Do We Need the New Testament?

The answer is, of course, “Yes.” We do need the New Testament. But why we need it? In what sense is the Old Testament incomplete? What difference would it make if we didn’t have the New Testament?

## Salvation

We need the New Testament because it tells us about Jesus. What does it vitally tell us about Jesus? The New Testament itself suggests that the answer lies in what Jesus did and what happened to him. Half of the New Testament is occupied with telling his story, four times, with a special focus on his execution and his resurrection. Much of the other half of the New Testament focuses on explaining the significance of that story, with an even sharper focus on his execution and resurrection. His letting himself be killed and his resurrection were an expression of God’s love and power. In these events God let humanity do its worst to him, and declined to be overcome by that action. God was both willing and able to overcome it. The submission and the overcoming meant something for God; they were God’s assertion that he was unwilling to be overcome by humanity’s rejection. God was insistent on bringing to consummation the purpose he had initiated from the beginning. To use Jesus’ language, God was insistent on reigning in the world. By doing so, the execution and the resurrection also meant something for humanity. They indicated to humanity the far-reaching nature of God’s willingness to submit himself to us and the far-reaching nature of God’s power.

What if God had not sent his Son into the world or had not collaborated in his submitting himself to execution or had not brought about his resurrection? And what if we had not known about those events? What if the Gospels had not been written?

In a sense God did nothing new in Jesus. God was simply taking to its logical and ultimate extreme the activity in which God had been involved all through the Old Testament story. All the way through, God had been letting humanity do its worst. Specifically, he had been letting the people he adopted do its worst, and had been declining to be overcome by its rejection of him, declining to abandon it or destroy it. God had been paying the price for his people’s attitude to him. He had been sacrificing himself for this people. He had been bearing its sin (the Hebrew word most often translated “forgive” is *nasa*’,a word that means “carry”). He had been absorbing the force of that sin, carrying it in himself rather than making Israel carry it. This carrying did not exclude disciplining Israel; but when God brought trouble on Israel, this trouble was an act of discipline within the context of an ongoing relationship like the relationship between a parent and a child.

The fact that God had been acting in this way through Israel’s story didn’t make it redundant for God to bring his self-sacrifice to a climax in Jesus. This last self-sacrifice is the logical and inevitable culmination of that earlier way of acting and letting himself be acted on. It’s the final expression of it. Through the story of the nations and through Israel’s story God had been declaring that he was king, and he had sometimes been acting like a king in imposing his will on the nations or on Israel. That declaration and action was inclined to draw forth human resistance. The nations and Israel prefer to make their own decisions.

The coming of Jesus constituted another assertion that God was king and intended to behave as king in relation to the nations and to the world, an assertion made in acts and in words about being king. Predictably, Jesus’ coming and his declaration about God reigning drew forth a response of resistance. That resistance was expressed in the execution of God’s Son, which appropriately involved both the nations and the people of God. It constituted the ultimate expression of human wickedness. It thus drew forth the ultimate expression of God’s submission to humanity. God remained sovereign Lord; he was not compelled by any factors outside himself. Yet God deliberately let humanity do what it wanted to him, and did so under a compulsion that came from inside himself, a compulsion that derived from who he was, a compulsion to be himself. He could not deny himself or be untrue to himself (2 Tim 2:13). By the same dynamic our insistence on executing God’s Son also drew forth the ultimate expression of God’s faithfulness and God’s power, in resurrecting Jesus. One might almost say that God had to provoke humanity into its ultimate act of rebellion in order to have the opportunity to act in a way that refused to let this ultimate act of rebellion have the last word.

By the same dynamic again, our subsequent continuing resistance to God’s reign as nations and as the people of God means he must come back to implement that reign.

God’s submitting his Son to execution was thus necessary for God’s sake and for humanity’s sake. It was necessary for God to be God in fulfilling his purpose and overcoming human rebellion. It was also necessary for humanity’s sake in order to bring home to humanity the truth about itself and about God, and to draw it from rebellion to submission, from resistance to faith. The act of atonement had an objective and a subjective aspect.

