

Preaching and Teaching
from the
Old Testament

A Guide for the Church

Walter C. Kaiser Jr.


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Dedicated to

Dr. Carl F. H. Henry
and his wife, Helga

Two of God's choicest servants
and friends in the work of the gospel

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Introduction

According to some recent polls, the question that laity most want answered about a new pastoral candidate is this: Can he or she preach? This is encouraging, for while the church has made great strides forward based on aspects of the church growth movement and has learned from some of the megachurch groups how to attract the younger generations back into the house of God, the largest challenge that remains is how those same churches can develop a new appetite for the hearing and doing of the Word of God.

Recently I preached at one of the newer megachurches. An enthusiastic crowd of middle teenagers composed the largest block of the congregation in the front center of the auditorium. They responded with rapt attention. It was a joy beyond my ability to describe. Preaching in that kind of situation revitalizes one enormously.

After the service, the pastor asked me to go out and have coffee with him. As we talked, he recounted the obvious blessing of God in the huge numerical increase he had seen as he had applied, not what he had learned in seminary, but what he had gotten from attending seminars offered by those in the megachurch movement. He concluded, "They taught me how to get the kids in. Music is the new language that every one of them understands almost instinctively. But I am afraid that those of us who have experienced such unprecedented growth are headed for a train wreck," he complained.

"Why is that?" I inquired.

"Because we have not been given any help on how we can foster interest and a real appetite for what is needed for spiritual growth and development. Who will help us put theology and

biblical teaching into the idiom of the day so that it will capture the eyes, ears, and wills of these new generations?" he pleaded.

His passionate call for help is not unusual. It must not go unheeded.

Fortunately, at the very moment pressure is building for help from a new generation of theologians, scholars, and seminaries, there is evidence that some fresh winds of change have already started to blow. Witness the amazing number of hits on web sites that offer instruction on biblical, theological, and homiletical helps. Note also the new periodicals on preaching and the increasing number of books being published on preaching.

Yet despite this vanguard of favorable signs, there remains a distressing absence of the Old Testament in the church. It is possible to attend some churches for months without ever hearing a sermon from the older testament, which represents well over three-fourths of what our Lord had to say to us. This vacuum is unconscionable for those who claim that the whole Bible is the authoritative Word of God to mankind.

As long ago as 1967, John Bright tried to alleviate some of the alleged roadblocks that believers felt they had in using the Old Testament in his volume, *The Authority of the Old Testament*. At that time, Bright found it best to address the question of *why* we should preach from the older testament rather than tell us *how* we should do it. The time has now come for us to help one another address the question of *how*.

Bright pointed to the theology of the Bible as the key to understanding its message. He asserted that "*no part of the Bible is without authority*, for all parts reflect in one way or another some facet or facets of that structure of faith which is, and must remain, supremely normative for Christian faith and practice."¹

Bright was even more forceful in laying down a proposition that has raised a firestorm of protest, but one that I will argue is the only way out of our present morass. He declared: "Let us say it clearly: The text has but one meaning, the meaning intended by its author; and there is but one method for discovering that meaning, the grammatical-historical method."² This is true, of course. It is the only way to rule out all subjective and personal readings of the text that are without authority or back-

ing of the one who claimed to have received this word as a revelation from God.

Some will immediately object that such a limitation is elusive (for who knows exactly what it is that an author is asserting?) and it also fails to appreciate the enormous complexities that are involved in the act of reading a scriptural text. The assumption is that once a text is produced, it becomes the property of its various readers, who come to that text from a wide assortment of backgrounds and prejudices. Each must have his or her own day in his or her own court to say what each has taken as the meaning for that text. It is this view more than any other that has brought almost all communication on a human level, much less communication from God, to an absolute standstill. Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the folly of this approach is for all of us to get our own meanings of what is being claimed (using their theory of meanings) in their objections. Ultimately, such an approach ends in nonsense.

On the question of where meaning is to be lodged (i.e., in the text, in the community, or in the individual reader), we answer that it is in the text as it is found in the context of the writer's assertions.

