

Chapter 5

The Old Testament and the Priority of Jesus Christ

Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*

Quote of the Week:

The [early] church regarded itself as the new Israel, and for that reason it clung to the same canon the Jews had. Yet, it was not felt that Christians had the Old Testament in common with the Jews. Quite to the contrary, the ancient church was convinced that if the Old Testament is rightly understood it is a Christian book which testifies in its entirety to Jesus Christ.¹

Key Scripture:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17-18, NASB).

Lesson Outline:

Intro: “If...the prophets and writers of the Old Testament spoke ‘to our forefathers’ and God presently speaks ‘to us’ by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2a), does this mean that the coming of Jesus simply abolished all that had gone before? If, in the presence of Moses and Elijah, God says to Peter, James, and John, ‘Listen to him [Jesus]!’ (Mark 9:7), what place is left for earlier revelation” (57)?

- A. Some have accused proponents of New Covenant Theology of following Marcion, the 2nd century heretic who rejected the Old Testament [and significant parts of the New Testament] as Christian literature.
- B. “Since the Lord Jesus is God’s chosen spokesman for this age and since we must listen to him, the answer is obvious. We must hear him on this issue as on every other” (57-58).

I. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: Christ fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

- A. “Fulfill” shows that Jesus consider the OT to be anticipatory; the Law and the Prophets were meant to introduce someone or something else.
 - 1. The OT gives us that very impression—it ends without bringing things to a satisfactory literary or historical conclusion.
 - 2. Second-Temple literature [Jewish writings from roughly the time of Jesus and shortly before] recognized this, seeing Eden, the Exodus, and David’s kingdom as pictures of a promised future.
 - 3. Jesus came presenting himself as the personal fulfillment of all these pictures.

¹ Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 24; quoted in Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 61-62. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from *The Priority of Jesus Christ*.

- B. Some understand Jesus to mean that he kept and obeyed the Law (typically focusing on the moral law, and especially the Ten Commandments).
1. This seems to be the standard Puritan view of Matt. 5:17-18.
 2. But Jesus isn't speaking simply of what he would do about the Law, "but what he would demand of others as he fulfilled the Law and the Prophets" (60; see v. 19-20).
 3. And though Jesus here focuses on the Law and the Prophets, what Jesus says through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is just as much about the Lord Jesus himself (see back in *The Priority of Jesus Christ* chapter 2, p. 26-32).
- C. More to the point, Jesus's words can't be restricted to one sub-division of the Law.
- [1. Jesus doesn't simply say, "I'm keeping the Ten Commandments, and you should, too. –MDY]
 2. Notice the next verse: "Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen" (v. 18, NIV) is outside of Jesus's fulfillment.
 3. In v. 19 Jesus speaks of "the least of these commandments"—that means Jesus is addressing his relationship to the entire Old Testament, not just the Law, and certainly not just the moral law.
- D. "While the Bible itself does not spell out the division of law into ceremonial, civil, and moral, and scholars have sometimes used it unhelpfully, it is not an unreasonable division in itself. As a literary device, it will help us to understand how Jesus used the word 'fulfill' in Matthew 5:17" (60-61).
1. Ceremonial law—The OT ceremonies were pictures; the reality of Jesus's life and death went far beyond. Jesus didn't abolish the pictures; he transcended them.
 2. If that's what "fulfill" meant for the ceremonial law, we would need good evidence that Jesus was thinking in those separate categories to suppose that he meant something else by "fulfill" for the civil or moral law. "Evidence for that, however, is totally lacking" (61).
 3. "The Lord Jesus, then, treated the Old Testament as a sign that pointed to him" (61)
 - a. As Bernhard Lohse noted above, "if the Old Testament is rightly understood it is a Christian book which testifies in its entirety to Jesus Christ."
 - b. "Historically, to be sure, [the Old Testament] came first, but it came first so that [Jesus Christ] might be first in the minds and hearts of his people" (62).
- E. "The Lord Jesus, then, looked on the Old Testament typologically, that is, he looked on its history, legislation, and even its poetic longings as precursors and models of his own history and teaching" (62).
1. "What makes this modeling typological rather than merely ethical is the fact that the sovereign God, in eternity past, prior to the revelation contained in the Old Testament, formed that revelation on the model of the Son" (62-63).
 2. "The Old Testament does not simply, in hindsight, offer illustrations of truth concerning him" (63); the revelation was given as it is as a prophecy of him.