Insofar as God’s act was undertaken for God’s sake, there was no great need for humanity to know about it. It could have been done in secret or not recorded. But insofar as it was undertaken for humanity’s sake, as a demonstration of divine love, it needed to be done in public and it needed to be recorded, so that people two thousand years later can still be drawn by it.

So do we need the New Testament? Insofar as the execution and the resurrection were the logical end term of a stance that God had been taking through Old Testament times, then the Old Testament story gives an entirely adequate account of who God is and of the basis for relating to God. Because of who God has always been, God was already able to be in relationship with his people, despite their rebellion. God has always been able and willing to carry their waywardness. And on the basis of that story, Israel has always been able to respond to God and be in relationship with God. In this sense the gospel did not open up any new possibilities to people; those possibilities were always there. Yet the story of the execution and the resurrection are the story of the ultimate expression of who God is, and therefore they do provide the ultimate public basis for responding to God and trusting in God. We do not absolutely need the New Testament, but we do benefit from it.

## Narrative

Related to the question about salvation is another question. Is the Old Testament story complete on its own? Clearly the New Testament story adds to the Old Testament story, but then so do other Jewish writings from the Greek and Roman periods such as Maccabees. The movie *The Bourne Legacy* added to the earlier Bourne movies, but this fact did not mean that the earlier movies needed a fourth in the sequence.

The beginning of Matthew’s Gospel implies that the story told in the Old Testament and the story told in his Gospel can be read as a unified story, but it does so in a way that also indicates that the Old Testament story does not have to be read that way. Matthew speaks of fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile, and fourteen from the exile to Jesus, but the Old Testament itself shows that he has been selective with its story in order to make the point. In the Old Testament there were not fourteen generations from Abraham to David and fourteen from David to the exile. Matthew is working backwards. He knows that Jesus is the climax of the biblical story, and he shapes it accordingly. But the shaping does not emerge from the narrative itself.

Richard Hays has remarked that the “astonishing event” of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was “completely unpredictable on the basis of the story’s plot development,” but “is nonetheless now seen as the supremely fitting narrative culmination, providing unforeseen closure to dangling narrative themes and demanding a reconfiguration of… the reader’s grasp of ‘what the story is all about.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Are Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection unpredictable on the basis of the Old Testament story? They were indeed unpredicted, yet Jesus didn’t see them as unpredictable. He was not surprised at his execution and resurrection, and his lack of surprise did not simply issue from his divine insight. He pointed out that his crucifixion fitted the pattern of the Old Testament story. Israel had regularly rejected and killed its prophets. Likewise the resurrection fitted the pattern of the Old Testament story. Ezekiel 37 notes how Israel in exile saw itself as dead and hopeless, yet God brought it back from the dead and reestablished it in fulfillment of Ezekiel’s promise that it would be raised from the dead. So the astonishing event of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection is a logical continuation of Israel’s story. Yet we might not have seen that Israel’s story is a story of death and resurrection unless we were reading it in light of Jesus’ story.

There is then a converse point to be made. The Old Testament indicates that God brings Israel back to life after the exile, but it also indicates that this new life is by no means as glorious as the life promised by Ezekiel’s vision. One could say that the late Second Temple community sees itself as still in exile, though the fact that the Jewish people is in being throughout the historic borders of Israel may make this a confusing way to make the point. I would rather speak of the Jewish people seeing itself as still in need of restoration. The Holy Spirit thus inspires John the Baptizer’s father to speak not in terns of exile and return but in terms of freedom, of light shining on people living in the shadow of death (see Luke 1:67-79).

Luke’s version of the gospel story indeed starts by suggesting that Jesus’ coming is to bring the downfall of Rome and the restoration of Israel to freedom and full life. “He has brought down rulers from their thrones,” Mary says; he has “rescued us from the hand of our enemies,” Zechariah says (Luke 1:52, 74). This intention comes to be frustrated by the leadership of the Jewish people, whose hostility leads to Jesus’ execution. The process whereby God restores his people and implements his sovereignty in the world thus takes a new form as God lets that rejection happen and turns it into a means of achieving his purpose. The process God goes through in Jesus parallels the one God goes through in the Old Testament story.

