



The History of the Bible
Session 04: Topics 1.4
The Origin of the Old Testament

Study by
Lorin L Cranford

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Detailed Study

1.4 How have Christians used the Old Testament down through the centuries?

Christian use of the Old Testament forms both a fascinating and an important segment of our study. We will summarize three historical aspects and then a theological one.

1.4.1 The Bible of Jesus and the apostles

How did Jesus and the apostles refer to and use the Old Testament?

One of the first Christian expressions of using the Old Testament scriptures comes from what we observe in the New Testament. The pattern of use by Jesus and the apostles sets the agenda for subsequent Christian attitude and usage. A variety of terminology will surface both in the gospels reflecting Jesus' usage. One of Jesus' favorite terms was "the law and the prophets" (ὁ νόμος καὶ οἱ προφῆται). He used this some six times. This reference plays off the threefold division of the Hebrew Bible: law, prophets, and writings. Referring to the first two divisions was a common way at that time of referring to all three divisions. In addition to these six references, three more places – Acts 13:15, 28:23; Rom. 3:21 – reflect this way to designating the Old Testament. The Romans 3:21 reference indicates that the apostle Paul could occasionally use this designation as well. A



more common reference to the Old Testament is the use of the term "scripture" translating the Greek word γραφή (graphe) or its plural "scriptures" (γραφαί; graphai). Literally, this Greek word means "writing," or "writings." This word shows up some 52 times in the New Testament as a reference to the Old Testament. Inherent in both these sets of references is a recognition of the special place these writings occupied as authoritative sources of understanding of God's will for His people.

Other terms can refer to the OT, but often they go back to either the Gospel message about Jesus or the words taught by Jesus. For example, the word of the Lord, (from the Greek ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου) means either the word from Jesus or the word / message about Jesus, although the Greek phrase is found in the Septuagint designating a message coming from God through the messenger to God's people. Or sometimes directly to the targeted person(s). 1 Peter 1:25 illustrates this: "but the word of the Lord endures forever. That word is the good news that was announced to you." At the stage of the NT, this will always refer to an oral or spoken message about Jesus, rather than anything written down. The phrase Word of God, as used in the NT, has similar meanings.

The use of the Old Testament by Jesus and the apostles includes either citing it directly or alluding to its ideas numerous times. Most of these are taken from two sections: the Law and the Prophets. But a fair number come from the Psalms in the third Writings division of the Hebrew Bible. Overwhelmingly the wording of the OT reference in the NT can be traced back to one or the other of the major manuscripts of the Septuagint, the Greek text of the Old Testament. This is not surprising since the New Testament was written in Greek and it would have been more natural to use a Greek text of the Old Testament. Joel Klavesmaki has provided a online helpful chart of the OT quotes in the New Testament with a comparison of the LXX and the Masoretic Text; all in English translation for the non-specialist to read for a feel of what is taking place.

In trying to sense the attitude of early Christians toward the OT, one should look at several aspects. First, the

overt statements about the Old Testament in some of the references to it. There is a sense of the permanency of the OT scriptures, as reflected in John 10:35, “and the scripture cannot be annulled.” Perhaps one of the key texts reflecting Jesus’ attitude toward the Old Testament is Matthew 5:17-20:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The followers of Jesus in the first century reflect a similar respect and high regard for the Old Testament as well, as 2 Tim. 3:16-17 in its reference to the OT as scripture declares:

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”¹

For a detailed treatment of this passage in print or online, see my article “Inspiration” in the Encyclopedia of Early Christianity.

The OT texts, especially the prophetic passages, became a major source for interpreting who Jesus was as the fulfillment of the promised Messiah in the Old Testament, as the Wikipedia Christian view section in the article on “Messiah” describes:

Christianity emerged in the first century C.E. as a movement among Jews (and their Gentile associates and converts) who believed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah; the very name of ‘Christian’ refers to the Greek word for ‘Messiah’ (Χριστός *Christos*). Although Christians commonly refer to Jesus as the “Christ” instead of “Messiah”, in Christian theology the two words are synonymous.

