

Sermon by Request #2: “Why Bother with the Old Testament?”

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Scripture: Genesis 6:5-8; 7: 1-5.

Today I will be addressing another sermon request question: Why do we bother with the Old Testament? The case against it is pretty easy to describe. The people we meet in the Hebrew Scriptures are often terrible. Jacob lies to get Esau's inheritance. Good King David sleeps with another man's wife, then has him killed. Moses murders a man. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. People lie, cheat, and kill often.

But it isn't only people who come across badly in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is God, too. Adam and Eve eat one piece of forbidden fruit, and rather than being forgiven they and all of humanity are cursed. When Moses can't convince Pharaoh to set the Israelites free from Egypt, all of Egypt is afflicted with plagues and even the death of children. And in today's scripture reading, God decides to wipe out virtually every living thing on Earth with a flood. How can this be a God of love?

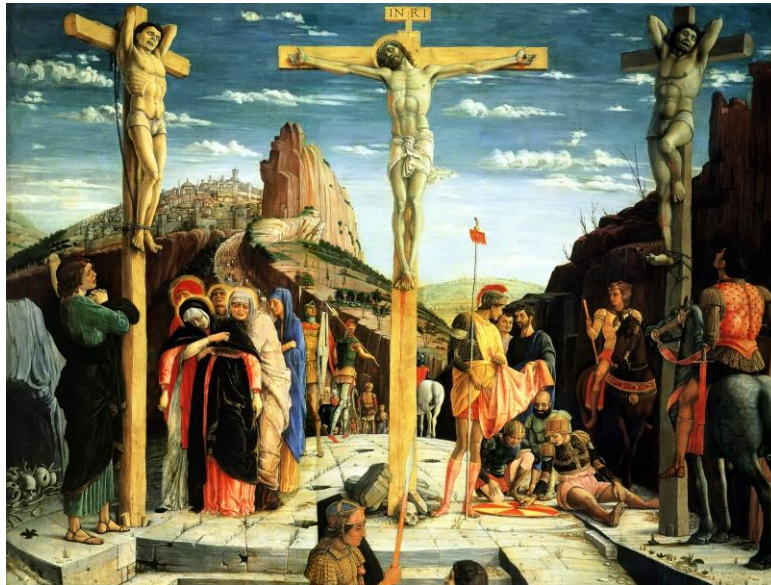
The obvious problem is that if human beings are supposed to emulate God, then the God of the Hebrew Scriptures seems like a terrible role model. Judgmental and often violent. Not what we want our children or adults to copy.

We are not the first ones to wrestle with this problem. When Christianity was young, they noticed this too. Some people decided to simply throw away the Hebrew Scriptures.^[1] They concluded that a different, lesser god had created the universe. The *real* God was the one Jesus described, a God of Love. So, they ignored the Hebrew scriptures entirely.

Those early critics lost the Bible battles. The main Christian movement insisted on keeping the Hebrew Scriptures as the first testament of God's relationship with humanity. And they had good reasons. They knew that to read the New Testament without knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures would make for a thin

and superficial understanding of the gospels and the epistles. The fact is that the New Testament is laced with references to the Hebrew Scriptures, on virtually every page. Sometimes the text says it outright – this happened to fulfill such and such a prophecy. Jesus himself declares multiple times that he is the Messiah as predicted by the prophecy of Isaiah.*

But most of the time, the references are more subtle.



This is a painting of the crucifixion, based on the gospel accounts. Jesus is in the middle. On either side of him there are the two thieves. A Roman soldier stands with a spear holding a sponge full of vinegar, which will be offered to Jesus to drink. At his feet, Roman soldiers are playing dice for his clothes. While on the cross, at no time does Christ shout out about the injustice of what is happening to him. Instead, in Matthew and Mark's gospels*, Jesus' last words are "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Each of these details in the New Testament account of Christ's death derives from the Hebrew Scriptures. Adam and Eve were thieves who were kicked out of paradise for stealing a piece of fruit. Christ is crucified between two thieves, one of whom defends him. Jesus promises that man that this day he will join him in paradise. It is a reversal of the fall, through Christ's willing death on the cross.

Jesus does not complain on the cross. That was predicted in the prophecy of Isaiah, that the Messiah would suffer, but be silent.([Isaiah 53:7](#))

The sponge on the spear comes from Psalm 69. It says that God's chosen one will be given gall to eat and vinegar to drink.

The casting of dice for his clothes comes from Psalm 22:

a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.
All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment.

Even Jesus' last words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the opening line of psalm 22.

The gospel writers have deliberately constructed a scene that insists that we see the crucifixion through the lens of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the fulfillment of promises made centuries before. What seems like a simple act of cruelty by the Romans is in fact the playing out of God's plan. God wins over history, using Roman cruelty to create a new kind of salvation, promised long ago, and here fulfilled. In fact, the psalm which Jesus quotes ends with words of hope, that God never abandons the faithful. So, by quoting it from the cross, Jesus is reminding people that his death on the cross is not the end of the story.

If we ignore the Hebrew Scriptures, we lose this whole layer of meaning, in this scene and dozens of others in the New Testament. The people who wrote the New Testament felt that the Hebrew Scriptures were critical, so that makes it important for us who want to understand our Christian testament.

Reason #2

There's a second reason why I think we need to keep the Hebrew Scriptures. In our time, when we think about salvation, we focus on individuals. How do *I* get into heaven. That notion comes from the New Testament. But in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is the group, the nation, that is promised salvation. Moses leads a nation out of Egypt, not a group of individuals. And that is important, because often, it is an entire group that is oppressed. Today is the birthday of Martin

Luther King Jr. His leadership in the civil rights movement was deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Like many Black leaders, he was inspired by the story of an enslaved nation being freed by God from their oppressors. He speaks in terms of nations and cultures, not just individuals.