So Jesus comes to bring Israel back to fullness of life, and his own dying and rising is designed to bring its story to closure. Yet it did not do so. Israel strangely declines that closure. Paul then sees a mysterious divine providence in this refusal; it adds impetus to the carrying of the gospel to the Gentile world, pending a closure for Israel that will come later. Further, we can hardly say that the result of the spreading of the gospel is that the church manifests unqualified resurrection life. The church engages in crucifixion; the church experiences crucifixion; the church experiences resurrection. The pattern continues into our own day.

The Old Testament, then, reaches a partial closure, but not a complete one; the New Testament likewise achieves a partial closure, but not a complete one. This parallel gives the Old Testament story more potential to be instructive for the church than one would think from the way the church uses that story. When Paul wants to get the Corinthians to think about their life, he points it to the story of Israel from Egypt to the promised land, and comments that “these things happened to them as examples, but they were written for our admonition, on whom the end of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). There might seem to be some tension in Paul’s comment. If the end of the ages has come, would one expect there to be illumination for the church in these stories about Israel’s experience before it reached the promised land? Yet the issues that arise in the Corinthian church’s life show that living in the last days does not transform the life of the church. Israel’s position between the exodus and the promised land provides a parallel for the church’s position between Jesus’ resurrection and his final appearing.

The Old Testament story is not merely our ancestors’ history, a history of a period so different from ours that it hardly relates to our life when the end of the ages has come. It is the history of a people like us in a position not so different from ours. Our pretense that things are otherwise puts us into a jeopardy that is potentially fatal.

## Hope

Is it the case that the Old Testament relates the promises whose fulfillment is related in the New Testament? Insofar as this is so, we clearly need the New Testament, to tell us about that fulfillment.

The Old Testament certainly relates promises that are fulfilled within the Old Testament itself. For instance, Isaiah tells Hezekiah that the treasures of Jerusalem will be taken off to Babylon, along some of his descendants (Isa 39:5-7). It happens. Subsequently within the Old Testament, Yahweh’s proven capacity in this way to declare what is going to happen, and then to make it happen, is a major reason for believing he is God (e.g., Isa 41:1-7, 21-29). Likewise, the New Testament makes declarations about the future that are fulfilled within its own pages. Notably, Jesus foretells his rejection, death, and resurrection (e.g., Mk 8:31). And it happens.

Yet it is strikingly hard to give an example of such fulfillment *between* the Testaments. Matthew 1—4, for instance, refers seven times to fulfillment, but none of the references involves a direct fulfillment of the prophecies that Matthew quotes that parallels those fulfillments within the Old Testament and within the New Testament. When Jews argue with Christians about whether Jesus is the Messiah, they thus point about that this claim is implausible because Jesus did not fulfill Old Testament hopes. Jesus did not introduce a lasting reign of God’s righteousness and justice in the world.

In trying to understand the theological significance of this phenomenon, I have been helped by Paul’s comment that “Whatever promises of God there are, in him [in Christ] there is a ‘Yes’” (2 Cor 1:20). God’s promises are not all *fulfilled* in Christ (in the sense in which we commonly use the word “fulfill”), but they are all *confirmed* in Christ. The fact that Jesus came, healed people, expelled demons, stilled the storm, submitted to rejection and execution, rose to new life, and overwhelmed people with God’s spirit is the evidence for seeing him as the confirmation of God’s promises. Most of these acts are not the *subject* of the promises, but they do confirm the promises. They indicate that God is at work in Jesus and that this activity of God’s is one with the promises God made through the Prophets. We don’t exactly need the New Testament in order to make it possible for us to believe in God’s promises; at least, many Jews believe in them without believing in Jesus. But the New Testament does direct us back to the Old Testament to consider what are the promises there that we can believe in.