F. Luke 16:16-17: “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law” (NIV).

1. “A new age has arrived that leaves the old era behind. The ‘good news’ has replaced the older revelation, yet that is not the whole story” (63).
2. “In a deeper sense, the old bears witness to the new so completely that we cannot (and dare not) spare even ‘the least stroke of a pen’ in the old Law. All of it witnesses, just as John the Baptist did, to the kingship of God in Christ” (63).

II. Compare God’s motivation of his people in the Old Testament and the New Testament.²

A. “Gratitude for what God has done”

1. OT: God’s redemption of his people from Egypt (see Exod. 20:2-3, for example).
2. NT: A greater redemption by an incomparable Savior, Jesus Christ (see Rom. 12:1, Heb. 13:12-16).

B. “Imitation of what God is like” and “Being different”

1. Lev. 19:2—“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” And to be holy is to be different.
2. Deut. 10:12—Israel was to “walk in all his ways;” see Deut. 10:18-19 for an example.
3. The NT calls us to imitate Jesus as “our grand exemplar” (66).
 - a. “The revelation of the character of God in the Old Testament is worthy of our imitation. God does not change, nor does our obligation to be like him (66; note the repetition of Lev. 19:2 in 1 Pet. 1:15-16).
 - b. But imitation of God the Father “has been embodied for us, and it must inform how we live” (66). See Mark 10:42-45. We imitate the Father by imitating Christ.

C. “For our own good”

1. OT: “Israel would prosper if they followed the commands of God” (66). See Deut. 11:20-21 [and Deut. 27-31].
2. “When we turn to the New Testament, we find the same kind of appeal, but again it looks beyond an earthly redemption and a ‘this age’ reward” (67). See Gal. 6:7-9; “Those who obey the Spirit will receive, not life in the land of Canaan, but the harvest that is eternal life. If the Old Testament Israelite could see that following God’s way led to blessing, how much more the Christian!” (67).

III. The Old Testament makes the reader wise for salvation and equips for ministry (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

A. At first, this seems to imply that the OT is enough. If it does all this, who needs a New Testament? “In some sense, according to Paul, the Old Testament, in itself, has a

² The categories of motivation come from Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 195-209; quoted in *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, 64, and discussed 64-67.

completeness and sufficiency. What more can we ask from revelation than that it makes us wise for salvation and leaves us thoroughly equipped for every good work” (68-69)?

- B. But that is only true because the whole of the Old Testament points to and is fulfilled by Christ.
 - 1. “Though the Old Testament contained the way to God, his truth, and the expectation of life (John 5:39-40), the New Testament reveals the one who in himself is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)” (69).
 - 2. “The Old Testament is indeed filled with good things to equip God’s people... for all kinds of godly activity (2 Tim. 3:17)...[but] only in the light of the person and ministry of Jesus Christ do these things reach the zenith of their usefulness” (69).

IV. The New Testament assumes that all of the Old Testament speaks of Christ.

- A. Carson: Six times in the Gospel of John “Scripture or some writer of Old Testament Scripture is said to speak or write of Christ, even though no specific passage is adduced [1:45; 2:22; 3:10; 5:39, 45-46; 20:9]. What is at stake here is a comprehensive hermeneutical key. By predictive prophecy, by type, by revelatory event and by anticipatory statute, what we call the Old Testament is understood to point to Christ, his ministry, his teaching, his death and resurrection.”³
- B. Jesus cites the OT as bearing witness to him (Luke 24:27, 44).
 - 1. He then opened his disciples’ minds “so they could understand the Scriptures” (24:45).
 - 2. Apart from this divine work, they and the unbelieving Jews couldn’t see (2 Cor. 3:14-16), because “the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4).
 - 3. “Those who come to the Old Testament with a hermeneutical key that fails to look for Christ everywhere are to that extent ‘unbelievers.’ Whether it is in the name of quite literal interpretation or in the interest of having a complete ethical system beforehand, it is an act of blindness not to allow the Lord Jesus to have the final word. He fulfills it all” (70).
- C. “To put it another way, we must not create problem texts in the New Testament by giving the Old Testament logical priority over the New. On the contrary, we must read the Old in the light of the New, so that the Lord Jesus has the first and the last word” (71).

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 263; quoted in *Priority of Jesus Christ*, 69-70.