All of this will be dealt with more fully in the chapters that follow, but the inroads of postmodernism must not be ignored or taken for granted. It is another strong reason why the teaching and challenging ministry of applying the Old Testament text must not dwindle in our day but remain strong, vigorous, and methodologically sound.

But let us go back to the key that Bright pointed to: theology. Elizabeth Achtemeier countered Bright's appeal to the meaning that the authors of Scripture placed in the text. She claimed, "It must be emphasized that no sermon can become the Word of God for the Christian church if it deals only with the Old Testament apart from the New."³ In her view every text from the older testament should never stand alone but should always be paired with a text from the New Testament. Fortunately, several scholars challenged her thesis, such as Foster R. McCurley Jr. and Donald Gowan.⁴

But the sad fact is that many in evangelical circles use a method of preaching on the Old Testament that is very similar to this view. The result is that they get very close to, if they do

not indeed practice, what we know as eisegesis, that is, “reading [meaning] into” the text. The result is a flat Bible in which ideas found elsewhere in Scripture are equal to similar ideas found in all parts of the Bible in part and in the whole. It is not that such preachers act as if they do not possess the full canon of Scripture or as if God were not the author of it in its entirety, but it is rather that their methodology is flawed. We first must establish what the text of the Old Testament is asserting, and only then should we draw in additional information on that subject, which God has seen fit to give us in the later progress of revelation.

Much more helpful in getting at the meaning of these Old Testament texts is the recent development of first observing the particular genre in which a text was cast as the most basic clue on how to interpret it and how to preach on that text. Donald Gowan said it best: “That ancient writer used the genre which was best suited to convey the particular message which burdened him, and the question is, can that help the preacher who wants to speak to contemporaries as effectively and persuasively as possible?”⁵ This, then, is what we aspire to do in this volume after we have treated the preliminary matters that have already been mentioned as roadblocks. May our Lord grant to all of us wisdom and a passionate desire to communicate with all of our heart and soul the fabulous message of the gospel at this critical moment in history.

This book began as a set of lectures first delivered on June 2–14, 2000. I am grateful to Dr. Joseph Shoa, president of the Biblical Seminary of the Philippines, for his kind invitation to teach forty-four enthusiastic seminarians. Their critiques and encouragements were most helpful in formulating the chapters now before you.

I must also express gratitude to my research assistant, Jason McKnight, for his help in locating some difficult bibliographic sources and to my editor at Baker Academic, Brian Bolger. Special thanks to Rev. Dr. Dorington Little for permission to include his sermon on the lament of Psalm 77. Their assistance is deeply appreciated. The responsibility for the resulting product is my own and one for which I must be faulted, not them. May God be pleased to use this book for his honor and glory.

Part 1

The Need
to Preach and
Teach from the
Old Testament

The Value of the Old Testament for Today

Quite often when I have the opportunity to speak or preach at a church or Christian institution, I am asked: “You are not going to speak from the Old Testament, are you?” Obviously the expected answer is that no one who is thinking correctly, or even as a Christian, would venture to do such a bizarre thing as address contemporary issues and the needs of our day by going back to something as antique and remote as the Old Testament.

But that is indeed what I have done time and again, for I have been impressed with how relevant and powerful a message that portion of the biblical text shares with the New Testament. The time has come for a whole new evaluation of our reasons for avoiding this section of the Bible. Along with the argument for turning to the Old Testament for answers to contemporary issues must also come some practical helps on how this task can be carried out without doing an injustice either to the older text or to the needs of the waiting church.

The Old Testament needs about as much defending as a lion! Yet it clearly is overlooked and frequently neglected in the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. This neglect is all the more baffling when its claims and right to be received as the powerful Word of God are just as strong as those of the New Testament. Therefore, it is incumbent that we hear the Old Testament’s own case for itself once again. This case can be set forth in four major theses.

It Is the Powerful Word of God

The earlier testament is light years away from being a mere word *from* mortals written *to* humanity *about* themselves! Instead, it presents itself as possessing divine authority with a sufficiency that transcends what mere mortals can create or expound for their contemporaries or for later generations.

