

### ***03 How do I/we relate to the OT?***

*Disclaimer (repeat): What I have written here is my interpretation of the theological books I've read. I'm not a theologian, so I've probably (undoubtedly) got bits of it wrong, so please bear with me because its import has transformed my whole view of life, and I hope it might be of help to others who are desperately struggling, as I was, to build a credible faith in a loving God, a faith that I can happily share with my friends and families.*

My next challenge was to take an honest look at the Old Testament – dangerous, I know, but they do say that “honesty is the best policy”.

The OT clearly contains some wonderful and inspirational passages, which we use in our worship: it speaks about a loving and forgiving and tolerant God who wants to restore his people to a loving relationship with him – great! But it also, in some parts, seems to talk about a less savoury God who urges his people to do things which, today, we'd probably class as ethnic cleansing, even genocide. So how are we going to deal with these?

**Option 1:** Pick out the nice bits, enjoy and propagate those, and **ignore** the nasty bits. If I'm honest, this is what I've done for my first 50 years as a Christian.

**Option 2:** Try to actually **justify** the bits about killing all the men, women and children. We might argue that God told them to do it, so it must be right; it was justifiable because otherwise those worshippers of other gods would have perverted the purity of the Israelites' religion and worship.

Sorry but I don't like Option 2, either. That sort of attitude has led some people to do some unspeakable things in the name of Christianity over the centuries, things of which those who oppose our faith quite rightly say, “Well, if that's what Christianity is like, I don't want to know.” and “There's more evil done in the name of religion...” I'm sure you've heard that sort of thing more than once.

OK, let's try a radically different approach. I've spent years using the Bible to try to work out what's right and what's wrong. That eventually led me into that tiny sect where we were the only ones who were right, and all those around us were trying to pull us off the true path. Stupid, I know, but I believe God let me make that mistake to make a point:

Jesus did **not** come to teach us what's right and what's wrong, and worse still **who** is right and **who** is wrong, who is in and who is out.

So, if we're followers of Jesus, is there anything we can learn from his attitude to the Scriptures, i.e. to the Old Testament. Well, let's start by asking, what were Jesus' main priorities in life? And then we'll look at how that related to his attitude to the OT.

I'd like to suggest that Jesus had two main priorities. In the short term, he just didn't seem to be able to stop himself caring for the poor, the marginalised, the outcasts – he loved them and they loved him! (By contrast, he also didn't seem to be able to stop himself getting up the noses of the

religious elite, whose concerns about “what is right” were in large measure the cause of the marginalisation of others.)

Jesus’ longer term priority was his determination to do something about the way our relations with one another and with God were being ruined, and he knew that through his willingly succumbing to death on a cross, and thence to resurrection and ascension, he could offer us freedom, reconciliation, redemption, victory, healing, restoration, forgiveness, communion, acceptance, belonging, value, worth, inspiration, and a model of sacrificial love... I could go on (and, as Sue says, I frequently do!). These are some of the wonderful things I’ve been revelling in this past couple of years, all flowing out of Jesus’ willingness to die for us, but annoyingly I’ll have to stop, as that’s not the focus of my thinking here. (Back to the Old Testament...)

So, if those were Jesus’ priorities, did they flow out of his study of the OT? (Remember the time that he spent in the temple as a child, talking to the Bible teachers? I’d love to have listened in to those conversations!)

Well, what did Jesus have to say about the Law and the Prophets? “*I did not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them.*” Yes, but what does *that* mean?! **How** did he fulfil the OT?

We know how the Scribes and Pharisees interpreted the OT; they spent hours studying the Scriptures (and Saul [Paul] was one of the keenest), working out exactly what they meant and how they showed what the Israelites had to do to please God. And Saul was so convinced in his then interpretation of the OT that he felt he was serving God by killing people who were teaching things that he knew were **wrong!** (It’s nice to know that I’m not the first ‘Paul’ to get things stupidly wrong!)

So how **did** Jesus, and later Paul, interpret the OT? I have come to believe that Jesus interpreted it as showing us how God wants us to live in love with him, and how to love one another and to care for the marginalised.

This totally different way of looking at the OT struck me right between the eyes this morning, and it’s there in black and white in the New Testament. Having said in Matthew 5 that he’s come to fulfil the OT, Jesus then says that our righteousness must **exceed** that of the Scribes and Pharisees, or we’ll never get into heaven. What?! This is getting worse, not better! What does he mean by that?!

Don’t panic, instead, just read from verse 21 to the end of chapter 6 to see how Jesus interprets what the OT really means. And it’s all about relationships – with one another and with God – how those relationships can be encouraged and protected, and what our relationship with God should be like. **That** I think is what Jesus is drawing out of the Scriptures. He came to fulfil the Law in the sense that he showed us what its **ultimate purpose** was: to draw us into a loving relationship with the Living God (and not for us to live in fear of being zapped for getting things wrong!)

And Paul (having realised the error of his Pharisaic interpretation of the OT) says the same sort of thing: *Romans 13:8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other*

*commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself."  
10 Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the **fulfilment of the law.***

And then back to Jesus: *Matthew 22:35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' 40 **All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**"*

So if my interpretation of the OT (or NT, for that matter) actually does harm to my neighbour, then I need to check if my interpretation is correct.

In the books I've read, the authors (theologians) claim that both Jesus and Paul (esp. in Romans) quote scriptures to support their arguments in ways that a "careful exegesis of the passage would not allow". They say that Paul and Jesus are using an "overriding hermeneutic of love" (no, I'm not quite sure what 'hermeneutic' means either!): you interpret any passage in terms of how it displays God's redemptive, restorative love and justice. (Those authors, esp. Flood, but also Baker-and-Green, seem to me to be putting forward a scholarly argument in favour of this approach, and I can provide references if you're interested.)

Flood refers to this as "faithful questioning" of Scripture (Old and New), instead of "unquestioning obedience", because the latter can cause untold harm. By "faithful questioning", he and I mean that we start from "Yes, I believe in Jesus; I love him, I follow him to the best of my ability" and then say, "Let's discuss these difficult issues and see if there's a way we can show love for each other, and for those outside, those who don't even want to discuss it."

Please, for the sake of those (like my own family) who don't believe, can we work out how to communicate the love that Jesus showed, that spoke so powerfully to the lonely and the marginalised, that has transformed so many lives, but that annoyed those who thought the important thing was to be *right*?

Paul Bev. 29.8.18