

A Doctrine of the Bible

Taught by Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Summer 2015

LECTURE 5: JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

10 a.m. Sunday, October 18, 2015

This topic is a very important one to me. We all love Jesus. We know that Jesus is the one “with whom we have to do,” to use a phrase from last Sunday’s Epistle Lesson (Hebrews 4:12-14). But a good question for us to ponder is whether we have correctly understood Jesus. This is the question that should continually draw us back to the Bible in hope that we can learn even more about our Savior. For there is more to Jesus than his kindness toward lepers and prostitutes and tax collectors. There is also his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which can be pretty stern stuff. There is also his call to “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11) And there is also the Word of God, who was in the beginning, who revealed much about himself in the Old Testament, and who in the fullness of time became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus of Nazareth is not somehow a different person from the Word of God we find in the Old Testament. In fact, for Martin Luther it is chiefly in the Old Testament that we learn about Jesus.

I have used this image before but maybe it is a helpful image, or at least an intriguing image: On Mt. Sinai Moses received the Ten Commandments from Someone. Who? I figure that he received them from Jesus – the Word of God, the very Revelation of God. Or, to be more precise, Moses received the Ten Commandments from the One who in the fullness of time was born of the virgin Mary and became man. This means that we do not understand the Ten Commandments unless we understand them as coming from the hand of the One who was willing to die for you and for me. This is a great theme in Luther’s Large Catechism. Indeed, Luther believed that it is hard for us to obey the commandments unless we first understand that they come from the hand of the God who loves us. On the other hand, we do not understand Jesus unless we understand that he believes in the Ten Commandments — indeed that he gives the Ten Commandments.

In an earlier lecture, I think I mentioned the Marcionites. So, again let me lift up a lift up that name from the early church. I mean the fellow named Marcion (85 – 160 A.D.¹) Marcion rejected the God of the Old Testament. He didn’t like that God. He felt the God of the Old Testament had nothing to do with Jesus Christ. He flat-out denied that the God of the Old Testament was the same God as the one revealed in the New Testament. And so, Marcion rejected the Old Testament. He

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcion_of_Sinope

imagined that the church would be better off by forgetting about the Old Testament.

The early church *could have* done that. It could have cast off the Old Testament as irrelevant, in the style of Marcion. But, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church rejected Marcion, thereby claiming that there can be no true understanding of the gospel apart from the Old Testament.

But the question remains for us and for every generation: Are we practicing a *functional Marcionism*? That is, do we think the stories and teachings of the Old Testament are irrelevant to the modern church?

Let's begin to appreciate the Old Testament by noting this plain fact: The apostles preached the gospel and converted the world by way of preaching on the Old Testament. Apostolic preaching consisted of what can be called "Christological commentary on the stories of the Old Testament." Think, for example, of the story of Philip preaching to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:

²⁹And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

³⁰So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³²Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this: "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth." ³⁴And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?" ³⁵Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus. (Acts 8:29-34, RSV)

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says of the rock that miraculously gushed forth water in the desert for the thirsting people of God (Ex 16-17), "The rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:1-5). He does not say that the rock is "Christ-like" nor that it symbolically represents Christ, but that the rock is, in some respect, Christ.²

In Martin Luther's commentary on the story of Jacob wrestling with God (Genesis 32), Luther says that Jacob wrestled with Jesus Christ. Let me read the passage for you:

²²The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and

² Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "Sinewes Even In Thy Milke: The Plain Sense And The Trees Of Eden," Pro Ecclesia

likewise everything that he had. ²⁴And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." (Genesis 32:22-30, RSV)

Now, in his commentary on this story, Luther goes ahead to say that Jesus was "very familiar" to the people of the Old Testament. As I read the following passage from Luther's Genesis commentary, notice the name "Jesus." Luther does not hesitate to speak of Jesus in the Old Testament:

Without any controversy we shall say that this man [with whom Jacob wrestled] was not an angel but our Lord Jesus Christ, eternal God and future Man, to be crucified by the Jews. He was very familiar to the holy fathers and often appeared to them and spoke with them. He exhibited Himself to the fathers in such a form that He might testify that He would at some time dwell with us in the form of human flesh....Jacob says: "I have seen the Lord face to face." He Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ, tested Jacob not to destroy him but to confirm and strengthen him and that in this fight he might more correctly learn the might of the promise.³

To some modern Bible scholars, Luther's way of speaking of Jesus is baffling. Well, it's not just to some Bible scholars. Perhaps it is baffling to many of us. It can be baffling even to preachers. I mean, how often do we hear sermons on the Old Testament, as if preaching on the Old Testament is an important way to learn about our Saviour Jesus?

³Luther, M. (1999, c1970). *Vol. 6: Luther's works, vol. 6 : Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (6:144). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

St. John's great testimony concerning Jesus is that he is the very Word of God. If that is so, then he is the Word who came to the prophets. Indeed, Jesus is the "prophet in all prophesy."⁴

In a recent parish email I referred to an important quote from Martin Luther's little treatise from 1521 called *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*. Luther argues that the importance of the gospels and the epistles is that they direct us to the Old Testament. The passages goes this way:

Now the gospels and epistles of the apostles were written for this very purpose. They want themselves to be our guides, to direct us to the writings of the prophets and of Moses in the Old Testament so that we might there read and see for ourselves how Christ is wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in the manger [Luke 2:7], that is, how he is comprehended [*Vorfassett*] in the writings of the prophets. It is there that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves, and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him. For he himself says in John 5[:46], "If you believed Moses, you would also believe me, for he wrote of me." Again [John 5:39], "Search and look up the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me."