True, God employed the distinctive personalities, literary skills, vocabulary, and unique ways each writer had of expressing himself, as anyone who has read the Bible in the original languages has noticed. But God's revelation was not thereby hampered or distorted like a sunbeam that is refracted when it passes through a stained glass window. If this analogy must be used, then let it be noted that the architect that built the sun, from which the sunbeam originated, is the same architect who built the stained glass window, which in this case would be analogous to the writers of the Old Testament. God prepared both the writers, with all the uniqueness and particularity that each brings to the task of writing Scripture, and the revelation itself.

The point is this: the preparation of the authors was just as significant a work of God as was the revelation that came from God. Thus, each writer was given experiences, cultural settings, a range of vocabulary, and special idiosyncrasies so that they would express themselves in styles absolutely their own but with the end result being precisely what God wanted for each section of his revelation.

This preparation of the writer began as early as the day he was born. The prophet Jeremiah knew he was called while he was still in his mother's womb (Jer. 1:4–5), while Isaiah's call to minister on behalf of God's word came out of his sense of need, apparently later in life (Isa. 1–5). If Jeremiah illustrates what an internal call of God is like, then Isaiah shows us what God's external call is like.

How, then, can each writer be so uniquely himself and yet so true to the disclosure God wanted to get across to humanity? Must we sacrifice either human originality or divine authority? We cannot have it both ways—or can we?

It is evident to any student beginning to read in the original languages of the Old Testament (Hebrew and Aramaic) that

there are very clear differences in the levels of difficulty, grammar, vocabulary, and styles in the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. This certainly makes the case for the individuality of each of the writers. But instead of this being a mere word of mortals, the repeated claim of the writers themselves is that what they wrote was a disclosure from God that was to be distinguished from their own words. For example, Jeremiah 23:28–29 enjoined:

“Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain,” declares the LORD. “Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”

To confuse the prophet’s own words and dreams with God’s word and vision was as silly as confusing straw and chaff with real grain on that straw stem!

The apostle Paul would have no part in a diminution of the Old Testament, for he instructed his youthful friend Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16 that,

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for
teaching,
rebuking,
correcting
and training in righteousness.

One must recall that the “Scripture” (Greek: *graphē*, “writing”) that was available to Timothy when Paul wrote was the Old Testament. All of it, the whole of the Old Testament, was “God-breathed.” It came as a product of God. Therefore, if we are to have a balanced and full presentation of all of God’s truth, it is absolutely essential that we include the Old Testament in our teaching and preaching.

Moreover, the Old Testament is useful for it has at least four functions: (1) teaching, (2) rebuking, (3) correcting, and (4) training us in righteousness. To this Paul also adds in 2 Timothy 3:15 that the Old Testament is “able to make [us] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Few think that such a good result as one’s own personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ

could come from teaching and preaching from the Old Testament, but the apostle Paul taught that it could—and he taught that under the inspiration of the sovereign Lord.¹

Our day is not the only time when the Word of God has been scarce, hard to find, out of vogue, or seemingly lacking in power or effectiveness in those cases where it is exposed to the people. One could cite a similar situation when young Samuel was growing up in the sanctuary under the tutelage of the priest Eli. Accordingly, the story began on the note that “in those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions” (1 Sam. 3:1). Without the light of revelation, the whole fabric of society was put at risk. That point was also made in the Book of Proverbs, which warned, “Where there is no revelation [Hebrew: *hazôn*, “vision” or “disclosure” from God], the people perish” (Prov. 29:18, my translation). The Hebrew term used for “perish” is the same one that appears in the golden calf episode in Exodus 32:25, where the people “cast off all restraint” and “ran wild” in acts of sacred prostitution in front of the calf they had just created. That was exactly what was happening in the days of young Samuel, for the high priest’s sons were imitating the same reckless path of destroying themselves even while they presided as priests at the altar of God. Meanwhile, the word of God remained scarce and was rarely announced or taught to the people.