There is one truth that is confined to the New Testament, and it is a truth about hope. In the Old Testament, the grave or Sheol or Hades is the end of the story for human beings. In the New Testament, there is a bigger End to come after our death, an End that will then mean that we rise to a new life, with new bodies—or that we go to Hell. The Old Testament does not incorporate either aspect of this truth, the good news or the bad news. There are slight hints of it, once at the very beginning and once at the very end of the Old Testament. At the very beginning, the first human beings have access to the tree of life; if they ate it, they would live forever. Because of choosing to eat of another tree in disobedience to God’s command, they and their descendants are denied access to the tree of life. So this story explains why we all die, but it leaves there the fact that God originally intended us to live eternally. Then the very last scene in the Old Testament, in Daniel 12, promises that many dead people will wake up again, some to lasting life, some to lasting contempt. This promise has its background in the martyrdoms brought about by Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century crisis in Jerusalem when he banned proper worship of Yahweh and replaced it by pagan worship. Jews paid with their lives for their faithfulness to God in that situation. It surely can’t be the case that God simply lets faithful servants be killed in this way and lets the unfaithful live on until they die in their beds? Daniel 12 promises that God will take action to reverse things.

Daniel 12 is the only reference to a form of resurrection to life or death in the Old Testament. In principle, the Old Testament is content with the idea that this life is all we have. It tells some stories about dead people being resuscitated, but resuscitation is not resurrection; resurrection involves a new kind of life and a spiritual body—that is, a body that lives according to the spirit and not according to the lower nature. When people have lived a full life and are “full of years,” they are content to go to be with their ancestors. They will not cease to exist but will go to Sheol, which is not a place of suffering but a place of a lifeless existence. The Psalms chafe loudly about not being able to live out one’s full life because of undeserved troubles, but what they look for is deliverance that makes it possible to live a long life, and for the early death of people who seek to cause their death. They can speak about living in God’s presence forever, but the “forever” refers to the whole of life. It does not envisage something beyond Sheol. Enoch and Elijah are taken to be with God, but their experience does not correspond to the resurrection of which the New Testament speaks.

It is entirely appropriate that the Old Testament should have virtually no hope of resurrection, because until Jesus died and rose, there was going to be no resurrection. It’s not that the Old Testament was wrong; it was right. Hence the fact that Jesus went to make a proclamation to people who belonged to God but had died and were in Sheol (1 Peter 4:6); he went to give them the good news that they were not stuck in Sheol forever. Admittedly, when Jesus argued with the Sadducees about resurrection, his argument also implies a reason for the reality of Hell. As resurrection to life must follow from the reality of God’s relationship with people, so perhaps Hell must follow from the lack of reality. “Hell is other people,” Jean-Paul Sartre famously had one of his characters saying, in his play *No Exit* about three people who are in Hell who thus can’t escape one another. Hell is a matter of relationships—specific relationships, in the context of the saying in Sartre’s play. But to turn that idea inside out, Jesus’ might imply that Hell is the continuing lack of a relationship between God and us that characterizes this life. The related implication of Daniel 12 is that it is appropriate for faithlessness to receive some more explicit exposure than the fact that people’s life simply peters out, which is the reason why the realization about Hell as well as that about resurrection developed in Judaism. Hell means judgment. While Jesus is the person who introduces Hell into the Bible, he was taking up an idea that was present in Judaism by his day.

There is another sense in which the Old Testament continues to teach us about hope. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wondered why God did not let the Israelites know about resurrection life, and speculated that it was because he needed to get them to take this life really seriously. Once people know about eternal life, they stop doing so. The history of Christian attitudes to this life provides evidence for his speculation. We therefore need the Old Testament to remind us of the importance of this life, and to give us hope for this life.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Mission

Church as muli-ethnic and not-political

Do we need the New Testament because the Old Testament focuses exclusively on Israel and we would not otherwise know that God was concerned for the whole world? Did God not reveal his concern for the nations before Jesus came? In fact, that concern for the nations goes back to the beginning. God created the whole world and was involved with the development of all the nations. The aim of God’s appearing to Abraham was not simply to bless him but to drive the nations to pray for blessing like Abraham’s. God’s judgment of the Egyptians and the Canaanites does not mean God is unconcerned about other nations, as God’s judgment of Israel and God’s judgment of the church does not mean God is unconcerned about Israel and about the church. Prophets look forward to a time when nations will flock to Jerusalem to get Yahweh to make decisions for them. Psalms repeatedly summon all the nations to acknowledge Yahweh with their praise.

