

Artizo Discussion Paper – Section: Students of the Bible

The Relationship Between The Testaments

One of the vexing problems of Christian communities is that of the relationship between the Testaments. This problem is often not identified because the symptoms seem so different. The symptoms of the problem are discussions and debates about **Eschatology, Prophetic Fulfilment, The Work of the Holy Spirit, Legalism, Social Action, Ritual Worship, Priests and Ministry.**

Frequently people debate issues such as these not realising that the basis of their argument lies in competing and contradictory views of how the two Testaments relate to each other. Sometimes they agree on this issue and still fight because the basis of their agreement is never to think about the issue. These are the flat earth society of Bible interpreters who see that each verse in the Bible is of equal weight and significance to be interpreted without any relationship to the overall context of the theme or themes of the Bible. However, most frequently people who argue and debate about biblical issues do not work out any common understanding on the relationship between the two Testaments and therefore cannot resolve the point of controversy between themselves.

The New Testament treats the Old Testament as being authoritative and inspired. It is appealed to as the final authority; it is said to be the Word of God and inspired by the Spirit of God. Jesus blames the Sadducees for not knowing the power of God or the Scriptures. Furthermore he says that without listening to Moses and the Prophets they would not be convinced even if someone rose from the dead.

However, the relationship between the two Testaments is more complex than just the question of authority and inspiration. The New Testament uses the Old Testament in a variety of fashions. Sometimes it is a quote to support an argument, sometimes to conclude an argument, sometimes to claim a fulfilment of prophecy. Yet the New Testament not only quotes the Old Testament it also alludes to the Old Testament using language, thoughts, words and symbols in ways which are sometimes hard to be exact. Furthermore, the New Testament assumes the basic thought and theology of the Old Testament and Christ claims to have a distinct (and in fact) the correct interpretation of the Old Testament.

This is not the end of the complexity of the relationship between the Testaments. Sometimes Jesus is claiming to be the fulfilment of the law, one who has come not to do away with it, and on other occasions he seems to displace the law. (For example, about food in Mark 7.) The interpretation of the law and its application to Christian life, such as the law about the ox in 1 Corinthians 9:9 seems odd to us. Furthermore in Luke 24, Jesus apparently had to open the minds of the disciples to understand the Scriptures concerning himself as if the plain meaning of Scriptures would not give the interpretation that he is seeking to establish.

However, the fundamental complexity of the relationship between the Testaments is that of disjunction. Do we have two covenants (the word 'testaments') or is there really only one covenant? Does Jesus come to bring to completion the covenant that God has established with mankind in creation and through Noah, Abraham and Moses or does

Jesus come to bring a new deal for mankind and establish a new covenant over against the one established with Moses? Is the work of the Holy spirit in the old covenant the same as the work of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant?

Well enough of the difficulties and the problems. Where do we start in resolving the issue of the relationship between the Testaments? Part of the problem is to know where to start. There are several places where one could begin. Firstly, we could start with Christ in Luke 24 explaining the Scriptures as pointing to him and so we could seek to study the Old Testament to try and see what the Old Testament teaches us about Christ. Secondly, we could turn to the New Testament and begin there looking at all the quotes and allusions and uses of the Old Testament and try and map out its plan and framework, its overall theological structure and its expectation of a New Testament. Or, fourthly, we could start with some key concepts like covenant, kingdom, Messiah, prophet, fulfilment, Sabbath, temple, the law, passover, redemption and so on. Each of these would be fair and reasonable ways of starting a study of the relationship between the Testaments. Each of these would contribute towards an overall mosaic of understanding. Let us follow out briefly the plan of the Old Testament and its forward-lookingness. **That is, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:17 (Key verse)** Jesus claims to come to fulfil the law and the prophets. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that no matter how many promises God has made they are 'yes' in Christ and so through him the 'amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God. So it is possible to study the Old Testament to see what the law and the prophets promise and prophesy and expect.

Two preliminary parts of the study that would need to take place are to examine the history of Israel and secondly, to look at the character of the literature in the Old Testament and the basis upon which it is being gathered together in the order in which it is being gathered.

However, leaving those two preliminaries aside, we can see the Old Testament as starting with Genesis 1-11 giving a backdrop of God's relationship with mankind as a whole; through the doctrines of Creation, Sin, Judgement, but also through the genealogies and the promises of the covenant with Noah, some expectation for the future redemption of the world. Hints like Genesis 3:15 of the coming Son of the woman who will crush the serpent under his heel.

These expectations find fulfilment in the person of Abraham who comes from a godly line and with whom God strikes up the great promise and covenant of Genesis 12:1-3. From here on it is the seed of Abraham who will do this great work of salvation. Through Abraham God will provide a great nation occupying the promised land and being a blessing to all the nations of the earth. The rest of the narratives of the life of Abraham and his family are the fulfilment of these promises; the finding of the one proper seed Isaac, the multiplication through the sons of Jacob (come Israel) into the great hoard of people in Egypt under Moses; the renewing of the covenant in the Exodus and the establishment of the details of God's plan in Exodus 19; a plan to have his own people who will be a kingdom of priests.

It is in the time of David and particularly Solomon that we see God's promises coming true in the history of Israel. There, in 1 Kings 4, we see Solomon in his wealth, in his land, with his people being a blessing to the nations of the world. But with Solomon we also see the turning of the tide for after his death the kingdom is divided and subsequently

destroyed by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. As David and Solomon is the high water mark so the Babylonian captivity is the low water mark. The prophets prophesy a restoration of the kingdom, the priests, the temple, the city, the king and while this takes place partially under Nehemiah and Ezra it never again rises to the heights of the Davidic kingdom.

During the period of the decline of Israel from Solomon's day down to the Babylonian exile, and during shortly after the Babylonian exile, the prophetic movement within Israel reaches its height. The prophets speak to the situation in which they find themselves in, calling upon the people of God to repent, warning them of the judgement that is about to befall them, promising them salvation, but also speaking of a future day when the promises to Abraham, Moses and David will be fulfilled in a grander scale than ever before. It is with these great hopes that the people return from Babylon only to find frustration and disappointment.

It is the claim of the New Testament writers that these great prophetic hopes have found their fulfilment in the person and work of Jesus, that he is the new King establishing the age of salvation and judgement, that with him comes the kingdom of God and the fulfilment of all that the law and the prophets stood for. He is the great high priest, the temple and the sacrifice. He is the passover lamb and the Exodus. He is the prophet who was greater than Moses, he is the resurrection and the life. Thus Jesus makes a new covenant in his blood which while it is a fulfilment of the old covenant it is also markedly superior to the old covenant and so can be put both in comparison and in contrast to the old covenant.

Questions

1. **With this quick sketch of a way into the relationship between Old and New Testament it is worth going back to the beginning of this discussion paper and looking at the topics over which people disagree. Try to work out how this view of the relationship between the Testaments would effect these controversial topics.**

 2. **How does Jesus fulfil FULLY all the OT laws (Matt 5:17) ?**

 3. **Why do we eat shellfish and pork (prohibited by OT law) yet still don't marry close blood relatives (also forbidden).**
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