Possession of a word from God was no small favor or treasure, for it continues to be second in importance only to the gift of God’s Son. But mere *possession* of that word alone will not be enough to fortify the community in times of need. In fact, continual neglect of that word can lead to God himself making that word scarce so that few can find it and thus profit from applying its message. In that case, mortals cannot manufacture it, duplicate it, or replace it with an alleged alternative.

Such a scarcity of God’s word would be a sign of God’s judgment on his people and their leaders who had helped to create this barrenness. It would represent a setting similar to those horrible words found in Amos 8:11–12:

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. Men

will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it.”

Sometimes God gives us what we want (when we refuse to hear his word), but he also sends a leanness to our souls as a result (Ps. 106:15). In these instances, God grows silent and the darkness of our day thickens as an unbearable sadness and gloom sets in over us.

The only known cure for this is the cry that was heard in the Reformation: *post tenebras lux*, “After darkness, light!” That is why Calvin and his successors reasoned that the only way *light* was going to come to God’s people and to the city of Geneva, Switzerland, would be through the preaching of the Scriptures. Hence, six sermons a week were prescribed according to the Ordinances of the Church of Geneva in A.D. 1541. There was to be a sermon at dawn on Sunday, and another at the usual hour of 9 A.M. Catechism for the children was to take place at noon, followed by a sermon at 3 P.M. and three more sermons on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Only in this manner would light return and the darkness be invaded, they reasoned. Should we not follow these Genevans in establishing, as they did, something more than the twenty-five-minute homily or one ten- to fifteen-minute topical sermon given each Sunday morning as the total source for our Christian maturation for the whole week? And should not a portion of that expanded repertoire of biblical texts include a distinctive preaching and teaching mission from Old Testament texts?

That word from God can startle us just as it shocked the priest Eli (1 Sam. 3:2–14). It was startling in its call, for repeatedly God called to the young boy Samuel (vv. 2–10). The words “call” or “called” appear no less than eleven times in verses 4–10 of 1 Samuel 3. Nevertheless, God does not rebuke Samuel for being dim-witted or slow to respond; he merely “came and stood there, calling as at the other times” (v. 10). The patience and tenderness of our Lord is in itself amazing.

But just as amazing and startling is the content of that word. In this case it was the word that the Lord had Samuel deliver to Eli. The sovereign God was “about to do something in Israel that [would] make the ears of everyone who hear[d] of it tingle” (v. 11). Because Eli failed to restrain his sons, God would judge

his family and the guilt of their household would never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering (vv. 12–14). Hence, the word of God would involve a blessed call on one man for service to God but a visitation of judgment on another for failure to act in accordance with the published Word.

In so doing God demonstrated that he was sovereign over all (1 Sam. 3:15–18). He was sovereign over the speaker (vv. 15–17) and sovereign over the audience (v. 18). Thus we are taught in Scripture to say “Amen,” not only to the blessings of God, but also to the judgments of God.

The story of Samuel ends with the word of God accrediting his servant Samuel (1 Sam. 3:19–4:1a). As a matter of fact, God “let none of his words fall to the ground” (v. 19). Herein lay the validation, confirmation, and security of Samuel’s proclamation of the divine revelation. And that is what will validate the preaching of the Old Testament in our day as well: the sovereign validation of the Lord himself.²

It Leads Us to Jesus the Messiah

One of the tragic results of separating the Old Testament from the New is that the believing community fails to see that Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection were clearly anticipated long before the events occurred. By viewing the older testament as a message that is non-Christian, the expectation is set in advance for some that there is nothing Christological or messianic to be gained from studying, much less reading, teaching, and preaching, the Old Testament. But such a view flies in the face of the evidence from the text itself.

