

Date Preached	08-Aug-21	Date Initiated	25-Jul-21
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Prop 14, Yr B

" 'Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, and they died.' "



So, what do we 'do' with the Old Testament?¹ It is a perennial question in Christianity—one that priests and ministers get asked not infrequently. It recurred to me as I studied today's *gospel* lesson. In our readings from St John both last week and this week, Jesus seems to at least *imply* that He has come to supersede all that has gone before Him. Jesus is conversing with observant Jews after the feeding of the five thousand. They point to God's providing manna to the Israelites in the wilderness after they had escaped Egypt, and they ask, in essence, "Wasn't *that* the bread of heaven?" Jesus responds, "No, the *true* Bread of Heaven comes from God and not from Moses. And the proof of this is that your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they died, but those who eat of Me"—Jesus—"will never die. I am not only the Bread of Heaven but also the Bread of Life."

Well, if Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life² ... if He is the one sure pathway to God: to forgiveness, salvation and eternal life ... do we need *anything else*? Can we mark down everything that came before Jesus as mere prelude ... or disregard is as now-obsolete?

Many throughout the Church's history have argued, yes, we can. Perhaps the most famous—or infamous—proponent of this point-of-view is the second century theologian Marcion, who concluded that the God who sent Jesus into this world was an entirely different God than the Creator-God of the Old Testament. Therefore, Marcion argued that, to obtain a full revelation of God's Word, Christians needed to read little more than an edited version of the Gospel of St Luke and ten of St Paul's epistles: no content from the Old Testament at all. Marcion's extremism outraged and alarmed the Church. It branded him a heretic, and soon began the process of deciding which books—Old *and* New Testament—to include in the Christian Bible.³

The popularity and prevalence of the Old Testament among Christians has waxed and waned ever since. At one extreme, the Reformed tradition in Europe and early America perceived such essential truth in the Old Testament that generations of were boys given names like Elihu, Zebadiah and Abner.⁴ And at the other end of the spectrum, the Roman Catholic and Anglican

¹ "Old Testament" is a distinctly Christian term that carries with it not a small tinge of what is known as supersessionism: the doctrine that, through Christ, God has chosen a new people (*i.e.*, Christians) and, in the process, has somehow 'un-chosen' Israel as God's own. At least in its more virulent forms, this doctrine is now largely defunct in mainline Christianity. In light of its long history in the Church, however, more felicitous names for the 'pre-Jesus' books of the Bible include the Hebrew Bible or the Tanakh. For convenience and familiarity, however, I will stick with "Old Testament" in this sermon.

² John 14:6.

³ Not that their canon of Scripture endured forever: Today, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant Churches all have slightly different takes on what is and is not included in Holy Scripture.

⁴ I don't exclude girls from this observation intentionally, but my quick research shows that the same Old Testament girls' names have remained popular for centuries: for example, Ruth and Naomi, Esther and Abigail.

traditions swung so far away from the Old Testament that very little of it was read in worship, other than from the Book of Psalms and some bits from the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.⁵

This began to change during the twentieth century, as the liturgical reform movement that eventually led to Vatican II in the Roman Catholic Church—and also, by the way, to the 1979 version of *The Book of Common Prayer* that's in our pews today—came to realize the deep and ultimately inseparable connections between the Old and New Testaments. As we have grown in our understanding of how fundamental the story of God's relationship with God's people *before* Jesus' Incarnation is to our *own* faith and discipleship, we have included in our eucharistic liturgy more and more readings from a wider and wider swath of the Old Testament. And we can name at least three reasons to give thanks for the Hebrew Bible's regained prominence in our own worship and study:

