

Why bother with the Old Testament?

*And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
Luke 24:25–27 (ESV)*

Jesus has a ready answer to the question 'why bother with the Old Testament?', so why do we keep hearing it, or even asking it ourselves? There are some understandable, if tragic, reasons. Before we think about what we study the Old Testament for we need to think about why to study it at all.

Why is the Old Testament under threat, in the church as well as outside the church?

You may have heard about the first century heretical teacher Marcion. He rejected the OT as being all about a God who was rather unlike Jesus. It didn't take him long to realise he also needed to reject most of the New Testament as well! He is alive and well. The way we read the NT, and what we think it says about the OT, often reveals that our thinking has been infected by this idea that Jesus is a different God than the God of the OT.

Another reason of course is the drum-beating of the New Atheists in their echo chamber. They point at passages in the OT (which they haven't read very carefully, if at all) and tell us how nice atheism is instead. Its niceness is a matter of public record, thanks to the great atheist heads of state last century, like Mao, Stalin, Pol Pot, and the chap with the Charlie Chaplin moustache.

Most importantly, it's because our own hearts are idol factories. Idols turn us away from the true God and his word. Abandoning the OT is always going to be a danger.

The OT makes us uncomfortable to the degree that Jesus himself makes us uncomfortable.

We're at home in the OT to the extent that the Holy Spirit has reshaped our affections into the likeness of God the Son according to the will of God the Father.

Aims for you

What are my aims for my students—or any student of the Bible—when we engage in academic study of the Old Testament? There are five aims, even six...

1. Hallelujah!

First and foremost, doxology: I want the Old Testament to push you off your chair and onto your feet and praise God! It is my unbroken experience that giving our minds a bit of time studying anything at all in the Old Testament will make our hearts sing about how great God is.

2. Devotion

One you let the point above happen to you often enough, you'll be just as confident of enjoying a wonderful quiet time by opening a passage in the OT as you would be if you were opening a bit of NT. Overslept? Worked all night? Need a five-minute QT? You won't automatically be opening the Bible from the back anymore.

3. Salvation

If people can be converted once they're ministers, why not while they prepare for ministry study theology? The Old Testament will make you wise for salvation if you haven't yet grasped the gospel and handed your life over to Jesus.

4. Eagerness

The Old Testament isn't just teaching material: we shouldn't view the Bible as preaching fodder, but as God's word to me personally. That said, as Jesus shows us, it is worthy of detailed instruction to our churches, so you need to be eager to teach and preach and apply it to yourself and others.

5. Evangelism

A great deal of apologetics nowadays focusses not on the question of whether God exists, but on whether the God who Christians believe in is good or bad. That often puts the OT in the spotlight, so we need to be confident that the Old Testament is the sword of the Spirit and that the Spirit isn't frightened by the delusions of modern man.

6. Study

And finally, because the Old Testament is at least as worthy of deep and detailed attention as any other body of great literature, and because it is God's own word, we want to begin to equip you for scholarly engagement with the text. We need you to begin to feel at home in academic debates and discussions. That's not always going to be comfortable for you; it might not always bring out the best in you, but the skills that you learn about handling yourself in controversy are directly applicable to ministry more widely. Controversy, like the poor, will always be with us.

Yes, but 'critical scholarship', really?!

You might well be thinking that points 1–5 above are pretty obvious, but wonder whether it's worth spending time engaging with some unedifying theories that seem to turn the Bible on its head.

Let me assure you that if attending to even these areas of scholarship didn't feed everything from Hallelujah! to evangelism, I wouldn't bother with them. Everything we cover in any Old Testament course should prepare you to skip down the corridor with the majesty of God humming away behind your lips.

Specifically, how will scholarly study, even engaging with 'critical' methods and theories, help you?

Firstly, for defending the faith against some of the unsavoury conclusions of those who want to undermine the OT. Your television set will keep pumping out documentaries about how unreliable the OT is; it's handy to have an answer ready some of the time!

Secondly, any discussion of the text forces us to engage with the text in close detail, and that is something that will always be rewarding. No question is so wrong-headed that it won't eventually make you see something amazing (even if you end up putting the question itself in the bin).

Thirdly, some of these challenges can very helpfully make us examine our own assumptions and point us to the fact that we ourselves have strayed from an evangelical view of Scripture. What they meant for harm, God can use for our edification, to paraphrase a beloved character from a beloved Testament.

Finally, engaging in some of these controversies and coming out on the other side will increase our confidence in the word of God. We haven't got time to enter the fray on every debate, but if

we can manage some of them, then we know that we could have tackled the others too. Watching their efforts crash and burn shows you how strong and reliable the word of God is.

Don't take it from me! Here's a current student reflecting on an OT course:

"who knew that engaging head on with critical scholarship would make you delight more in the Bible, or that the food laws have something to teach us about the mission of God to the nations?!"

Two virtues about Jesus: patience and impatience

There are two attitudes we need to cultivate whenever we let the OT speak to us. Impatience to see Jesus, and patience to see Jesus.

Jesus insists the whole of the OT—every page, every verse, every word, every syllable, every jot and tittle—is about him. So who wouldn't be eager and impatient to see more of what the OT tells us about him—and soon!

Then again, that would be much easier to do if we could get away with just seeing how the big picture and some major themes are all to be read in the light of Jesus. I'm convinced that every syllable is Christological, and yet not every syllable jumps up out of the page and immediately enlightens my mind and heart about the Son of God. So I've got my work cut out!

There is a joyful discipline in meditating slowly over OT texts, whether large swathes of the canon or the tiniest section, knowing that eventually this little puddle will overflow into a tributary of the river of life. So drink, and never thirst again.



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