The Messiah is at the heart of the message of that neglected portion of the Bible. For example, according to rabbinical calculations, there are some 456 Old Testament texts that refer either directly to the Messiah or to the messianic times.³ Even though this number is inflated by the particular standards of scholarship used in some communities, what remains when the list is reduced is still extremely impressive.⁴

Sadly, a significant portion of modern scholarship shares a skeptical attitude toward the messianic consciousness of the Old

Testament writers. Typical of such judgments is the conclusion of Joachim Becker: "There is no evidence for true messianism until the second century B.C."⁵ Becker would have us believe that it was only on the threshold of the New Testament that we begin to see any evidence for a Messiah! The amazing thing is that Becker himself realized that such a conclusion would run counter to some pretty strong evidence from those early believers in the first Christian century who were still without a New Testament in any of its sections or parts. He allowed: "Such a conclusion [that he had just made above] would contradict one of the most central concerns of the New Testament, which insists with unprecedented frequency, intensity, and unanimity that Christ was proclaimed in advance in the Old Testament. Historical-critical scholarship can never set aside this assertion of the New Testament."⁶ Becker will go to even greater lengths in destroying his own conclusions. He wrote, "To find Christ at every step on our way through the history of Israel and the Old Testament is not only no deception but also a duty imposed on us by the inspired testimony of the New Testament, the meaning of which we must strive to understand."⁷

Indeed, there is an organic system of messianic prophecy that can be found in the Old Testament, which is in full accord with the fulfillments of the New Testament. All too few have noticed the organic unity of the total argument, often settling for much less by picking up a verse here or there in an abstract and random manner.

The interpreter need not resort to settling for a double set of meanings in order to squeeze out of the Old Testament some messianic possibilities. On the contrary, one must be able to show that the Old Testament writers were aware of a very decided nexus between the temporal/historical events in many of their prophecies and their climactic fulfillment in the Messiah—and this can be done legitimately without doing violence to the ordinary rules of interpretation.

Those who argue that the messianic meaning, that which points to Jesus as the Messiah, remains hidden in the text oppose the apostles, who boldly announced that the events that occurred during the days of Jesus happened exactly as the Old Testament had predicted! The Old Testament cannot have a more obvious meaning along with a hidden Christian meaning. Had that been

the case, quoting the verses for nonbelievers and trying to convince them that Jesus had been fully anticipated in the Old Testament predictions would have amounted to foolishness. If we incorrectly argue that this meaning had been hidden in the earlier revelation of God, how then could it be persuasive for those considering whether Jesus was the one sent from God according to his plans from all eternity?

James H. Charlesworth has argued that “the term ‘Messiah’ in the Old Testament does not denote God’s final agent in the history of salvation. . . . The New Testament concept of ‘The Messiah’ is linked with the Old Testament through the theology of Early Judaism.”⁸

But this is to miss the repeated claim of the Old Testament text itself. The term *Messiah* is indeed used only nine times of the coming Anointed One who was to arrive in the person of Jesus Christ.⁹ Yet both the Jewish community (especially in pre-Christian days) and the early church found scores, if not hundreds, of texts supporting a messianic interpretation as we have already shown in the preceding argument.

As early as the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16–36), the apostle Peter used the Old Testament to demonstrate that Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection had been clearly anticipated by the writers of the Old Testament. Peter appealed to the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28–31), to the psalmist (Ps. 16), and to King David’s understanding (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 110) to make these same points prior to the appearance of any New Testament literature. A few days later, as Peter and John were going into the temple, he healed a lame man at the temple gate (Acts 3). This occasioned another sermon from Peter, in which he again made direct references to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, noting how they pointed to “what [God] had foretold through all the prophets” (Acts 3:18), namely, that Christ must suffer. Peter asserted that Christ was “that prophet” about whom Moses had written. Moses had expected God to raise up such a one to appear in these days. This pattern of appealing to the Old Testament to demonstrate that Christ is the Messiah was repeated in Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 and in Paul’s speech in the synagogue at Antioch (Acts 13). It is not a case of the early disciples borrowing from Judaism, the newly formed Jewish religion that began in the Babylonian exile in which the temple would now be replaced by

the synagogue, the priest would be replaced by the scribe or wise man, and the sacrifices would be replaced by prayers. The apostles' appeal was directly and solely to the earlier and prior text of the Old Testament itself.