It is in keeping with this concern that the spread of the Jewish people around the Middle East and the Mediterranean before Jesus’ day had the happy result that there were synagogues all over the known world, and that these synagogues were attracting Gentiles to acknowledge Yahweh. It is in keeping with this concern that before Jesus’ day the Jewish Scriptures had been translated into Greek, so that people who did not know Hebrew could read them. The Book of Acts relates a series of events that gave huge new impetus to spreading the knowledge of the God of Israel: Pentecost, the abolition of the Jewish people’s distinctive rule of faith in the Cornelius story, and the broader mission process described in Acts. But these events did not initiate the spread of knowledge of Israel’s God among the Gentiles. One might try a thought experiment. Suppose Jesus had not come. What would have happened? One can imagine that Judaism would have continued to spread through the Gentile world and would have become more and more of a world religion.

God’s strategy in seeking to fulfill his purpose for creation worked somewhat as follows. First he commissioned humanity to subdue and care for the world. It didn’t work. So he tried destroying most of the world and starting again with one family. It didn’t work. So he tried a third time with one family but separated them from the rest of the world in order to bless them so spectacularly that the entire world would pray to be blessed as they were blessed. This strategy also didn’t work, and the descendants of Abraham and Sarah ended up back in the Babylon from which they had come. God tried a fourth time by reestablishing the community centered on Jerusalem even while many people who had been scattered around the Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern worlds stayed in the place of their dispersion. This arrangement proved more effective insofar as the Jewish community did attract many Gentiles to come to believe in the God of the Torah. But the Jewish people centered on Jerusalem remained under the domination of the superpower of the day. So God tried a fifth time by sending his Son into the world. This strategy initially failed in a particularly catastrophic fashion but God again turned disaster into potential triumph. He turned the failure and his refusal to be beaten by it into a message that could go out to the world as a whole. In this connection he made use of that already-existent dispersion of the Jewish community and the way it had already attracted many Gentiles to believe in the God of the Torah.

The strategy of attraction that God had initiated with Abraham and Sarah continued. The focus of the Epistles lies on the Christian congregation’s seeing that it grows in its understanding of the gospel and its embodying of that gospel in its life. The world’s coming to recognize the God of the gospel would then follow. Paul makes this vision of attraction particularly specific to the Corinthians when he speaks of people coming to the congregation’s worship, falling down to worship God themselves, and acknowledging that “God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:26). The dynamic is the one envisaged by Zechariah, who pictures ten people from every tongue among the nations taking hold of the hem of every Jew’s cloak and saying, “We want to go with you, because we have heard that God is with you” (Zech 8:23).

We do not need the New Testament because otherwise we would not realize that God cared about the whole world, nor because Jews who lived before Jesus had not been active in spreading God’s revelation around the world. The Old Testament made God’s concern for the whole world clear, and the Jewish people had been attracting people to the revelation in the Scriptures. Missionally, a major significance of the New Testament is that it opens a window into the life of a series of Christian congregations and helps us to see the nature of the congregational life that commends the gospel. But the Old Testament makes clear the problem that the church still faces. I have noted the way Paul speaks to the Corinthians about the importance of learning from Israel’s story. Another facet of that importance appears here. God’s strategy was that his people would be the magnet that attracts people to him. Israel was not very good at being such a magnet. The church continues to have this problem.