Christianity claims that Jesus is the Messiah that Jews were expecting. John 1:41-42 The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). 42 And he brought him to Jesus. However, the Christian concept of the Christ/Messiah is fundamentally different than the Jewish and Muslim (*Shafaat*, 2003) concepts because many Christians believe Jesus claimed to be God (cf. John 10:37-38; 14:7-11; 17:5; 17:11 and the following):

John 10:30 (NIV) I and the Father are one.

John 10:33 (NIV) “...you, a mere man, claim to be God...”

John 14:9b (NIV) “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

In Christian theology, the Christ/Messiah serves four main functions (Ankerberg & Weldon, pp. 218-223):

·He suffers and dies to make atonement before God for the sins of all humanity, because God’s justice requires that sins be punished. See, e.g., Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and Psalm 22, which Christianity interprets as referring to Jesus.

·He serves as a living example of how God expects people to act.

·He will establish peace and rule the world for a long time. See Nicene Creeds of 325 and 381 C.E.; Revelation 20:4-6: (NIV) “...They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. 6 ... they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.” (see Millennialism).

·He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and he came to earth as a human. John 1:1-2,14a: 1. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. 2. He was with God in the beginning. 14a The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

In the New Testament, Jesus often referred to himself as ‘Son of Man’ (Mark 14:61b-62; Luke 22:66-70), which Christianity interprets as a reference to Daniel 7:13-14 (NIV):

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

¹3.16 πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος πρὸς διδασκαλίαν, πρὸς ἐλεγμὸν, πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν, πρὸς παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ, 3.17 ἵνα ἄρτιος ᾦ ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος, πρὸς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἐξηρητισμένως.

Because Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that he claimed to be the Son of Man referred to by Daniel, Christianity interprets Daniel 7:13-14 as a statement of the Messiah's authority and that the Messiah will have an everlasting kingdom. Jesus' use of this title is seen as a direct claim to be the Messiah.

Jesus offered no denial when others identified him as the Messiah and successor of King David (Mark 8:27-30, 10:47-48, 11:7-10); his opponents accused him of such a claim (Luke 23:2), and he is recorded at least twice as asserting it himself directly (Mark 14:60-62, John 4:25-26).

Christianity interprets a wide range of biblical passages in the Old Testament (Hebrew scripture) as predicting the coming of the Messiah (see Christianity and Biblical prophecy for examples), and believes that they are following Jesus' own explicit teaching:

·He said to them... "Did not the Christ/Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24: 25-7, NIV)

·Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke 24:45-47, NIV).

·The book of Matthew repeatedly says, "This was to fulfill the prophecy ...". See (the concept of) Messianic prophecy.

Christianity believes many of the Messianic prophecies were fulfilled in the mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and seeks to spread throughout the world its interpretation that the Messiah is the only Saviour, and that Jesus will return in the Second Coming to fulfill the rest of Messianic prophecy.

Jesus and the apostles, therefore, made heavy use of the Old Testament scriptures within the framework of the Hebrew Bible structure. In these scriptures they found God's revelation and it was authoritative. Thus they stood in constant confrontation with the Pharisees and other Jewish groups because these interpretations of the Hebrew Bible were not considered authoritative. In fact, most of the time, Jesus and the apostles contended that these traditional Jewish understandings of scripture were false and not grounded in scripture at all.

1.4.2 The Bible of Early Christianity

When did the Bible become the Old and New Testaments?