Jesus' own testimony to himself was no less clear: "These [Old Testament texts] are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39b). Moreover, in Jesus' own hour of temptation, when faced by Satan himself, his response to each of the three temptations was to cite the Old Testament as his definite and authoritative remonstrance. Jesus had no need to accommodate either his Jewish listeners or the devil, as some allege. On the contrary, it was a conviction shared by both the Lord and the evil one: the Scriptures were the authoritative Word of God. On that point the devil could not be faulted!

It Deals with the Questions of Life

The scope of the Old Testament's teaching on the great questions of life is extremely broad and startling in its practicality. It covers everything from questions of human dignity and treatment of the environment in the opening chapters of Genesis to the nature and purpose of marital love in the Song of Solomon and a theology of culture in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Its moral laws address such values and sanctities as the absolute uniqueness of God, the worth and dignity of mortals, and respect for human life, for parents, for marriage, for property, and for truth. The civil laws, on the other hand, illustrate issues like public safety, treatment of orphans, property rights, and respect for authority. No less helpful are the ceremonial laws, which teach us to draw a line in the sand, demarcating the sacred and the secular and setting apart that which is holy from that which is common and ordinary.

If the Book of Lamentations is needed to develop a theology of suffering, then the Psalms are needed just as much to teach us how to praise and worship God.

Both the earlier prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets, according to the arrangement in the Hebrew

Bible) unfold the promise-plan of God. They also give us practical lessons we can use as we observe both the failures and the successes of earlier individuals and nations. The point is clear: those who refuse to learn from history are doomed, as the saying goes, to repeat its mistakes.

It Was Used as the Exclusive Authority in the Early Church

Even though we have already made reference to this fact, it bears a distinctive emphasis of its own. The fact is that whenever the word “Scripture(s)” (*graphe, graphai*) appears in the New Testament, it almost always points to the Old Testament, whether in its Greek translation, known as the Septuagint, or in its Hebrew and Aramaic text. It was to these texts that the Christians went, as did the Bereans, for example, to find how Jesus had been anticipated in the plan and purpose of God in that earlier testament.

Not every Jew or every early follower of Jesus caught on. One need only remember those two disciples who were walking on that first Easter Sunday to the village of Emmaus when Jesus joined them (Luke 24). Cleopas and that other disciple were so overtaken by their sadness that they failed to notice that the one who accompanied them was Jesus himself.

Their failure went deeper than that, however. They had no idea that the events they were now experiencing had been foretold long ago in the very Scriptures that they held to be the Word of God. This intellectual faux pas calls down Jesus’ stern rebuke: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:25–26). In the next verse Jesus went on, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”

Nowhere in the New Testament can one find evidence advocating that the writers went outside the boundaries of the Old Testament text to gain their view of the Messiah, or that they just rejected outright what these texts taught about the coming

one. The “story” the early church told was the story of the promise-plan of God and the line of the “seed” that would end in David’s final son, Jesus. This was the gospel they proclaimed.

Our English word *gospel* goes back to the Middle English *godspel*, which meant the “good story” and by a change of inflection, the “God-story.”¹⁰ Thus, the gospel was the story of that series of interconnected events written to inform us about the person and work of the Messiah.

But there is more to be said about the early Christians’ appeal to the Old Testament, for it was more than a mere series of proof-texts for the identity and mission of the Messiah. In Romans 9–11, Paul grapples with the issue of whether God has been faithful to his promises made to Israel. He is interested not only in the promise concerning the “seed,” but also in the “land,” *eretz Israel*, and the blessings that were to come to all nations of the earth through Israel’s man of promise.

Paul could hardly contain himself as he traced the concepts of Israel’s adoption as sons, the divine glory that was theirs, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises (Rom. 9:4). Yet he was troubled enough to ask the key question: Had God failed to do what he had promised? Such an idea was anathema to Paul, “for God’s gifts and his call [were] irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). Even though the nation Israel had for the moment been cut out of its own tree (which was rooted in the promises made to the patriarchs), this exclusion would only last until the times of the Gentiles were fulfilled and the full number of the Gentiles had come into the body of believers (Rom. 11:25). But then there would be a grafting of Israel back into the tree they were cut out of, as they returned in those latter days in great numbers to full belief in their Messiah. Paul was exuberant. Such knowledge astounded him:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are [God’s] judgments and how inscrutable
[God’s] ways. (Rom. 11:33 NRSV)

God could not and would not go back on all that he had promised in the Old Testament. No wonder the early church found both a ready apologetic for the Messiah’s claims and such great comfort in the Old Testament.

