

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

What is the relevance of the Old Testament for Christians? So much of it has to do with laws that the Jews back then lived by but are not part of Christianity. All those laws seem totally irrelevant to us as Christians and don't speak to us at all. I do find the Psalms beautiful and inspiring, but even in the Psalms, there are references to offering sacrifices and to the Jewish Temple that as a Christian, I just can't relate to.

You have given expression to something that I don't know how many Christians have ever verbalized. There is a sense in which the Old Testament addresses us in a different way than the New Testament does.

First off, the New Testament was written by people like us for whom Jesus is very important. For us, Jesus is central to our thinking and indispensable for our understanding of God and God's purposes, and that was true of the New Testament writers too. In contrast, Jesus did not enter at all into the thoughts and minds of the Old Testament writers beyond hopes they may have had about God someday sending the Messiah to make all things right. They wrote on the basis of the same conception of God the Creator that we Christians have, but a Jesus played no part in their thinking.

The other major fact that distances us from the Old Testament is that the Old Testament was written by Jews for Jews, while the New Testament was written by Christians for Christians. It is true that most of the New Testament writers were Jewish by birth (Luke is the clearest exception), but they were Jewish Chris-

tians writing mainly to Gentile or mixed congregations where it was understood that Gentiles did not need to convert to Judaism and join the Jewish people to belong to the Church and that Gentile Christians would not observe Jewish Law. This meant that Gentile Christians would read the Old Testament from a position where they stood outside the Jewish people.

Christians reading the Old Testament are always aware on some level that they are not Jews, while Jews are always aware when they read it that they are Jews, the exact same people who were brought out of Egypt, who stood at Mt. Sinai, who accepted "the yoke of the Law" (the obligation to keep Jewish Law), and so on.

Now if there had been no Gentile mission allowing Gentiles into the Church without converting to Judaism and therefore all Christians were Jews, part of the Jewish people, then we Christians would have the same direct, relatively uncomplicated relation to the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition that Jews have. We would all be directly addressed by every verse of the Old Testament But

as it is, we Christians are not directly addressed by the Old Testament because it was written by Jews to Jews. We are not Jews and are therefore outsiders to the Old Testament in a fundamental way.

Now, I don't mean to say that the Old Testament is of no interest or value to Christians. On the contrary, it is crucial that Christians retain the Old Testament and the connection with the Judaic tradition. Without it, we turn into Marcionites or Gnostics with a "Judenfrei" totally Gentile Christianity that "came out of nowhere" with Jesus but was in no historical continuity with what had gone before.

But when we read the Old Testament, there is a sense of distance between us and the people we read about. They lived in very different cultures from us, Jewish cultures that will of necessity be strange to us to a degree. We have to see what is transferable to us — even if not everything is.

Modern Jews actually have something of the same problem (but not as much as we Christians do) because the rabbinic Judaism that developed after the Old Testament is not identical to the Judaism

of the biblical period. Not every law in the Old Testament has continued to the present among the Jewish people. There is a culture gap for Jews too. But because there is a sense of identity ("they are us") with the people of the Old Testament that is different from the sense of identity that Christians have and stronger than Christians what have, the gap is less for modern Jews.

As Christians, we have the task of relating ourselves to the stories and the people of the Old Testament and seeing them as our ancestors in the faith, though of a different ethnic group and a vastly different culture with laws and practices different from ours. It can be done, and Christians have always done it, but when it has been done in too simple a way, sometimes legalism has resulted.

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