## Theology

Do we need the New Testament because we wouldn’t otherwise have as true a revelation of God? Is it the case that the Old Testament would give people the impression that Yahweh is a God of wrath and that we need Jesus to show us that God is a God of love? It is a popular understanding, but one hard to reconcile with either Testament. It is not a Jewish view; Jews do not get the impression from their Scriptures that Yahweh is a God of wrath. Of course Yahweh is capable of acting in wrath, but the relationship of love and wrath in Yahweh is well summed up in a line from the middle of Lamentations. Yahweh does not willingly afflict or hurt people, as translations commonly have it (Lam 3:33). More literally, Lamentations says that Yahweh does not afflict or hurt people from his heart. Yahweh’s heart is compassion and mercy. It fits with this fact that the New Testament doesn’t say, “You know the Scriptures give people the impression that God is a God of wrath? Well we can now tell you that God is a God of love.” The New Testament doesn’t speak in terms of having new things to say about God that the Old Testament did not say. It does not describe people such as the Pharisees or people such as Jesus’ disciples as having a false or incomplete understanding of God. It does not tell them things about God that they did not know. It does not picture the Pharisees or the disciples responding with horror or surprise at things Jesus says about God. The New Testament doesn’t invite the reaction, “Oh, we could never have known God was like that, but now it is revealed to us.”

There are New Testament texts that have been read that way, but they do not bear further examination in this connection. John says that the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). He hardly means that Moses did not know about God being grace and truth. That very phrase sums up God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34:6, which is then alluded to many times in the Old Testament. The King James Version (among others) has the very words “gracious” and “truth” as part of its translation of the verse in Exodus. Grace and truth came through Moses; he taught Israel that these realities were the foundation of God’s relationship with them, or rather Moses reaffirmed that point (Abraham knew it already). But Moses was not himself an embodiment of grace and truth, as Jesus was. Jesus was the very incarnation of God, he was grace and truth on two legs walking around Galilee and Jerusalem. As John goes on, “no one has ever seen God, but a one and only son, God, who is close to the father’s heart, he has given an account of him” (John 1:18). Being one who embodies grace and truth and being God’s only son and being one who can give an account of God, Jesus *is* himself divine. He did not offer a new revelation of God, but he did provide people with an unprecedentedly vivid embodiment of the revelation they already had. The gift that the New Testament gives is its story of God’s known character embodied in someone visible, embodied in a concrete life.

The same insight emerges from the beginning of Hebrews. “God, having spoken in many different forms and in many different ways of old to our ancestors through the prophets, at the end of these days spoke to us through a son” (Heb 1:1-2). Hebrews’ point is not that God has now said something different or something additional over against what he said through the Prophets. It is that the different revelations given through the different Prophets have now been embodied altogether in this one person.

This embodiment means that the New Testament does indeed make the metaphysical questions about God more complicated. God is one; Jesus is divine; Jesus addresses the Father, so he is in some sense a different person from the Father; the spirit of God or of Jesus brings the real presence of God or Jesus to people. These facts in due course led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

What did the doctrine of the Trinity add to our knowledge of God? Suppose by another thought experiment we project ourselves back into the position of believers in Old Testament times, or believers living on the eve of Jesus’ birth—people such as Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon. What did they lack by not knowing about the Trinity? They knew that God was powerful and loving and just. They knew he was a reality in their lives. They heard him speak. They knew they could pray to him. When the New Testament speaks of God as our Father, it doesn’t give the impression that it is inviting Jews to think about God in a way that would have seemed novel. I am not clear that Israel missed out too much by not knowing about the Trinity.

Now I accept the doctrine of the Trinity; I say the creed every Sunday without any mental reservation. Yet I’m not inclined to say it’s a New Testament truth. Rather, its importance lies in the way it safeguards those truths that the New Testament does imply. The importance of the doctrine of the Trinity does not lie in what it reveals. Indeed, I am not clear it reveals anything. Now in making that statement, I go against a trend in Systematics. If you ask how the Trinity is positively significant for us, then a standard contemporary answer in the West is that it establishes the presence of relationality in God and of free collaboration within God. But those statements are inferences from the doctrine of the Trinity, contextual inferences that became important to Western thinkers in the late twentieth century because of our concern about relationality, which issues from relationality being a problem to us. It is not a truth that comes from the New Testament as opposed to the Old.