For Jesus and the apostles living in the first Christian century, "Bible" meant the Old Testament as far as it had developed by that point in time as a collection of authoritative scriptures. By the middle of the first Christian century, the "word(s) of the Lord," when it referred to the teachings of Jesus rather than words about Jesus, i.e., the Gospel, was considered authoritative, although the label "scripture" would hardly be appropriate. Primarily, because the teachings of Jesus were still mostly in oral form at that point. The written gospel accounts did not come into existence until beginning in the 60s of the first century. Acts 20:35 illustrates this through Paul's mentioning a teaching of Jesus that is not contained in any of the four gospels: "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Most scholars believe that by the end of the first Christian century efforts were beginning to be made to collect together early writings of the apostles. The commonly understood pattern is that the writings of the apostle Paul came together first, followed by the gospels, then Acts as a kind of bridge between "gospel" and "apostle." Next, the "other apostles," first in a threefold grouping and expanded eventually into a sevenfold grouping. Lastly, came the book of Revelation. This process will take until the fourth century to stabilize itself into a consistent canonical list and sequence of listing. So early Christians did not possess "the Bible" until four hundred years after Christ. The primary unifying factor in this was Jerome's Latin Vulgate in the early 400s. The Vulgate with both testaments would remain "the Bible" for Christians in the west until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

Of course, for Jewish people the Bible has never become the Old and New Testaments.

1.4.3 The Impact of the Protestant Reformation

What role did the European Reformers have on our Old Testament?

With the "protests" of Martin Luther in the early 1500s against the abuses he observed as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church of his day, there came eventually serious questioning of which foundations were proper for Christians to base their convictions on. The pragmatic tendencies of most Catholics in Europe in the 1500s was to believe whatever the priest said was true. While the Latin Vulgate would be faithfully read at Mass each week, most of the laity did not understand Latin and thus did not understand anything being read. They were dependent

on the parish priest to tell them what the Bible was saying. Very few priests by this point in time could do serious interpretation of the Vulgate text. Their interpretation was mostly what they had been trained to understand and what was the official interpretation coming out of the Vatican in Rome. With the pope understood to be the official interpreter of God's will for the church, whatever he said was true was considered as true. His words needed very minimal grounding in scripture before they were considered authoritative.

In scattered places over Europe individual priests who studied the scriptures seriously were aware that inconsistencies between the voice of scripture and that of the pope were quite prevalent. But few dared raise questions about this. Luther was not one of the quiet ones. Largely, because his intense spiritual struggles over his sense of guilt left him desperate to find relief and peace. When his bishop at the University of Wittenberg where he was teaching advised him to study Romans and Galatians he came to the conclusion that salvation is "justification by faith alone apart from works of law" as set forth in these two letters of Paul. Increasingly this put him at odds with the official position of the church and the pope.

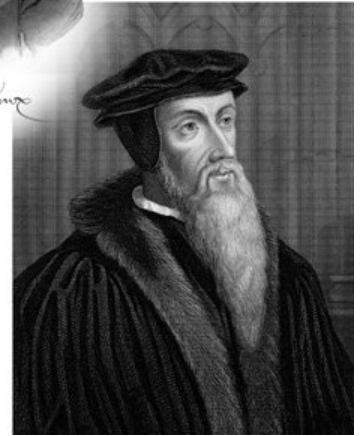
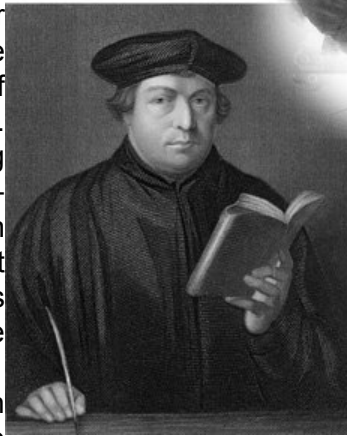
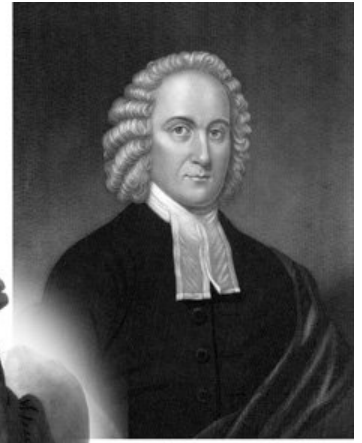
For Luther the clear principle of salvation found in scripture contradicted the teaching of the church. Which one is to be believed? Luther opted to go with scripture as the sole authority for faith and practice. The pope and the church must stand under the authority of scripture, not the other way around. Thus was born a foundational stand of what would become Protestant Christianity from this time forward. The Bible must be the exclusive basis for determining God's will for His people. One of his major subsequent contributions that would strengthen his position was the translation of the Bible, mostly the Vulgate, into the German language of his day. This got the scriptures into the hands of the laity who now could read and understand what the Bible was saying directly, instead of being dependent on a priest's interpretation of it. Even if they didn't read themselves, when they heard it being read they could understand what was being read. This launched the modern Bible translation movement and played an enormously important role in opening the door for a translation of the Bible into English.

