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“Nailed to the Cross”: The Continuing Relevance of the Old Testament

R. Mark Shipp

He washed away the handwriting which was against us, with the decrees which were opposed to us, and he set them aside, having nailed them to the cross (Col. 2:14, author’s trans.).

Growing up in churches where the Old Testament was most often read “backwards,” through the lens of the New, the statement was sometimes made that the Old Testament served a purpose for a time, but has been abolished and superseded by a new dispensation of grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Proponents of this approach appealed to such passages as Colossians 2:14 and Ephesians 2:15, which seemed to verify the temporary, and largely negative, value of the Old Testament.

This approach, however, appeared to be at variance with other passages in the New Testament, such as 2 Timothy 3:15, which seemed to uphold the validity and ongoing usefulness of the Old Testament (“all scripture,” manifestly the Old Testament for the writer!) in the life of the believer. In light of common perceptions of these passages, it is useful to look again at what exactly is nailed to the cross, what that means in the life of the believer, and the Church’s relationship to the Old Testament. I will first look at where we have come from in Churches of Christ relative to the Old Testament, specifically Alexander Campbell’s “Sermon on the Law,” then at Colossians 2,

and then end with recommendations for how Christians should look at the Old Testament.

Alexander Campbell's Sermon on the Law and the Old "Constitution"

Several have, in recent years, written on Campbell's Sermon on the Law and its impact on the American Restoration Movement.¹ It is not necessary, therefore, to cover the same territory again. It will suffice to note Campbell's understanding of the temporary nature of Old Testament authority, clearly articulated in the Sermon on the Law, foundational to the dispensational ideology of the American Restoration Movement.

The Old Testament as Law, or Constitution, of the Sinai Covenant. To Campbell, Christ was the king of a new kingdom and along with that kingdom came a new system of organization whereby it could be governed. Every government required a *constitution*, written principles and organization for that government. The Sinai covenant was the constitution for the majority of the Old Testament era. Because Campbell considered the church a new kingdom, with Christ as its head, it also had a constitution, specifically the documents of the New Testament.

Such a dispensational approach was foreign to most ways of understanding the Old Testament of the time. Protestants understood the continuing relevance of at least the moral, if not the ritual, law, as exemplified in the Ten Commandments. Campbell did not so understand the Law. *All* of the Law, which he understood to be not so much legal precepts, as a system constituting a previous government, had been replaced. He recognized that much

¹ See, for example, Everett Ferguson, "Alexander Campbell's 'Sermon on the Law': A Historical and Theological Examination" *RQ* 29 (1987): 71–85; Ferguson, "Sermon on the Law," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas Foster, Paul Blowers, Anthony Dunnavant, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 680; Elmer Prout, "Alexander Campbell and the Old Testament," *RQ* 6 (1962) 131–142; and R. Mark Shipp, "Alexander Campbell and the Relationship Between the Testaments," *Christian Studies* 14 (1994): 19–32.

in the Old Testament was of enduring value, but those concepts and teachings with continuing validity were all repeated in the New Testament.

Campbell also believed in a “book of nature,” natural revelation in which moral and religious truths were disclosed. The Law was given to corporate Israel. The Book of Nature was revealed to those outside of Israel. The “moral law” of the Old Testament which Protestants found still applicable, or the standards revealed by reason and nature, were both superseded by the new covenant in Jesus Christ, as revealed in the New Testament, the constitution of his kingdom.

Campbell has several presuppositions in his approach to the Old Testament which are by no means self-evident or obvious. First, it is curious that Campbell reduces the Old Testament text to a series of governmental “constitutions,” remarkably modern in light of the political and religious realities of his day. Second, it is also by no means apparent that anything of lasting value from the Old Testament will always be found in the New. Campbell’s position makes sense if the documents of the Old Testament were intended to record and/or constitute a theological or governmental system. On the other hand, if these documents are primarily the record of God’s relationship with a people and the world he created and which reveal the nature of God to us in narrative form, they function in an entirely different manner.

