

# A New Covenant / Two Testament–Christianity

What is the nature of the authority of the Old Testament literature for the life of the Church? How is this literature to function for Christians today? These are large questions that involve many issues. In this post we will begin (only begin) to address some of the issues involved.

First (1), we draw a distinction between “testament” as a body of literature / canon that developed over time on the one hand and the *prior* dynamic relationship of covenant from which this literature spawned on the other hand. Second (2), we will emphasize the authority and function of the Old Testament literature reflected in how New Testament writers redeployed the persons, events, institutions, and cultural and religious categories of ancient Israel to explain and legitimate the Messiah and his New Covenant Community both to Jews and and to the world. Finally (3), we will scrutinize the rubric “New Testament Christian / Christianity” and give our rationale for abandoning this concept and for embracing rather the concept of a “New Covenant / Two Testament Christian / Christianity.”

(1) The link to "**Canon or Covenant**" in this post distinguishes "Testament" (understood as a body of literature or as Canon), from "Covenant" (understood as a dynamic relationship initiated by God with his people). This dynamic relationship is *prior* (both in time and in importance) to the literature which the covenant engenders. Indeed, the covenant relationships (whether of Yahweh to Israel or of Christ to his Church) has generated a bodies or canons of associated literature over time. In the case of Israel, the Sinaitic or Mosaic covenant established by Yahweh’s proffer and Israel’s acceptance, was accompanied by a small core of written stipulations (the decalogue) almost from the beginning. With the Church, however, no new authoritative literature (that is extant) was produced for approximately a dozen years. In both cases, however, the covenant relationship *per se* functioned as the generative matrix of the literature which continued to develop out of it over time. Neither in ancient Israel, in Second Temple Judaism, nor in the earliest Church were these literatures ever regarded as the covenants themselves. That is, literature (canon) is not equivalent to covenant (relationship).

(2) The writers of the New Testament canon (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and whoever wrote Hebrews) quote from or clearly allude to the Old Testament literature a total of 375 times. These quotations come from 28 of the 39 books of the Old Testament. These writers thus utilized the Old Testament literature as a profound moral, ethical, spiritual, doctrinal, and theological resource. Such a usage demonstrates the functions of Scripture Paul envisioned in 2 Tim 3:16-17:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Here Paul, who wrote half of the words of the New Testament literature, teaches the Church (in his last epistle that is extant) to look to the Scripture (i.e the Old Testament) as a resource for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in all that is right and good. Paul anticipates that as the Church does this, the Church will find the resources it needs to carry out all the good works that God has ordained for the Church to do. In order for the Church to use the Old Testament literature in these ways, however, some hermeneutical obstacles must be cleared from the path. We address four of these obstacles below:

- Christ's disciples have a relationship with God by means of a new covenant. This does not mean, however, that any part of the Old Testament literature has become irrelevant to the Church or to its individual members (cf. Matt 5:17-20 in the light of 1 Cor. 15:20-28);
- As Col 2:13-19 among other New Testament texts, makes clear, Christians have no obligation to keep the Israelite civil, ritual, and cultic stipulations. In this text, what is "nailed to the cross" is not the Old Testament literature, but the debt which every person "owes," as it were, to God by virtue of human sins.<sup>1</sup>
- New Testament writers redeployed the language and categories of Israel's cult and sacrificial system to explain the definitive role of Jesus and the ultimate significance of his life, death, and resurrection. Indeed within the Pentateuch (Torah) alone, there is a great deal of theology and ethical teaching which can inform and shape the Church as no other literature can do. It is here that we learn the most about the nature and character of God, about his engagement with his world and its inhabitants, about humankind's role as vice regent and moral agent, and about the distinctiveness of the ethical and moral life that is required of those who form the community of God.
- Some of the laws and injunctions found in the Pentateuch are explicitly embraced and even elaborated upon by Jesus and by the writers of the New Testament. At the same time, it is a complete misunderstanding of the nature of God and of the function of Scripture to argue that only those parts of the Old Testament which are explicitly repeated in the New Testament literature have authority for Christians and for the church.<sup>2</sup> Such a view suffers from the fallacy already addressed that equates "testament" (as canon) with covenant (dynamic

---

<sup>1</sup>The term translated "written code" in the NIV and "the record" in the NRSV at Col 2:14 is χειρόγραφον. It is well-attested in the legal and economic papyri in Hellenistic times. It refers to a note of indebtedness or a promissory note (often written in one's own hand). The term χειρόγραφον occurs only here in Paul's writings. In the Septuagint (LXX) this term occurs only at Tobit 5:3; 9:2, 5 in the characteristic sense of "receipt." For a full discussion of the term, cf. Eduard Lohse, "χειρόγραφον," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel & Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, IX: 435-36 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. James D. Ernest (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:508-10; and R. Yates, "Colossians 2,14: Metaphor of Forgiveness." *Biblica* 90 (1990): 248-59. For a full exposition of Col 2:6-23 against the backdrop of syncretistic Christianity at Colossae, see Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 274-309.