Although this stance on the exclusive authority of the Bible will take many different shapes and tones, it remains a key identifying mark of a Protestant Christian church over against Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. To be sure, these other two groups do not reject the authority of the Bible. Rather, its authority is subjected to that of either the pope or that of the patriarchal leaders of a given Eastern church. Thus, in Protestantism especially the study and understanding of scripture stands in a central place for Christians seeking to faithfully follow Christ.

1.4.4 The Relationship of the Old and New Testaments

Does the New Testament override the Old Testament?

Another issue surfaced for Luther in regard to the scriptures, and has prompted an ongoing discussion even into our day. Luther's reading of Paul's "justification by faith alone apart from works of Law" pushed him to the conclusion that "Law" stands in tension with "faith." What is the proper relationship between Law and Gospel? Often defined as OT verses NT. Does the "new" replace the "old"? Jesus' parable of new wineskins frequently opened the interpretive door for debate (Mt. 9:17):



“Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”

Add to this passages such as Mt. 5:17-20:

17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.



Does Law here mean the Old Testament? The phrase “the law or the prophets” naturally refer to the Old Testament. Jesus says he has come to not destroy but to fulfill them. Does “old wineskins” mean the Old Testament and “new wineskins” mean the New Testament? If so, then the gospel must be placed in the new wineskin while doing away with the old wineskin. Luther saw the “Law,” i.e., the Old Testament, being used inappropriately by the Roman Catholic church to corrupt the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, especially Paul, on the central issue of salvation. Thus the proper relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament became a central concern in understanding the Bible, as the Wikipedia article describes.

A specific formulation of the distinction of Law and Gospel was first brought to the attention of the Christian Church by Martin Luther (1483-1546), and laid down as the foundation of evangelical Lutheran biblical exegesis and exposition in Article 4 of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (1531):

“All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics, the Law and the promises. For in some places it presents the Law, and in others the promise concerning Christ, namely, either when [in the Old Testament] it promises that Christ will come, and offers, for His sake, the remission of sins justification, and life eternal, or when, in the Gospel [in the New Testament], Christ Himself, since He has appeared, promises the remission of sins, justification, and life eternal.”^[3]

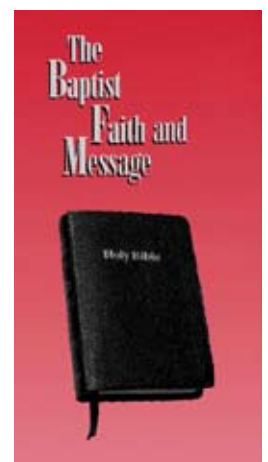
The Formula of Concord likewise affirmed this distinction in Article V, where it states:

“We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence. . .”^[4]

Martin Luther wrote: “Hence, whoever knows well this art of distinguishing between Law and Gospel, him place at the head and call him a doctor of Holy Scripture.”^[5] Throughout the Lutheran Age of Orthodoxy (1580-1713) this hermeneutical discipline was considered foundational and important by Lutheran theologians. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (1811-1887), who was the first (and third) president of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, renewed interest in and attention to this theological skill in his evening lectures at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis 1884-85.^[6]

