

Jesus's View of the Old Testament

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

Jesus's view of the Scriptures was similar to his contemporaries—accepting their completely divine origin, reliability, and authority in our lives—but also markedly different—seeing their judgment of ethnocentrism, their Christological nature, and their implications for the Levitical purity laws.

SUMMARY

We see in Jesus' view of the Old Testament God's word to the world, as evidenced by his citation of a wide selection of texts, even if not always in ways with which his Jewish contemporaries would have agreed. What we do *not* see in Christ's teachings based on the Bible of his people is anything that would point to a canon within a canon—viewing only certain parts of the Bible as authoritative. To be sure, like other rabbis Jesus can recognize some books as more central than others and distinguish between the lighter and the weightier parts of Scripture ([Matt. 23:23](#) par.). But all of the Bible remains inspired, and all God's laws must be obeyed. At the same time, none of it can be obeyed until we see how the arrival of the new covenant has changed things.

Throughout church history, various Christians have minimized the value of the Old Testament. Yet they profess to follow Jesus as their Lord. A study of Jesus' view of these Scriptures, therefore, proves crucial, as it should inform believers' approach to the first three-quarters of their Bible.

Similarities between Jesus and His Contemporaries

In many ways, Jesus' view of the Scriptures of his people would have fallen exactly in line with the attitudes of his fellow Jews. He seems to have adopted the identical body of authoritative documents as the Judaism of his world. He quotes from all three major sections of the Hebrew Bible (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings) and from all three major kinds of laws, as Christians would later define them (the moral, civil, and ceremonial). He alludes to still more texts and treats them consistently as authoritative for both himself and his audience ([John 10:35](#)). He sees God as the ultimate author of the Bible and views Scripture's words as God's words.

Jesus and the Historicity of the Old Testament

Jesus appears to have viewed Old Testament narratives as historical. He frequently appeals to the events in the lives of key Old Testament individuals to support his teaching or justify his behavior. He can take it for granted that his listeners share his conviction that these things really happened and that they were recorded to provide authoritative models of good and bad behavior for God's people in later eras. For example, he recalls those who persecuted God's prophets in past times ([Matt. 5:12](#) par.). He cites Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom as paradigms of ancient evil cities (11:21-24 par.). He accepts that Jonah remained alive in the great fish's belly and went on to preach to a repentant Nineveh, and he believes the Queen of Sheba actually lived and visited Solomon (12:40-42 par.). He refers back to the days of Noah and then of Lot and the catastrophic destruction that occurred around each of them (24:37-39 par.). He reflects on the ministries of Elijah and Elisha ([Luke 4:25-27](#)) and appeals to the account of Moses erecting a bronze snake in the wilderness ([John 3:14](#)). He believes that God provided manna for the Israelites during that same period of wanderings (6:32, 49, 58). Finally, he assumes the historical truth of a broad cross-section of Old Testament narratives when he makes the sweeping pronouncement that his generation will experience all the judgment due “for all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah” ([Matt. 23:35](#); cf. [Luke 11:50-51](#)).

Jesus and the Prophecies of the Old Testament

In other instances, Jesus takes the same approach his contemporaries would have by viewing unfulfilled prophecy as an authoritative and true account of what must still occur in the future. Thus, there must still be an “abomination that causes desolation standing where it does not belong” (Mark 24:15)—the sacrilege of the Jerusalem temple (cf. [Matt. 24:15](#); [Luke 21:20](#)) that replicated the horrors of [Daniel 9:27, 11:31](#) and 12:11. He recognizes that [Hosea 10:8](#) must still take place, when people will want to end their misery from this world’s tribulation by having the mountains fall on them and kill them ([Luke 23:30](#)). He envisions cosmic upheavals when he returns, using the imagery of [Isaiah 13:10](#) and 34:4 to do so ([Mark 13:14](#) par.). He also anticipates a coming end-times banquet for all God’s people from all the world ([Matt. 8:11-12](#) par.) based on [Isaiah 25:6-8](#).