For many people, here and all over the world, salvation will not come one person at a time. They need a God who is concerned with entire races, genders, sexualities. Oppression often rules entire kinds of people inferior. Christ calls for injustice to end, and promises heaven to individuals who change their ways. But we also need a God who can see when an entire nation or group needs help to be freed, to walk through a Red Sea with towering waves on either side. To ignore the Hebrew Scriptures would rob us of that other way of salvation which is so important to people all over the world today. Who yearn for God to help them, to intervene for them, to break into history to let their people go free.

Reason #3:

In our modern times, we often find talk of divine intervention troubling. This is where a lot of rational people get off the bus. We know that natural disasters can be explained better by science than by seeing them as punishments from God. Earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions – there are rational explanations for all of them. There is no need to invoke divine will to explain them.

The flood is the biggest natural disaster of them all, caused by God according to the Hebrew Scriptures. But after centuries of searching, scientists can find no proof it ever happened. There is no strata of bone showing the year almost every creature died. The flood is fiction, a myth, a child's tale, and not a very charming one at that. So why should we bother with this story of divine intervention, or any other?

Some years ago, I was in London, England for work. One day, I visited the British Museum. Geek that I am, I headed for the ancient archaeology section. And there, behind glass I saw this: Gilgamesh fragment.



This is some of the earliest writing on Earth. It is a clay tablet written by the ancient Sumerians. It is very small, you can fit it in your hand. To read it you need a magnifying glass. It is part of the story of the hero Gilgamesh, written 4000 years ago. ^[2]

On this tablet it tells of the time when the gods decided to destroy humanity with a great flood. But one of the gods took pity on humanity, and told one man to build a boat to save his family, and many animals. The flood lasted for six days. At the end, they sent out three birds, one after another, to see if there was any dry land. It was the raven who came back with proof there was a place to land.

Sound familiar? Biblical scholars believe that the flood story we have in the Hebrew Scriptures was based on this story, from a civilization older than the Israelites. In fact, all over the world, people have similar flood stories, which existed long before anyone from the West reached the Americas or Japan. It is very strange since there is no proof that a worldwide flood ever happened.

What's important for us today is that when the Jews wrote their Bible, they knew they couldn't leave out this story. It was a fact. Everyone back then believed gods were in charge of all major events, so that meant their one God, YHWH, must have decided to destroy the world. But the Jewish account is different from the Sumerian one. God warns the people, but they don't listen. God tells one man to save the animals and his family. After the waters recede, God declares that this will never happen again, even though Noah and his family are not exactly saints.

God says, as a sign of my desire for peace, I will hang up my bow in the sky, unable to flood the world again with arrows of flooding water. It will be known from now on as a rainbow. A peace symbol in the sky. That promise was not in the original story. The Jews added that part. To them, God is not an enemy of humanity, but its guide, a loving parent who desperately wants us to do better. And note why the flood comes. Because humans are treating each other so badly. One of the innovations of the Jewish faith is that not only does God care about us, but God cares deeply about how we treat each other.

Reason #4

The last reason I would offer for keeping the Hebrew Scriptures has to do with science. Today, most people are confident that God does not send floods or hurricanes or earthquakes. Those are better explained by science and natural phenomena. But let's not stop there. The universe science has discovered, inside the atom and out in space is very, very strange.

The image shows the top portion of a Scientific American article. At the top, there are navigation links: 'Subscribe' (blue button), 'Latest Issues' (grey button), 'SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN.' (logo), 'Cart 0' (grey button), 'Sign In | Newsletters' (text), and 'SHARE' (text). Below this is a horizontal line. Underneath the line, the text 'QUANTUM PHYSICS' is centered. The main title is 'Explorers of Quantum Entanglement Win 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics' in a large, bold, serif font. Below the title, a subtitle reads: 'Alain Aspect, John F. Clauser and Anton Zeilinger won the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics for their work using entangled photons to test the quantum foundations of reality'. At the bottom of the header, it says 'By Lee Billings on October 4, 2022'.

The most recent Nobel Prize in physics was awarded to the men whose experiments proved something Albert Einstein said was impossible.

According to quantum theory, measuring a photon, a particle of light, here can change the behaviour of another photon across the room, or across the universe, instantly. Einstein dismissed this as impossible, and he called it “spooky action at a distance.”^[3] The Nobel Prize was awarded because this weird idea was proven correct by experiment. Our ancestors would have called this sort of thing magic or a miracle. It makes no sense at all, but it is real.

Things are equally strange out in space.



Out in space, it has become clear that the only way galaxies can exist is if they are surrounded by an invisible halo of matter that no one has ever been able to measure or see.^[4]

Indeed, for the universe to exist, three quarters of it must be composed of this so-called “dark” matter. It is even in this room with us right now. But it is utterly different from regular matter, but it must exist. The more we learn about the universe, the stranger it gets.

Whoever God is, they have created a universe which even our best minds cannot figure out. This cosmos is deeply strange, and God likes it that way. In Isaiah’s prophecy, God says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” (Isaiah 55:8) That is more true now than ever as we learn more about the universe.

So, I suggest we keep the Hebrew scriptures. For it’s ethics, for its influence on the New Testament, and for its reminder that God is not our personal valet. There’s a good reason why Christians believe in the Trinity: we need the God of Jesus as well as the God of the Old Testament and the Holy Spirit. If the Old

Testament bothers us – that is exactly why we should bother with the Old Testament still.

Amen.