Growing out of this have come many different variations of Luther’s view. They range from such an intensive use of the Old Testament that often resembles that of the Roman Catholic church, at least in methodological stance, to those who functionally do away with the Old Testament altogether. The most extreme view here that preceded Luther’s discussion all the way back to the second century is that of Marcion, who rejected not only the Old Testament but “the God of the Old Testament.” The modern movement that moves somewhat along those lines is the Dispensationalist movement, popularized by the Scofield Bible. This view tends to be found among extremely conservative groups often called Fundamentalists.

Where have Baptists stood on this issue? Given the diversity of Baptist viewpoints, an answer to this question is not easy to find. The answer to some degree has to be determined more by official statements than anything else. One source is the various editions



of the Baptist Faith and Message that date from 1845 to 2000. Below is a listing of the section on “Scriptures” beginning with the 1925 edition. These reflect a Southern Baptist perspective.

1925 BFM

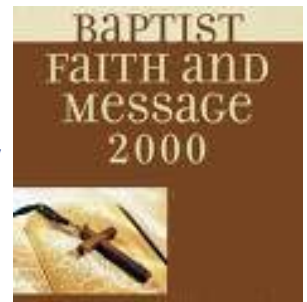
We believe that the **Holy Bible** was written by men divinely inspired, and is a **perfect treasure of heavenly instruction**; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds and religious opinions should be tried.

1963/1998 BFM

The **Holy Bible** was written by men divinely inspired and is **the record of God’s revelation** of Himself to man. It is a **perfect treasure of divine instruction**. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. *The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.*

2000 BFM

The **Holy Bible** was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a **perfect treasure of divine instruction**. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.



A careful comparison of these four official statements by Southern Baptists reveals that we have seldom attempted to address this topic of the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament, except in very generalized terms. The 1963 statement, unchanged in the 1998 statement, *“The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ,”* comes fairly close to addressing the issue. Then the 2000 statement with its emphasis on “all Scripture” repeats this emphasis with a slightly different twist: *“All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.”* The struggle between Law and Gospel has never been a major issue for Baptists like it has been for Lutherans. Too much dependency on Old Testament texts allegorically or spiritually interpreted has been typical for most Baptists. To be sure, differing views can be traced through comparing influential systematic theology textbooks that have been used in the seminary classrooms of Southern Baptists over the years. In general Baptists have maintained a rather positive view toward the Old Testament. But it has been mostly a source of moral exhortation, or a prophetic source looking for the Messiah that Jesus was in fulfillment. The 1963 through 2000 statements have especially stressed this aspect. The IBC constitution simply states: *“We believe that the Bible is inspired by God and is the standard against which all Christian belief and behavior is measured.”* This is much more consistent with Baptist confessions of faith over the past four hundred years.

A final issue that Luther raised and has consequently impacted Protestantism significantly has to do with the definition of the Old Testament. We discussed that issue at the outset of this presentation in topic 1.1.1. Luther saw the Catholic Church’s use of the apocryphal documents as providing a “scriptural” foundation for some of the doctrines that he strongly objected to. One of those was the concept of purgatory. Also he noticed that the Hebrew Bible had never included these writings as sacred material. This, among other motivations, led him to the conclusion that the Apocrypha in the Septuagint and the Vulgate had no divine inspiration and thus should not be counted as a part of the Old Testament. In the Luther Bibel translation these documents are not included.

Gradually this became the standard among Protestant churches. The Apocrypha has not been counted as sacred scriptures in most of these traditions. The Anglican Church struggled more with this than other groups, simply because of its close ties conceptually to the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, the Apocrypha remained a part of the English Bible until the 1800s. This meant the King James Version contained the Apocrypha from the original printing in 1611 until the middle 1800s, although it was not considered on the same level as the other material in the Old Testament.