## Spirituality

Do we need the New Testament because without it we wouldn’t know how to relate to God, know how to pray, know how spirituality works? Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with a prophetic summary of the dynamics of life with God. He tells people that it is all right to be crushed and to be longing for God’s righteous purpose to be fulfilled; God is going to respond to that longing. In speaking to people who are crushed and mourning, Jesus sees them as in the kind of position out of which people pray in the Psalms, and in response he speaks like a prophet. Most of the wording in the Beatitudes starts from the Psalms and Isaiah. It is therefore not surprising that Ephesians 5 bids people to be filled with the Spirit and thus to speak to one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs—which at least includes the scriptural Psalms. Nor is it surprising that the praise of heaven as Revelation describes it looks very much like the praise of the Psalms.

Prayer in Revelation also looks like prayer in the Psalms. In Revelation 6 John sees the martyrs under the altar in heaven (there is an altar in heaven because heaven is the heavenly temple, and a temple has an altar). The martyrs are praying in the way people do in the Psalms, crying out and asking how long it is going to be before the Lord judges and takes revenge for their blood from the people on earth. It might seem that the appropriate Christian response to their prayer would be to tell them that because they live after Christ, they ought not to be praying in that way. It was a way of praying that was perhaps tolerable before Christ, but it is hardly acceptable any longer. Actually the Lord gives each of them a white robe and does not rebuke them except by telling them to wait a little longer until the full number of their brothers and sisters have been killed as they have been. Events later in Revelation constitute the fulfillment of that promise within the vision. When we were young, we may have been told that God answers prayer by saying yes, no, or wait. On this occasion, we might have thought God would answer “No,” but actually God gives the other two answers, “Yes, but wait.” Apparently it is still fine to pray for one’s attackers to be punished.

So the New Testament affirms the ways of worshiping and praying that appear in the Old Testament. Does it add anything to them? When Ephesians urges people to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, I have assumed that it includes the Psalms in the Psalter, but I also assume that it does not confine its reference to them. At the beginning of his Gospel Luke includes those two songs of praise by Mary and Zechariah, which I assume would count as hymns or spiritual songs. Even more than the praise in Revelation, they constitute praise of a kind one finds in the Psalms, in this case praise that bases itself on what God is now doing afresh. As is appropriate in the context, they thus most resemble thanksgiving psalms, or testimony psalms as one may as easily call them. Like such psalms, they recount what God has just done for the person who is praying. Like such psalms, they go on to reaffirm truths about God that have been newly-demonstrated in what God has done. Like such psalms, they express confidence for the future in light of what God has done. Like such psalms, they assume that what God has done for the person who is praying is of significance for other people; it builds up their faith and hope. Like some examples of this kind of praise in the Psalms, they praise God for having done what God has actually not yet done but has made a commitment to doing; because God has made that commitment, the deed is as good as done.

When Jesus gives the disciples what we call the Lord’s Prayer, it might be asked whether he means people are to say these actual words, or whether they are to take the prayer as a pattern. I assume the answer is that it has both significances. The same is true of the Psalms. They are meant for us to pray; they are also a pattern for prayer. What the New Testament adds is examples of people taking up the pattern in their own prayer and praise.

When I listen to Christians pray, I hear little evidence of our praying being shaped by Scripture. We could do worse than learn from the Psalms, along with other prayers in the Old Testament, in Lamentations, Ezra-Nehemiah, and elsewhere.

## Ethics

Finally, do we need the New Testament because it lays before us a higher ethical ideal than that of the Old Testament?

Jesus himself suggests three hermeneutical clues for understanding the significance of the Old Testament. One comes in a response to a question about this very subject. If you want to understand the Torah and the Prophets, he says, you need to see them as all dependent on the commands in the Torah to love God and love one’s neighbor (Matt 22:40). Augustine, in his book *On Christian Doctrine* (4.36), thus declared that the proper test of interpretation is whether it build ups this twofold love of God and our neighbor. The entirety of the Torah and the Prophets is an outworking of those two commands. Now it is often hard for us to see the Torah and the Prophets that way, when we see Moses laying down a puzzling rule about not boiling a kid goat in its mother’s milk or Joshua telling Israel to slaughter the Canaanites. Yet Jesus sees the Torah and the Prophets thus, and I find it illuminating to keep his twofold principle in mind in reading them. How does this command or that one work towards the twofold love? The implication is, if you want to know what love is, read the Torah and the Prophets.