- One is historical: Christianity was birthed in the culture of the Old Testament. Jesus was Jewish, as were all of the Apostles, and the majority of His three-year ministry was with and for Jews. Jesus knew and preached the Old Testament⁶ by heart. Indeed, it was the reform—the revitalization—of Israel's relationship with the God in the Old Testament that Jesus came to earth to effect.⁷
- The second reason is theological: Jesus' coming into this world ... and *all* that follows ... are properly seen not as a *disruption* of what began that fateful day Adam and Eve met the serpent in the Garden of Eden, but rather, as its *very culmination*. God created humanity in God's image and with powers over creation that echoed God's own, but in the exercise of their God-given free will, our spiritual forebears created distance between themselves and God ... and the entire sweep of the Old Testament is the uneven, unpredictable and ultimately unfruitful story of a steadfast God calling—imploing—an inconstant humanity,⁸ again and again, to let God bridge this chasm. Flood and famine, law and prophet, exodus and exile, ark and Temple: God affords humanity one opportunity after another to turn from its cold, sour and, finally, hollow self-declared independence ... to an open-hearted dependence upon a warm, gracious and loving God.

And the ending of this story ... is Jesus Himself. He is the final bridge. He repairs the rupture and incorporates humanity, wholesale, into the very life-and-being of God, by His dying, rising and ascending. The New Testament is the Old Testament's

⁵ We see evidence of this in the so-called Track 2 (*i.e.*, Gospel-related) readings appointed by the Lord's Day lectionary for Ordinary Time.

⁶ Again, the notion of an "Old" Testament is our own; Jesus would never have called it that!

⁷ Jesus' critique of first century Judaism is not theological, and He does not seek to replace it or begin what would become a new religion. His animus is directed to religious (*e.g.*, the pharisees and scribes) and quasi-civil (*e.g.*, King Herod, a Roman puppet) authorities who hinder the people's grasp of their faith as a full and meaningful pathway to being in relationship with God.

⁸ *I.e.*, in the form of God's People, Israel ... who would, in turn, 'spread the [W]ord' to the rest of the race.

conclusion.^{9,10} Thus, we can no more understand Jesus without the Old Testament ... than we can understand "Hamlet" by reading only Act V.

- The final reason is the Old Testament's universality: It continues to sing to us today because even though '*Jesus happened*' ... we still feel distance and disconnection between God and ourselves, don't we? We sincerely believe that Jesus died for us and rose again for us; that He *is* the very Bread of Life in Whom we will live, forever. *And yet*: At the graveside, in the oncologist's office, in the police station, we forget or doubt. Staring at an empty bottle, an empty bank account or an empty seat at the table, we bargain or threaten or curse. In the middle of the night, in the middle of the fight, in the middle of yet another bruised, aching, crumpled day in an endless stream of them ... we wonder, *just like the Israelites*, where is God in all of this mess? Where is God's promise ... God's truth ... God's love?

Whether we know it or not, in our *own* faith journey, we murmur the Israelites' lament as they trek forty years through endless desert wastes; we join David in wailing at the death of his rebellious son; we cry with the exiles in Babylon, who weep over all they've lost back in Zion. Although the ancient Israelites and we sit on opposite sides of the 'Christ event' ... because our human eyes are no different, our struggle to see God's grace and mercy and love in the midst of life is no different.

When we read it attentively, the Old Testament mirrors our own spiritual aches and crises of faith and desires to let God more into our lives ... and it leads us, once again, to Jesus. For there is a single, direct and unbroken line from the manna in the wilderness ... to He Who is the Bread of Life and Bread of Heaven ... and from Him to us, gathered in this place and around this Altar, in his gracious Name.



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⁹ Again, I am at pains to observe that Jews do *not* see the Old Testament this way. For them, the Tanakh continues to point to a promised messiah who has not yet come.

¹⁰ For completeness, I would add that the story isn't quite finished yet. As predicted in the Book of Revelation, Jesus will return to this world to reign over it forever, at which point the perfection of creation that existed "in the beginning" (Gen 1:1) will have been fully restored. Theologians debate what this final end will bring for those who do not believe in Jesus. Suffice it to say that from what I know and believe about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I myself am convinced that God will give every human being every possible chance to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. (I believe this because, as a Christian, I know of no other pathway to salvation. This is not to say that Jesus, in God's plan, *is* the only way. Rather, Jesus is the only way that's been *revealed*.) In the end, however, because God is a God of love and not of coercion, the choice will be left to each person, individually.