Conclusion

The Old Testament was the Bible of the early church. Yet one more objection can be heard from some detractors. “Now that we have the New Testament, should we not go to the New Testament *first* to form an understanding of the Bible’s teachings and then go *backward* into the Old Testament, interpreting it in the light of the New Testament?” This approach is advocated so frequently in the church today that it must be faced squarely.¹¹

This whole approach is wrongheaded historically, logically, and biblically. As we have seen, the first New Testament believers tested what they had heard from Jesus and his disciples against what was written in the Old Testament. They had no other canon or source of help. How, then, were they able to get it right?

Thus, from a methodological point of view, reading the Bible backward is incorrect historically as well as procedurally. What is more, the early church knew the Old Testament to be true; therefore, logically, they could not have tested what was established (and true) for them (possessing only the Old Testament) by what was being received as new (the New Testament)! That would be a reversal of the natural, historical, and logical order of things.

Finally, Israel had been taught biblically in passages like Deuteronomy 13 and 18 to test new teachings or claims to divine authority by what God had already revealed in his Word (i.e., in the Old Testament). Therefore, preaching and teaching the Bible in a backward methodology can produce a message that is also methodologically backward!

In validating claims to authenticity, we move from what is already acknowledged to be true to that which builds on it. What, then, is the case for interpreting the Bible in a forward, rather than a backward, approach?¹²

1. To reject the Old Testament as the *prior*, authoritative revelation of God is to reject the Bible’s own basis for determining who is and who is not the Messiah. Jesus located the failure of the Jewish audiences in their failure to believe what Moses wrote. In John 5:46–47 Jesus declared, “If you

- believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (NASB). Exactly so! Dismissing the Old Testament and reducing the scope of your study only to the New Testament will logically raise this question: "How can I believe what God has said *en toto* in the New Testament if I tend to not believe or trust what he has said in the Old?"
2. The New Testament Scriptures base their claim to being authoritative on the Old Testament. That is why Matthew 1 begins with a genealogy that stretches from Genesis to the New Testament.
 3. The foundation of Jesus' teaching was the Old Testament. If any new teaching contradicted the *Tenach* (Jewish acronym for the Old Testament), it had to be rejected, for Deuteronomy 12:32 warned: "See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it."
 4. Paul also based his teaching on the Old Testament. He preached what he had received from the Old Testament Scriptures. Said he, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3–4, italics added). But even more definitively, when Paul was on trial for his life, he affirmed, "Now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers" (Acts 26:6 NASB). He concluded by saying, "And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day . . . stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place" (Acts 26:22 NASB). His testimony was that he believed "everything that [was] in accordance with the Law, and that [was] written in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14 NASB). Even under arrest in Rome, Paul called the Jewish community together to explain what his message was. He saw himself as "testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets from morning to evening" (Acts 28:23, my translation).

The Old Testament can stand on its own, for it has done so both in the pre-Christian and the early Christian centuries. To

make the preaching or teaching of the Old Testament contingent on a prior commitment to making normative for all matters of faith the teaching at the end of God's revelation (i.e., the New Testament) obscures the uniqueness of many of the Old Testament's teachings. It also trivializes up to three-fourths of what God had to say to us. The tendency to interpret the Bible backward is a serious procedural problem, for it will leave a large vacuum in our teachings and provide seedbeds for tomorrow's heresies. It is reductionistic to level out the Bible to say only what the New Testament has said!

The value of the Old Testament is immeasurable for all believers. To avoid it is to miss approximately three-fourths of what our Lord has to say to us today, whether we will hear it or not!