A second comment by Jesus helps show why some of those commands are puzzling. Jesus is responding to a question. Is divorce permissible, and if not, why did Moses presuppose that it was permissible? A command like this one, Jesus says, was given because of people’s hardness of hearts, even though it doesn’t fit with God’s creation intent (Matt 19:8). One can see how Moses’ command is an expression of love. Given that we fail to live up to God’s creation intention, it wouldn’t be an act of love for God then simply to say, “Well, you’re on your own now.” In particular, in a patriarchal society it wouldn’t be an act of love to leave a woman who’s been thrown out by her husband without any documentation of her marital status. So the Torah requires that she be given such documentation. Much of the Torah, then, starts where people are in their sinfulness. The New Testament does the same. Although the Old Testament talks about slavery, Middle-Eastern slavery was not an inherently oppressive institution like the European slavery accepted under the Roman Empire and then by Britain and the United States. It would be better to call Middle-Eastern slavery “servitude.” The Torah places constraints on such servitude. But the New Testament places no constraints on slavery. It shrugs its shoulders at this aspect of human hardness of heart.

A third comment by Jesus comes at the beginning of Matthew, though I refer to it last because it is harder to interpret. Jesus comes not to annul the Torah or the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matt 5:17). What does the word mean in this context? Elsewhere in the New Testament “fulfilling” the law means obeying it, and Jesus indeed embodies the expectations of the Torah and the Prophets. This understanding fits the immediate context of his words in Matthew 5. Yet what he goes on to say in that chapter may point in another direction. While English translations use the technical-sounding word “fulfill,” Matthew uses the ordinary Greek word for “fill.” We have noted that when the New Testament talks about fulfilling prophecy, it does not mean that the event in question simply corresponds to the prophecy. One might say that it means something more like filling out or filling up. In Matthew 5 it would make sense to think of Jesus filling out the expectations of the Torah and the Prophets, working out their implications.

The command about loving enemies provides a convenient example. “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” (Matt 5:43). Now there is no command or exhortation to hate your enemy in the Old Testament or in Jewish teaching from Jesus’ day. There are of course expressions of hatred towards enemies in the Torah and the Prophets; but then, there are examples in the New Testament. Jesus himself tells people to hate their family (Luke 14:26), whereas the Old Testament never tells people to hate anyone. Indeed, Jesus is the only person in the Bible who tells people to hate other people.

Further, the Old Testament gives examples of people loving their enemies, and when it tells people to love their neighbor (Lev 19:18), the context makes clear that the neighbor they are being bidden to love is the neighbor who is their enemy (people hardly need to be told to love the neighbor they get on with). Jesus is making explicit something that is implicit in the commandment. One could say he is fulfilling or filling out or filling up the Law by making explicit what the command implies, as well as by obeying it. Thus other Jewish teachers in Jesus’ day could have accepted his teaching on the subject, as an exposition of Scripture. There was nothing shocking about it.

Jesus indeed puts radical demands before people, but so did Isaiah and so does Proverbs, for instance. Jesus puts radical demands before people because he is a prophet and because he is the embodiment of wisdom. What he said could have scandalized people, but not because it went against what the Old Testament said or because they could not have found it in the Old Testament if they had looked with open hearts. There are statements Jesus makes that no prophet could have made, but these are statements such as the “I am” declarations in John’s Gospel. They relate to his being the incarnate one and the Savior. His teaching about behavior relates to his being a prophet and a wise man.

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Yes, of course, we need the New Testament, but what the church needs to see is that the New Testament doesn’t supersede the Old. We need the Old Testament for an understanding of the story of God’s working out his purpose, for its theology, for its spirituality, for its hope, for its understanding of mission, for its understanding of salvation, and for its ethics.

1. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven/London: Yale UP, 1989), p. 100. In a footnote Hays acknowledges the influence of insights from Northrop Frye and Paul Ricoeur on this sentence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (reprinted London: Collins, 1962), 50, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)