

Can We Trust the Old Testament?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a six-part series

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Luke 4:16-21 (CEB)

¹⁶Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. ¹⁷The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.

He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,

¹⁹and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

²⁰He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. ²¹He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (CEB)

¹⁴But you must continue with the things you have learned and found convincing. You know who taught you. ¹⁵Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, ¹⁷so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

Why does the collection of ancient Hebrew writings called the Old Testament mean anything to us today? Isn't the New Testament enough?

One might think that the question for this week would focus on the whole Bible, not just the Old Testament. But most of the problems skeptics have about the Bible focus on ethical and moral problems in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is pretty easy to find passages that make the hair stand up on our necks.

To pick one example, we could turn to the eighth chapter of Joshua and the story of Ai, in which all 12,000 men, women, and, presumably children of the Canaanite city were massacred by the Israelites. Granted Ai was a mortal enemy and Canaan was to be the land for the Israelites, but this story follows fast on the heels of the story of Jericho. There, not only did the walls come a' tumblin' down, but every man, woman, and child was put to death but Joshua and the Israelite army (Joshua 6:21). All of it seemingly sanctioned by God. As Robert Coote writes in his commentary on the book of Joshua, "There is probably nothing in the Bible more offensive to modern sensibilities than God's sanction of genocide against the Canaanites."¹

We shouldn't kid ourselves about how big a hurdle such Bible stories pose to believers and non-believers alike. The prominent neo-Atheist, Richard Dawkins, wrote, "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."²

Granted, it's the usual Dawkins stick-in-the-eye grotesque and offensive overstatement, but there is a small element of truth to it. We can be forgiven for asking, "Who is this God we meet in the Old Testament? Where is the love? Where is the God who is revealed in Jesus? Can I really trust the Old Testament? Is it really God's Word?"

¹In the *New Interpreter's Bible* series. The 12-volume set is in the St. Andrew library.

²From Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*.

Marcion

In the middle of the second century, little more than a century after Jesus' death and resurrection, Marcion, a ship owner from Asia Minor, came to Rome and asked those very questions. His answer was to begin teaching a surprising brand of the Christian message. He believed that there was a total discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between the God of the Old Testament and Jesus, the God of the New Testament. Marcion wanted to get rid of the Old Testament entirely, believing that the god depicted in it was a lesser god and unworthy of Christian worship. Obviously, since the Hebrew Scriptures are part of every Bible, Marcion's ideas were rejected. He was even excommunicated. But the problem lingers still. How could God sanction, even order, such genocidal warfare? Must Sodom and Gomorrah really have been completely and utterly destroyed? Who is this God whose law seems to be an eye for an eye rather than turn the other cheek?

There are many facets to these questions. Here's a few thoughts that we don't have the space to pursue in this study:

- We need to remember that the ancient world was a harsh and violent place. Life was cheap. Slavery was common. I only half-jokingly ask my students to imagine living in the world of Conan the Barbarian. God has to deal with us as we are, not as we wish we were.
- In the ancient world, the kings were also the supreme warriors and commanders. Thus, we should expect that because the God of Israel was also to be their king, it is God who fills the role of warrior and commander. YHWH commands the armies that conquer Canaan; so long as the people follow YHWH's battle plans, they succeed. This imagery carries over to the NT as well. In Revelation, for example, Jesus is the divine warrior on the white horse, commanding the angel armies. It surprises people to learn that the "Lord of Hosts" is a military title; hosts is a term for armies.
- There are countless examples in the Old Testament of God's love and mercy. Two of my favorites are Hosea 2:13-15 and Micah 6:6-8, both written hundreds of years before Jesus.

One of the keys to hearing the message of God in the Old Testament, is grasping Scripture's developing revelation of God's nature.

Progressive Revelation

When you first meet someone, do you know all there is to know about them? Of course not. You will come to know them over time, often a long time, and only to the extent that they open up and reveal themselves to you. We should count ourselves blessed if there is one person to whom we can reveal ourselves completely.

So it is with God. When Abraham first meets God, he learns something of who God is. But he doesn't even know God's name. God makes promises to Abraham, but he doesn't live to see those promises kept. Is God as good at keeping promises as he is at making them? Abraham dies without really knowing the answer to that question.

Indeed, God isn't fully revealed until the coming of Jesus. The incarnation and Jesus' subsequent faithfulness to God and to the covenant reveal to us that God is truly the great promise-keeper.³ Likewise, before Jesus, none of God's people knew that God was inherently relational, the unity of one God comprised of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Abraham and Moses and Elijah would never have imagined such a thing.

³Katherine Grieb's excellent study of Romans makes this point well. Her title is *The Story of Romans: a narrative defense of God's righteousness*. We don't normally think of God needing a defense, but in Jesus' day, many Jews wondered if God's promises would ever be fully kept. In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes the case that the very coming of Jesus and his faithfulness all the way to the cross demonstrates that God keeps the promises God makes.

Neither would we . . . without Jesus. It is Jesus who reveals to us that God not only loves but *is* love in God's very being.

Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that some aspects of God are revealed slowly in Scripture over time. It isn't that God is growing or changing; it is just that he is letting his people know more and more about him as they live with God over the centuries.