It depends on what questions are being asked of the text. If the question is, “How does one determine the system appropriate to how a church or theocracy may be organized and governed,” then the texts which relate to that era and community should be referenced. On the other hand, if the question is “How has the God who is finally manifested in Jesus Christ revealed himself to us,” then all the counsel of scripture is important and continues to form us as the people of God today.

Colossians 2:14 and the Decrees “Nailed to the Cross”

Colossians 2:14 has sometimes been cited in support of a dispensational understanding of the Old Testament—that the decrees and the “handwriting” mentioned in the text are the legal texts in the Old Testament and, by extension, the entire Old Testament dispensation.² But are the “handwriting” and the “decrees” mentioned in the text a reference to the Old Testament scriptures or covenants?

The passage surrounding Colossians 2:14 is generally understood to be vv. 6 to 23,³ though some subdivide the passage in vv. 6-7, 8-15, and 16-23. Chapter two deals with a Colossian heresy, the precise nature of which is unclear, but which held to a heterodox understanding of the nature of Christ.⁴ Vv. 1-5 encourage the Colossians to persevere in faith and not to be misled (v. 4). Vv. 6-7 again encourage the Colossians not to be misled by philosophies, deceit, and “elemental things” (*stoicheia*, v. 8, see below), in regards to the nature of Christ and the new life in him. What they had received they were to hold firm, that Christ was the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form (v. 9) and he holds all life and authority (v. 10). Only in Christ does God reveal his wisdom and knowledge (vv. 2-3), that only in Christ are the disciples made alive through baptism (2:12-13), and that Christ has once for all de-

² Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 203–204 wants to have it both ways—Colossians 2 does not itself deal specifically with the Law, but he says it cannot be excluded from the “handwriting” of Colossians 2:14.

³ David Hay, *Colossians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 88; Peter O’Brien, *Colossians. Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, 44 (Waco: Word, 1982), 109; Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 92; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians*, Anchor Bible 34b (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 298; Ralph Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1991), 113; Arthur Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, NIBCNT (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 49-55.

⁴ For a recent study on the false teaching at Colossae, see Jerry Sumney, *Colossians*, New Testament Library (Louisville: WJKP, 2008), 11.

feated and canceled the guilty verdict or writ of debt (v. 15) and defeated “powers and principalities” (perhaps the “elemental things” and the thrones and dominions of 1:16). The section ends in 2:16-23 with a description of teachings and philosophies the Colossians were entertaining: regulations regarding food, drink, and special days (2:16), visions and worship of angels (2:18), and self-abasement and ascetic practices (2:18, 21-23). The exact nature of the Colossian heresy continues to be debated, but most likely had to do with a Judaic-influenced visionary movement which required an ascetic lifestyle and special experiences such as visions or worship of angels and “elemental things.”⁵ The false teaching condemned by the writer is not the Old Testament, nor the Laws of Moses, nor a “governmental dispensation,” but a mystical and ascetic brand of Christianity which was on the verge of leading the Colossians astray.⁶ Inasmuch as v. 14, with its mention of “handwriting” and “decrees” have led many Christian interpreters to see here a reference to the Old Testament or Mosaic legal system, it is important to look more closely at these terms.

The Old Testament is never referred to elsewhere as “handwriting” (*cheirographon*). This word occurs only here in the New Testament and only in the Apocryphal book of Tobit (5:3; 9:5) in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament, henceforth LXX), where it does not translate a Hebrew original. In Tobit, it refers to a written receipt of deposit, which enabled the owner of the deposit to recover it.⁷ *Cheirographon* occurs often in

⁵ Sumney, 131 suggests that *stoicheia* are simply “elements,” and these might be word or sound exercises or interest in the Greek “elements”—fire, water, earth, air.

⁶ Sumney, 11. Sumney suggests that the real problem with this movement was not that they experienced visions or practiced ascetic lifestyles, but that they mandated them.