Perhaps at this point Luther could also have referred to the great Easter story of Jesus with the two disciples along the road to Emmaus. As I read the passage for you, notice that Jesus himself teaches the Gospel to these disciples by way of

⁴ Robert W. Jenson: We have just spoken of Christ as not only prophesied by and prefigured in the Old Testament but as himself present there, as - we might say - himself the prophet in all prophesy. It was the great maxim of all pre-modern Christian exegesis of the Old Testament: the Word, the second Person in God, who is incarnate as Jesus, was not first heard when he "became flesh and dwelt among us." God spoke throughout the life of Israel and in her Scriptures; and when he spoke to Israel's patriarchs and prophets and sages, the Word that came to them and gave himself to them was not other than the Word who is Jesus... However we manage the metaphysics of the matter, it must be in some way true that the Word who speaks in the Old Testament is Jesus the Christ, and not merely an yet merely unincarnate, and therefore abstractly metaphysical Logos. For if the formulas of Chalcedon's christological doctrine have any import at all, it is to classify the proposition "The Logos is Jesus" as an identity-proposition. If they do not say at least that much, it is hard to see what they can say. And if "The Logos is Jesus" is an identity-proposition, at least so much must be the case: one cannot meaningfully refer to the Logos without referring to Jesus, or refer to Jesus without referring to the Logos. And this in turn must mean at least: when we hearken to the Word in the Old Testament, we should always be listening for the self-identification and the intonations and rhetoric of the Jesus Christ of the Gospels... The Fathers of course knew this all along, and indeed, in the track of Christian doctrine, went a step the certified exegetes are still by and large unwilling to take: this Word, the singular and constant reality that comes to the prophets, is none other than Jesus the Christ, whom the church knows to be the second triune person, the singular Logos of God. The words (plural) are provided the prophet by the coming to him of God the Word himself, which in the understanding of the church, means that the words are provided to the prophet by the coming to the prophet of Jesus Christ. (Jenson, *Inspiration of Scripture*)

opening their eyes to the scriptures, which at this point can only mean the holy scriptures of Israel:

¹⁷And he said to them, “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. ²¹But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. ²²Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning ²³and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. ²⁴Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see.” ²⁵And he said to them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:17-27, RSV)

So my theory is that if preaching on the Old Testament is good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for me.

Martin Luther continues this way in his *Brief Instruction*:

But what a fine lot of tender and pious children we are! In order that we might not have to study in the Scriptures and learn Christ there, we simply regard the entire Old Testament as of no account, as done for and no longer valid. Yet it alone bears the name of Holy Scripture. (*A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, 1521, LW 35:117ff)

Theologian David Yeago, who is the one who brought this *Brief Instruction* to my attention, draws this conclusion from Luther’s treatise:

The relationship of Old and New Testaments in this scheme is one of mutual clarification and illumination. The true significance of the Old Testament is only seen clearly in the light of Christ, but Luther is quite clear that the converse is equally true: *Jesus Christ can only be rightly understood in terms of the Old Testament*. “It is there,” in the Old Testament, “that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves, and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends towards him.”⁵

It so happens that this Sunday’s First Lesson, from Isaiah 53, gives us another chance to see Luther finding Jesus in the Old Testament. The Isaiah passage is one of the Suffering Servant songs. The church finds it natural, indeed finds it somehow perfect, to lift up this song during Lent and Holy Week, for it teaches us about Jesus. The passage starts off this way:

⁴Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Bible scholars debate whether Isaiah’s Suffering Servant refers to an individual Israelite, like Jeremiah, or to Israel as a whole. None of this for Luther. Luther simply assumes that Isaiah is speaking about Jesus Christ. And so in Luther’s sermon on this passage we read this:

In these verses we hear how the prophet Isaiah prophesied concerning the Lord Christ’s suffering long ago. He points out very definitely that such suffering was foreordained and indicates that it was to be a sacrifice to pay for our sins and secure redemption for the human race. The prophet describes the suffering of the Lord almost more clearly than the Evangelists in the New Testament. In the entire Scripture of the Old Testament there is no place where the purpose of

⁵ Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” *LW* 35:122, quoted *ibid*.

Christ's suffering is so precisely and clearly delineated as in this text. Truly, we can say that this chapter of the Old Testament is an exemplary summary of that purpose, just as St. Paul's Epistles are in the New Testament. That is why every father should read it often to his children, so that they might learn it by heart and that our youth might become familiar with it and be strengthened in their faith. (*Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 5, page 440-441)

It is the same thing with all that we learn in the Old Testament: None of what we learn in the Old Testament can be properly understood apart from Jesus of Nazareth. But also, Jesus cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament, for he is the very Word of God at work in the Old Testament.

In a recent essay on Leviticus, theologian Sarah Hinlicky Wilson argues that that Old Testament book, so often scorned in our modern world, is in fact a very sophisticated and gentle book.⁶ It leads me to think that we can find Jesus even in Leviticus. If so, this teaches us something important about that book and something important about Jesus.

My concluding exhortation is to invite us back to being readers of the Bible – the whole Bible, both the Old Testament and the New. The great subject of the Bible is Jesus, his cross, and his community, the church, and everything can be read with an eye to those subjects. But do not limit your notions of Jesus to the New Testament. We also learn much about the heart and the ways and the convictions of Jesus in the Old Testament, because he is the very Word of God at work in the Old Testament.

(End of lecture)

⁶ Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Learning To Love Leviticus," *Lutheran Forum*, Winter 2014.