You might ask why God waits to reveal himself fully. Well, I think it is because God has to deal with us as we are. Here's an example of what I mean. In the Bible there is a developing revelation of forgiveness. I think you'll see the progression:

1. In Genesis 4:23-24, Lamech tells his wives that he will kill a young man for striking him. Lamech says he will be avenged seventy-seven times! Talk about unlimited vengeance. It is the world of Conan: you've killed my child and now we are going to kill every man, woman, and child in your village.
2. In such a world, the "eye for an eye" of Exodus 21:23-25 is at least proportional vengeance. It sounds so harsh to our ears, but it is real moral progress over the seventy-seven-fold vengeance of Lamech.
3. Indeed, Leviticus 19:18 (still in the Law of Moses) says "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people." And in Deuteronomy, 32:35, God says "Vengeance is mine." Much the same is repeated in Proverbs 20:22. Vengeance is still in the picture, but it is to be handed over to God.
4. And, finally, God's true desires for us are fully revealed by Jesus. In Matthew 5:38, Jesus takes the law from "an eye for an eye" to turning the other cheek and going the second mile. And when Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, Jesus tells him seventy-seven times,⁴ the perfect reversal of Lamech's desire for vengeance (Matthew 18:21-22).

It comes down to this, as it does in all things theological: Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God. When we see Jesus, we see God. When Jesus teaches, it is God teaching.

There are different ways of coming at the questions of God's depiction in the Old Testament. Perhaps, in the light of Christ, we are supposed to understand that the Hebrew writers ascribe actions to God that aren't really God's. Perhaps when Moses announces that God has instructed him to roar through the Israelite camp slaughtering thousands, it is Moses' anger on display, not God's.

But perhaps not. Perhaps we are supposed to understand that in that time and in that place God merely did what had to be done to preserve and protect a people, so that all the families of the earth could be blessed through them.

Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . there is no end to the perhaps. The Bible always has and always will pose enormous interpretive challenges. The bumper sticker "The Bible says it; I believe it" just isn't helpful. What does the Bible really say? What does God intend for us to hear?

But through it all, we know this. God is no bully. God is not vindictive. God is not unjust or unforgiving. God is neither capricious nor megalomaniacal. How do we know this? Because we know Jesus. The one in the "form of God" who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." The one who "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

The Sacred Writings

Turning to the decades after Jesus, we find the Apostle Paul reminding his young associate, Timothy, to cling to what he has learned, remember from whom he learned it, and hold to the "sacred writings," by which Paul means the Hebrew Scripture, as there is not yet a New Testament.

⁴In the Greek this can also be translated "seventy times seven," trumping Lamech's vengeance tenfold.

Paul tells Timothy that “every scripture” is “God-breathed” (*theopneustos* in the Greek, often translated “inspired”) and useful for (1) teaching us, (2) showing us when we’ve gone wrong, (3) helping us to get back on track, and (4) training us to stay there.

Paul’s letter illustrates the commitment of God’s people to God’s written word. We, as United Methodists, affirm the unique origin and role of the Bible in revealing to us the story of God’s love and in helping us to learn what it really means to love God and pursue God’s ways and purposes in this world.

So . . . do United Methodists trust the Bible, including the Old Testament? The answer is an unequivocal “yes.” Do we believe in the authority of the Bible? Again, yes. Is it the primary place we turn to understand who God is, who we are, and so on? Yet again, yes. And in all this, we affirm the importance of sound interpretation that is guided by the Holy Spirit and informed by scholarly inquiry. We’ll ask any question, but we won’t give any answer.

The United Methodist Church

Many Christians in our part of the country would be skeptical of the UMC’s commitment to the Bible. Over much of the 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s Methodists came to be seen by many as a denomination that no longer subscribed to the primacy of Scripture in establishing what we believe and how we are to live. Having been a part of the UMC in Louisiana, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Texas at various times over the last 40 years, I can attest that the Bible was little read and less studied in many churches. Indeed, the UMC General Conference (the church’s governing body) found itself at a crossroads in the late 80’s – would the denomination drift further still from the authority of Scripture?

The answer was no. Led by groups of younger bishops and scholars, the UMC embraced its Wesleyan heritage with a renewed vigor. General Conference affirmed that the Bible is the “primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine . . . [and] bears authentic testimony to God’s self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as in God’s work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit’s ongoing activity in human history.”

The UMC quickly moved to develop new Bible study programs, such as the *Disciple* series. Here at St. Andrew, we began an on-going commitment to a variety of weekly Bible studies fifteen years ago. We also began the creation of these Weekly Bible Studies, and generally sought to not only become better readers of Scripture, but to incorporate the Bible fully into our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I’m quite sure that all this would make John Wesley smile. He’d surely wonder how the Methodists allowed themselves to drift away from God’s Word, falling into an all-too-common biblical illiteracy. John Wesley was Oxford-educated and yet called himself a “man of one book,” the Bible. Quotations from and allusions to Scripture were woven throughout his sermons.

We United Methodists, John Wesley, and all God’s people stretching back through the centuries celebrate and cherish God’s gift of Scripture.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What has been your own experience with the Old Testament? How much have you studied it? How might you go about finding Jesus in the pages of the Old Testament?
2. What if there were no Bibles? How would Christianity change? Would the body of Christ survive? Could there be a church without the Bible? Bishop Will Willimon has called United Methodists a people of the book? What do you think he means? Do you agree with him? Do you think we look that way to other Christians?
3. How central a place does the Bible really hold in the church? in the UMC? in St. Andrew? Are we a scripturally-formed congregation? How would such a congregation differ from one that is not scripturally-formed?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Joshua 5:13-6:27 The story of Jericho</p>	<p>Tuesday, Hosea 2 How will God deal with his adulterous Baal-worshipping people?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Deuteronomy 32:35, Proverbs 20:22, Romans 12:14-21 God says leave the vengeance to him.</p>	<p>Thursday, Matthew 5:38-48 Jesus gets to the very heart of the Law.</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 19:11-21 Jesus the Divine Warrior</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