Differences between Jesus and His Contemporaries

Yet Jesus’ understanding of the Old Testament does not entirely overlap with that of his Jewish contemporaries. Despite many similarities between his perspective and theirs, he often quotes Scripture against key authorities or groups of authorities. Sometimes he argues that they have missed the original meaning or purpose of a text through a tradition of distorting or misinterpreting it. Sometimes he flat out challenges those he talks with by claiming that they have ignored or even disobeyed the clear teaching of a certain text of Scripture. For instance, at the end of Matthew’s longer version of the call of Levi/Matthew, Jesus adds the instruction to “go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” ([Matt. 9:13](#)). Jesus can presuppose that his religious opponents have the identical high respect for Scripture that he has, acknowledging its truthfulness and authority. But in this context, Jesus’ application is still more radical. The Hebrew Bible never suggested that the sacrificial system was to be abandoned when it included statements like these ([Hos. 6:6](#); cf. [1Sam. 15:22](#); [Isa. 1:11](#)). “X, not Y” meant “X much more than Y.” Jesus, however, forgives sinners and accepts them as followers ([Mark 2:15b](#)) without any indication that they need to offer animal sacrifices in the temple. At this juncture, his behavior is most definitely not abiding by the standard interpretation of biblically stipulated practices.

Jesus and the Judgment of Ethnocentrism in the Old Testament

Frequently, Jesus understands the Scriptures to be fulfilled in him or in the events with which he is involved. Occasionally, these were direct predictions of things that have now happened. Far more commonly, they represent typology — the recognition of patterns in history as God reveals his characteristic, recurring ways with human beings, especially in saving or judging them. Thus, Jesus quotes Micah typologically in [Matthew 10:35-36](#) (and parallel) in order to affirm that his disciples may face hostility and opposition in their own families, just as in Micah’s day. Jesus’ typology, nevertheless, remains firmly grounded in historical events, so his disciples would scarcely have found this kind of application of Scripture unusual. The same is true of Jesus’ use of [Isaiah 6:9-10](#) as a reason for speaking to his own generation in parables ([Mark 4:11-12](#) pars.), and likewise of his reapplication of [Isaiah 29:13](#) to the hypocritical worship of religious leaders in his day ([Mark 7:6b-7](#)). So, too, his use of “den of robbers” in [Mark 11:17b](#) reapplies Jeremiah’s label for the context of corrupt leaders in his day ([Jer. 7:11](#)). In this case, Jesus has just quoted [Isaiah 56:7](#) about the temple becoming a house of prayer for all nations ([Mark 11:17a](#)), a feature already implied by its containing a “Court of the Gentiles.” But it will take on extra significance in the messianic age when the peoples of the world would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem in unparalleled numbers to worship Israel’s God.

Jesus and the Christological Nature of the Old Testament

Often Jesus interprets Scripture Christologically, seeing both direct and typological predictions pointing to himself as the newly arrived messianic King. Even when his use of Scripture does not directly serve Christology, his sovereign authority over Scripture at least implicitly raises the question of who he is, or at least of who he *thinks* he is. This approach reaches its climax after his death and resurrection when he declares in [Luke 24:44](#) that “everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” Here, the Psalms stand for the Writings more generally, as Jesus refers to all three major parts of the Hebrew canon—the one time in all of the New Testament where all three are mentioned together. It is important to observe that Christ does not say that everything in all of Scripture points to him, as some Christians have said periodically throughout church history. Not every verse or passage from Genesis to Malachi teaches something about Christ. Instead, Jesus is claiming that *whatever* in each part of Scripture that *was* intended to point to him is indeed fulfilled. In fact, he has already maintained as much in [Luke 24:47](#) where he refers to the Hebrew Bible with its simpler twofold division into the Law and Prophets: “beginning with Moses and the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” But if that was the summary of his prolonged conversation with Cleopas and his unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus, then he certainly found quite a few passages throughout the Old Testament to expound.

Jesus and the Purity Laws of the Old Testament

At the same time, there are moments when Jesus seems to upend the fulfillment and application of Levitical laws entirely. Perhaps most dramatically of all, Jesus established the precedent for declaring all foods clean, which is an explicit break from the dietary laws of Leviticus. In [Mark 7:14-15](#) and parallel, he calls the crowd listening to him to realize that “nothing outside you can defile you by going into you. Rather, it is what comes out of you that defiles you.” Even if Jesus is speaking somewhat metaphorically (hence the reference to “this parable” in v. 17), the implications are relatively clear. Why do the disciples need further explanation? Presumably because they could not imagine that Jesus was doing anything as sweeping and as radical as setting aside the kosher laws. Peter himself would have to have the vision of unclean meat and the Lord three times telling him to eat it before he would be convinced, and that may well have been another ten years or so later ([Acts 10:9-16](#)). But Mark, writing as the early church tell us from Peter’s perspective, could look back another twenty or more years after that and realize that Jesus was indeed cleansing all food ([Mark 7:19b](#)).