<sup>2</sup>This is the argument of the much read and adopted *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 167.

relationship). Such a view also fails to appreciate the deep theological conjunction of the Old and New Covenants and their respective literatures (for more on this, see below).

Putting the Prophets and the Writings of the Old Testament canon aside for a moment, there are many rich theologies in the Torah alone. These theologies undergird each of its individual 613 laws (civil, ritual, cultic, and moral). It is the theology underpinning the law which transcend the time and culturally conditioned nature of those laws and of the Mosaic covenant. This is so because the undergirding theology is derived from the unchanging nature and character of God. The laws themselves are provisional. They are culturally conditioned expressions of God's supra-cultural transcendent character. This transcendent aspect of the Torah and of all of the Old Testament literature is what continues to render it relevant and applicable to the Community of Faith.

In the Torah there are theologies of the Sabbath, the Sabbatical Year, and the Year of Jubilee. There is a rich theology of the land as provisional gift. There is a profound theology of divine presence in the Tabernacle. There are theologies of compassion and justice. Theologies of creation express themselves repeatedly in the books of the Pentateuch. Theologies of holiness and of atonement reveal eternal truths of how God relates to humans and what he expects of them. All of this and much more, both explicit and implicit, were downloaded, as it were, and embedded in the minds of the writers of the New Testament literature in the earliest church.

(3) The rubric or phrase “New Testament Christian / Christianity” implies a number of presuppositions as well as a basic hermeneutical approach. In this post, we will address only two of its obvious implications. The phrase “New Testament Christian / Christianity” implies the following:

- the “old covenant” = the Old Testament literature; the “new covenant” = the New Testament literature;
- for its doctrine, instruction, praxis, and ethics, the Christian church relies exclusively upon the New Testament literature which it regards as its sole authority.

In contrast to and in opposition to these implications, however, we note that Jesus of Nazareth is portrayed in the Gospels as the embodiment of Torah, a New Moses, the Davidic heir to the throne of Israel, the Passover lamb, the personification of Old Testament Wisdom, the Suffering Servant, the dynamic life-giving Word behind all creation “in the beginning,” and the “I AM” of the burning bush. Moreover, the apostle Paul was a “new covenant” Christian whose thought, ministry, and writings were profoundly informed by every part of the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament literature). We cite again his recommendation of the Old Testament literature to Timothy as Paul nears the end of his own life and ministry (2 Tim 3:16-17):

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Today Christians living in the new covenant of Christ, no less than in Jesus' or Paul's day, are to draw upon the vast theological, spiritual, and ethical resources of the Old Testament literature in the service of the Church.

It is only in and through this literature that we access through imaginative portrayal the moments of original creation; the glorious theophanic vision at Sinai; the heights of Elijah's spiritual triumph and his reclamation by Yahweh from the depths of personal doubt and loss of faith; the moral courage, ethical compass, and eschatological hope of Amos and Micah who had stood in the council of Yahweh; the moral clarity of a suffering Job midst life's greatest perplexities; the praising, lamenting, and confessing heart of king David; Wisdom at Yahweh's side at the creation of the world; the tortuous terrain of the suffering servant and his ultimate vindication by Yahweh; Ezekiel's visions of a resurrected Israel and of healing and fructifying waters cascading from the throne of Yahweh to fill the whole earth; a stone uncut by human hands transformed at once into both the foundation and the capstone of the Kingdom of God upon the earth; the vision of a peaceable habitation for the lion, bear, ox, cobra, and child; a new Jerusalem whose citadels brush the clouds swarmed by nations clamoring to know the law of the LORD; a new heaven and earth formed as a habitation for the embodiment and personification of righteousness.

In and through each of these images one gains insight into the character and purposes of God and thereby insight into his creative, redeeming, and atoning work through Jesus of Nazareth. These images form the trajectory toward the emergence of justice, righteousness, and universal *shalom* which are personified in Jesus of Nazareth and envisioned as the destiny for the entire world by John of Patmos.

For these reasons and others (stay tuned), *I do not want to be* a "New Testament Christian" or be part of a "New Testament Christianity." *I do want with all my heart* to be a New Covenant Christian who explores all the fullness of God in and through his Two-Testament Canon.

## Selected Bibliography

- Arnold, Clinton E. *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 274-309.
- Baker, David L. *Two Testaments, One Bible: The Theological Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*. 3rd ed. Downers Grove, ILL: IVP, 2010.
- Beckwith, R. T. "Canon of the Bible." In *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes, 161-64. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.
- Gamble, Harry Y. "Covenant: New Testament." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, I:852-61. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Goldingay, John. "Covenant, OT and NT." In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, I:767-78. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.
- Longenecker, Richard N. *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*. 2nd rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- McDonald, Lee Martin. *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*. Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Canon of the New Testament." In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, I:536-47. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.
- McDonald, Lee Martin, James A. Sanders, eds. *The Canon Debate*. Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002.
- Mendenhall, George E. and Gary A. Herion. "Covenant." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, I:1179-1202. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Sanders, James A. "Canon: Hebrew Bible." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, I:837-52. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Trebolle, Julio. "Canon of the Old Testament." In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, I:548-63. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006.