⁷ Carey Moore, *Tobit*, Anchor Bible 40a (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 182 refers to it as a “bond,” or literally a “note of hand.”

extra-biblical Greek texts, generally referring to a certificate of debt.⁸

Decree (*dogma*) occurs in the LXX only in Daniel 6:12 (where it refers to the law of the Medes and Persians), 3 Maccabees 1:3 (where it refers to traditions), and 4 Maccabees 4:23-24, 26 (where it refers to decrees of Antiochus IV) and 10:2 (where it refers to teachings or instructions). In the New Testament, the word *dogma* is also uncommon, occurring in Luke 2:1 and Acts 17:7 (decrees of Caesar), Acts 16:4 (the decisions of the elders at the Jerusalem conference), Ephesians 2:15 and Colossians 2:14. In all of these occurrences, *cheirographon* and *dogma* refer to written receipts or contracts, verdicts, instructions, directives, decrees, and the like. They may have the force of a legal demand, but they do not refer to an entire legal code, system, or “constitution.”

Ephesians 2:14-15 is more reflective of common Old Testament terminology. “Law” (*nomos*) usually translates the Hebrew *torah*, “instruction,” but also *huqqah*, “statute.” *Entolē*, “commandment,” usually translates the Hebrew *mitswah*, “commandment” (see Deut. 4:2, 40, 5:29, etc.). *Dogma* also occurs in this passage as in Colossians 2:14 earlier. The point of this language is not to abolish a legal system, much less Old Testament literature! It is to abolish the decrees which kept Gentiles from enjoying the benefits of God’s covenant by means of the sacrifice of Christ. Much as with Colossians 2:14, the point is to nullify the “guilty verdict,” the “certificate of debt,” or the “decrees” which kept Gentiles from enjoying the presence of God in the covenant community.

The handwriting in Col 2:14 is a “record of sin, kept in heaven,” producing the “decrees” (*dogmata*) leading to the punishment of the offender.⁹ What Christ has done is to cancel the decree of punishment levied against

⁸ See, for example, Egyptian papyrus *Oxy. XXXVIII* 2846 and many others.

⁹ Sumney, 144–145.

us.¹⁰ In Campbell’s terms, the guilty verdict against us, whether legal/governmental or the law of nature, has been nullified. In any case, what has been set aside or nailed to the cross is not a legal system, much less the narrative of God’s dealings with Israel in the Old Testament, but the legal verdict of guilt, or the debt incurred by the lawbreaker.

The Christian and the Old Testament

The relationship between the Christian and the Old Testament has been a continuing source of debate and division throughout Christian history, from the Marcionism of the second century to dispensationalists of today. Indeed, even the New Testament refers to an “old covenant” which is in some sense fulfilled or culminates in the new covenant in Christ (see 2 Cor 3:14, Heb 8:6, 14). Any interpretive system of the Old Testament by Christians must take into account that there are at least aspects of it which are “old,” superseded, or at least now impossible to keep.¹¹ In a sense, Campbell was correct. The Old Testament chronicles a series of covenants—with all flesh through Noah, with Abraham, with Israel at Sinai—which in some sense were thought to supersede the previous covenant, at least as far as

¹⁰ Oliva A. Blanchette (“Does the *Cheirographon* of Col 2,14 Represent Christ Himself?” *CBQ* 23 [1961]: 306–312) suggests that the handwriting is both a heavenly record of wrongs committed and the embodiment of that record, Christ himself. James Dunn (*The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996]), 166 and Sumney, 145, suggest that Christ embodies the record of sin, which “affirms unquestionably that the cross is the means by which God forgives sins” (Sumney, 145).

¹¹ For example, offering sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. Even contemporary Jews understand that such laws and rituals are now kept by the reading of the *torah*, replacing the sacrificial system. On the other hand, “old” has often been understood as “obsolete” or “irrelevant,” leading some to discount the validity of the Old Testament for Christian theology and practice. Others have suggested that “first testament” or “Hebrew scriptures” is better nomenclature, because these do not prejudice the case for the continuing relevance of the first two-thirds of the Bible. On the use of such terminology relating to the Old Testament, see Jon Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: WJKP, 1993), 9–10.

