

“Can I Trust the Old Testament?”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Ask series

Texts: Joshua 10:36-42; Leviticus 25:44-46

Theme: Old Testament, Bible interpretation

Of the two parts of the book we call the Bible, the Old Testament is probably more confusing and difficult to understand than the New. Because it was written so long ago in a cultural context very different from our own, people outside the Christian faith will often ask hard questions about the content of the Old Testament.

And many faithful Christians wonder if they can believe that the OT was truly inspired. They ask, “Can I trust this ancient document? Does it really reveal important truths about God and humanity and how we should live today?” My short answer is yes, but it’s all about *how* you interpret the Old Testament. So let me tell you how I think it’s possible to read the OT and make sense of some of those deeply troubling passages.

First, I think it’s important to know that Jesus came out of the Jewish tradition. We need to read and understand the Old Testament to understand who Jesus is – particularly when we call him Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. There’s a history there that we won’t comprehend without understanding the Old Testament.

Second, we need to know that Jesus himself interpreted the Jewish Scriptures. On many occasions Jesus said, “You have heard it said (and he quotes the OT), but I say unto you.....” For example, he challenged people to think about their attitudes as well as their behavior.

He’d say things like, “You’ve heard it said that adultery is wrong. And I agree. But even if you lust in your heart, you are preparing yourself to commit adultery, so lust is wrong also.” He’d say, “An eye for an eye and a

tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you turn the other cheek.” Or another example, “You’ve heard it said that murder is wrong, and so it is. But I say to you that even harboring anger in your heart is preparing you for violence. Let it go.” The point is: Jesus himself interpreted the scriptures for his time.

Now, even though the Old Testament is the foundation for the new covenant Jesus inaugurated, there are still some major problems in relating the two. The Old Testament does have some very difficult passages that seem to describe a very different religion and God from the one described in the New. There are many such passages, but let us consider them in three categories:

First, some passages portray a God who instructs Israel to wage war against enemies in vicious and extreme ways. The battle accounts in the book of Joshua often portray God requiring Israel to kill all the inhabitants of a city – men, women, children and even the animals. In the OT, war is portrayed as a way of life and God is seen as taking the side of Israel against its enemies.

Second, some passages describe God as supporting behavior that today we consider cruel, unjust and inhumane. If a child disobeyed his or her parents, the law said to stone that child. Slavery was permitted. Extreme punishments for violations of the Law seem to contradict the God of grace and mercy revealed in the New Testament. If anyone touched the Ark of the Covenant they would be killed. Once when it was slipping, someone reached to grab it and they were struck dead by God. Wow!

A third category that proves challenging to the modern reader are primitive scientific explanations for things that today we understand in a much more complex and nuanced way. The universe was created in only

six days. The story of the flood in Genesis 6-9 presumes a three-tiered universe with waters above the dome and waters underneath the earth. That view was the best science in 1000 BC, but it no longer fits the knowledge we have today.

Passages such as these – depicting a God of war, violence, slavery and scientific absurdities – are reasons why so many readers are reluctant to trust the Old Testament. But is there a way to read it that makes sense today that enables us to trust it? I believe there is.

First of all, while some Christians believe the Bible is inerrant, without any mistakes of any kind, most Christians have a different understanding. They see the Bible as authoritative in matters of faith and practice, meaning it contains what we human beings need to know for salvation. But when we say the Bible is inspired, it does not mean we all agree it is infallible. Many of us do not believe the Bible was dictated by God.

Second, the Old Testament documents were originally written for people who lived in ancient times. They were written at a time when people had limited knowledge of the larger world in which they lived. Most Christians today acknowledge that God used human beings to convey God's message, and that their cultural realities shaped what they wrote, including their views on science, violence and war. They were a product of their time.

In terms of science, Bible scholars for centuries have taught that God accommodated Himself to the capacities of his human audience. God spoke to people in language and terms they could understand. Thousands of years ago they would have had no concept of the age of the universe,

the big bang or the process of evolution. So God kept it simple. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

With regard to violence, God’s revelation has to be seen in the context of two important factors. First, the ancient Middle East was an incredibly violent place. War was the norm, and punishment by death was frequently the penalty for crime. Fighting often escalated and a small matter could erupt into a war between tribes or nations. In that context, the punishment of “an eye for an eye” actually limited the amount of violence that was permitted. God was moving people in the direction of less violence.

Second, Israel was a small nation in the midst of many other hostile peoples. God was understood to be guiding them into a new land. Conquest was part of the normal give-and-take among peoples of that time, and God was siding with the Israelites to accomplish God’s larger purposes.

Over time, God was able to reveal more and more of God’s rule of love into human hearts. The prophets announced the vision of swords being beaten into iron plows. Jesus reinforced that vision with his teaching about the kingdom of God.

And Jesus reoriented the apostles toward a different approach to the Old Testament, as we talked about before. Christians, since the first century have come to understand that parts of the OT are still binding on Christians, and parts of it are not. For example, we no longer practice animal sacrifice or killing our children for disobeying. And yet the Ten Commandments are still held in high regard and are expected to be obeyed.

The early Church had decisions it needed to make. Would it require converts to Christ to become Jews first? Would they require men to be

circumcised and would new Christians be expected to follow ritual dietary laws? It created a huge debate in the early church. The Old Testament had to be interpreted.

In summary, the best way to interpret the Old Testament, I think, is to never pick out a single verse and assume it is the ultimate word. Instead we should understand that each verse should be interpreted as part of the Bible's whole message. When there are confusing and apparently immoral verses in Scripture, we should always test them against the message of Christ and the New Testament.

So, imagine you are hanging out in a coffee shop, and suddenly your non-Christian friend says to you, "Okay, I don't want a long complicated answer. But how can you trust the Old Testament when it has all those confusing and difficult passages? It doesn't even sound like the New Testament."

You might say, "It's all about how you interpret the Old Testament. God spoke to people long ago in ways they could understand. Yes, there are lot of things that made sense 3,000 years ago and we don't believe today. But there are important truths contained in those books that we really need to hear. The important part is reading the whole Bible to get the message of the entire book."

Let us join together in praying the opening prayer found in your bulletin.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ask: Faith Questions in a Skeptical Age*, by Scott J. Jones and Arthur D. Jones, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015; pp. 73-84.