Jesus and the Fulfillment of the Old Testament

Perhaps the most important passage for understanding Jesus’ overall view of the Old Testament is [Matthew 5:17-20](#). It is crucial, therefore, to interpret this text correctly when synthesizing Jesus’ similarities and differences from other Jews on this topic. He begins by denying any form of the charge that he is abolishing any part of the Hebrew Scriptures (“the Law or the Prophets”—v. 17a). He adds emphatically that not the smallest portion of the Scriptures can disappear before this current world order passes away (v. 18), and that any of his followers who ignores or removes even the least of the Bible’s commandments will be called least in God’s reign (v. 19).

All of this, nevertheless, stops well short of demonstrating that Jesus thought that the *implementation* of the Law remained unchanged by his coming. As we have just seen, he pronounced the forgiveness of sins on individuals apart from their offering animal sacrifices in the temple ([Mark 2:5](#) pars.; note the reaction elicited in vv. 6-7 pars.), and he set the precedent for understanding all foods to now be kosher. He announced the imminent arrival of an era in which the temple in Jerusalem would no longer be uniquely holy ([John 4:21-24](#)). He challenged Sabbath laws in ways that went beyond just charging the religious leaders of his day with legalistic interpretations, but said that it was always appropriate to do good on the Sabbath ([Mark 3:4](#) par.). We should not be surprised to note, then, that after declaring he has not come to abolish Torah, Christ does not state the expected opposite—that he has come to preserve it unchanged. Rather, he speaks of fulfilling it (v. 17b), the same verb already used six times in Matthew (*plēroō*; 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14) for the occurrence of an event to which Scripture, either literally or typologically, had pointed forward. This meshes perfectly with the temporal clause in verse 18, “until everything is accomplished.” Everything needed to atone fully for the sins of humanity was accomplished through Christ’s cross-work.

This means that while the sacrificial laws of Leviticus remain part of inspired Scripture for believers, they are not to be literally obeyed, even if an actual temple in Jerusalem were again erected, but to remind us of Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice. The time for separating Israel off from the nations in a variety of ritual or ceremonial contexts has likewise passed; Jesus goes out of his way to welcome “sinners” of many kinds, including gentiles, into fellowship with him apart from Torah regulations (see, most dramatically, [Matt. 8:5-13](#) par.). But moral law-keeping should still separate believers’ behavior from those who behave immorally.

Who is able to pontificate so about God’s holy, perfect and immutable Law? Only a *divine* messiah. For anyone else such claims would have been outrageously blasphemous. Here, then, is the greatest difference between Jesus’ views on the Old Testament and those of the rest of his contemporaries. Jesus confirms this by following [Matthew 5:17-20](#) immediately by the so-called “antitheses”—declarations about the differences between what his listeners understand to be true about the Torah and what he is teaching. Some have limited these differences to differences of interpretation, especially because the last antithesis doesn’t actually quote the Law but only its misunderstanding (“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’ ” — v. 43). Moreover, Jesus’ prohibitions of anger, lust and divorce (vv. 22, 28 and 32) actually intensify the commandments with which Jesus compares them (murder, adultery, and giving a wife a certificate of divorce). On the other hand, Jesus forbids oaths and retaliation where the Old Testament actually commands the fulfillment of vows and “an eye for an eye” (vv. 33-42). So here he is changing the requirements of the written Law itself. It is better, therefore, not to try to generalize about all six antitheses except to say that he can announce God’s authoritative intent for all the Law and every part of the Law in the age of the fulfillment of his new covenant.

Conclusion

In sum, we see in Jesus’ view of the Old Testament God’s word to the world, as evidenced by his citation of a wide selection of texts, even if not always in ways with which his Jewish contemporaries would have agreed. What we do *not* see in Christ’s teachings based on the Bible of his people is anything that would point to a canon within a canon — viewing only certain parts of the Bible as authoritative. To be sure, like other rabbis Jesus can recognize some books as more central than others and distinguish between the lighter and the weightier parts of Scripture ([Matt. 23:23](#) par.). But all of the Bible remains inspired, and all God’s laws must be obeyed. At the same time, none of it can be obeyed until we see how the arrival of the new covenant has changed things. To take just two examples that go beyond the gospels and Jesus’ teaching we see no tithe for believers but sacrificial generosity that makes ten percent too little for many ([2Cor. 8:13-15](#)). We see no gleaning, but we see enough care for the poor to make us look for equivalent processes that help the poor be able to help themselves.

Crucial, too, is how Jesus treats “Scripture” as a singular, unified document. He does not distinguish between the inerrant and the errant, between matters of faith and practice on the one hand and matters of history or science on the other. We dare not make any Old Testament passage teach on a topic it did not intend to address. But if we claim to follow Jesus, we should adopt his view of the Scriptures—their completely divine origin, reliability, and authority in our lives.

FURTHER READING

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