God's elect people were concerned. These covenant agreements and rituals, on the other hand, did not invalidate the theology, the narrative, and the principles which undergirded those covenants and endued them with meaning.

As others have noted, Campbell's own use of the Old Testament was sometimes at odds with his principle of the disjunction between the Old and New Testaments:

The neglect of the Old Testament engendered by this distinction among Campbell's followers was not true of Campbell's own practice. He recognized the Old Testament as part of inspired revelation useful for religious principles, edification, and moral instruction.¹²

As New Testament writers attest, Christians have always found the Old Testament to be the necessary prelude and foundation to the New. New Testament writers quote, allude, allegorize, typologize, find fulfillment of prophecy and stories of moral exhortation. As Campbell's work shows, Christians have always struggled with exactly how the Old Testament continues to function in communities of faith today, yet most Christians have also affirmed the positive, and not just the negative, functions of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament provides the "building blocks" for theology. It is the necessary foundation for both New Testament theology and exegesis and for dogmatic (church) theology. Without the New Testament, the Old is a torso, without the culmination of its messianic (royal) theology (Isaiah 11, Psalm 110, etc.) and the meaning and goal of Israel's history as a blessing or light to the nations (Gen 12:3; Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). Without the Old Testament, the New has no basis in history or literature for its historical and literary claims, quotations, and allusions. As one scholar says,

¹² Ferguson, *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 680.

In the Church, the Hebrew Bible, known as the “Old Testament,” appears as the first of the two volumes of sacred scripture, the “Bible,” and interpretation is not complete until volume 1 is related to volume 2, the Old Testament to the New, so as to proclaim together Jesus Christ.¹³

Perhaps it is easier to get at the importance of the Old Testament for Christian theology and practice if we ask the question, “What would we have if the Old Testament were *not* there, if all we had was the New?” The first thing that comes to mind is *creation theology*. The New Testament does incorporate elements of Old Testament creation theology, assuming and building upon the foundation of Old Testament creation accounts and theology. For example, “new creation” texts such as 2 Cor. 5:17, Gal 6:15, and even John 1 assume and build on creation passages such as Genesis 1 and 2, and even “re-creation” passages such as Isaiah 48:7 and 65:17, without reiterating them or unpacking their language and thought. Without the creation passages in the Old Testament, we lack the theology of what it means for male and female to be made in the image of God, what it means to be caretakers of God’s creation, the connection of holiness, worship, and “Sabbath rest” to creation, and what it means for God to be both transcendent (Genesis 1) and imminent (Genesis 2). Without creation theology we lose all of the wisdom books of the Old Testament, which are intended to guide humans in the world God created.

Second, without the Old Testament we lose a vital aspect of *incarnational theology*. God has elected to reveal himself in all the ambiguities and foibles of human history, which means his will and presence have always been manifested in specific cultures, at specific times, in finite human languages with finite human conceptions of the divine. If we lose the Old Testament, we lose the narrative of God’s revelation in human history, culminat-

¹³ Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, 1.

ing in Christ. When we lose everything prior to the most significant chapter in human history, the meaning of that chapter is also lost. Likewise, metaphors, analogies, parables, teachings, and moral exhortations based upon those earlier chapters lose much of their meaning.

Third, and perhaps most important, the New Testament is the record of “God with us” in Jesus Christ. It reveals a *Christology*, disclosing God and his nature through Christ. What the New Testament does not do is reveal to us details about the nature and activity of God the Father of Jesus Christ. For all the manifold revelation of God as redeemer, creator, judge, king, covenant-maker, parent, warrior, and many other metaphors for God, we turn specifically to the Old Testament.

In a real sense, we cannot get beyond the New Testament’s own assessment of the value of the Old Testament: the Old Testament still functions morally through principles laid down in creation and in covenant history, it functions as the necessary background narrative to the New Testament (prophecy and fulfillment), and as theological principles derived from Old Testament practices and beliefs (*theology* corresponding to the *Christology* of the New Testament).

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