

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

## SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

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With this issue of *Christian Studies*, I begin the duty and privilege of serving the faculty as editor. Since its inaugural issue in 1980, this journal, known at that time simply as the “Faculty Bulletin,” has been in the capable hands of its founding editor, Michael Weed. It is with gratitude for Dr. Weed’s visionary labor and with humility for the work at hand that I assume the role of editor, with the indispensable aid of the managing editor, Todd Hall.

From its inception, this publication has sought to provide responsible and biblical theological reflection that is beneficial and accessible to the scholar as well as to the interested “layperson.” This aim is summed up well in the journal’s motto: Scholarship for the Church. I want to assure our readers, old and new alike, that we press on toward the future mindful of what has come before. As in the past, so in the future, the goal of this journal will be not merely to publish the “results of scholarly research,” but to address real issues in the faith and practice of the church and of individual believers. As in the past, it will continue to be a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology, but also with contributions from other scholars. Within these parameters, the intent is to provide readers with the best theological writing in Churches of Christ, but also with a reach that extends beyond our walls.

All issues of *Christian Studies*, including this one, are available online, via the Austin Grad website, at <http://austingrad.edu/resources/christian-studies-publication>. If you find the content beneficial, please share this journal, in its print and online forms, with others.

In that first issue of the “Faculty Bulletin” that appeared thirty-five years ago was a contribution by Paul Watson. Watson is an Old Testament scholar who taught at the Institute for Christian Studies (now Austin Grad) from 1979-1983. He had a lasting impact on his colleagues and students during his years as a professor here. He left the Institute to work in full-time congregational ministry, where he has continued to influence countless souls for God’s kingdom. This issue of *Christian Studies*, whose theme is “The Old Testament and the Life of the Church,” is dedicated to Paul Watson and to the legacy of scholarship and ministry that he has passed on—and continues

to pass on—to the church. The contributors bring this gift to him, and to us all, in the hope that it will bring honor to whom honor is due.

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# The Israel of God

Allan J. McNicol

Several decades ago in the days when Austin Graduate School of Theology offered courses in connection with the University of Texas I found myself in a classroom teaching a group of mainly Jewish undergraduate students. It happened in the following way. At the time various seminary professors and campus ministers in the university area, through a Bible Chair arrangement, could offer courses in the University curriculum. This particular year the local Rabbi was on sabbatical and someone was needed to teach his course on the Religion of the Pharisees. I work in the general area and quickly found myself in the classroom with a group of students primarily with close associations with the Hillel Center.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Watson, to whom this essay is dedicated, spent several years (1979–1983) in Austin teaching in this program. My association with Paul goes back to Yale Divinity School where he was the teaching assistant to the professor in a class I took as a student. In Austin Paul and I team-taught the courses our school offered on Biblical Theology. I especially admire Paul for making a decision that few seminary teachers do. Our purpose in this school is to prepare students for ministry. Paul did this well. But he also went a step further. He practiced what he taught. He left the school and chose to enter full-time ministry himself.

Paul is one of the talented group of teachers (including Jack Lewis, Claude Cox, Tony Ash, John Willis, and J. J. M. Roberts) who from about the middle of the last century, fostered serious interest in critical study of the Old Testament among Churches of Christ. Many others have followed in their steps; but these stood out as the initial scholar-leaders. Of course any movement of renewal is never complete. One issue that still needs attention is biblical theology—especially the area of the relationship between the Testaments as it applies to the theological stance of Churches of Christ. This essay is offered as a small preliminary step on this topic.

To say the least, the class was an interesting venture. Most teachers will say that there are some classes where the teacher learns more than the students. This was one of them. After several students dropped because they were uncomfortable being introduced to Judaism by a Gentile teacher, we bonded together. At least, in my judgment, over the rest of the way we had a worthwhile intellectual journey.

The class left me with one dominant impression. The students were extremely knowledgeable about the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). They knew Leviticus and Numbers as well as a traditional member of Churches of Christ knew Acts. On the other hand, these students (mainly representative of Reform Judaism) had very little familiarity with the Prophets and Wisdom Literature of their Bible. Hence my impression: even allowing for the influence of the synagogue, there was a vast difference between the way Jews and Christians were reading the same Scriptures. For these Jewish students, the Torah was central. As people of the covenant they wanted to be informed about Jewish law and how one remains faithful to it. Thus they also sought out the teaching of the rabbis, using them to enter into dialectical discussion with the Scriptures. Usually that meant consulting what they had to say about the Torah and not the Prophets or Writings.

For Christians, reading the Scriptures of Israel is a different experience. To abbreviate, these Scriptures are constitutive for the biblical narrative of salvation but are also preparatory for the main thrust that followed: the act of redemption through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christian interest in the Prophets usually comes through the belief that the appearance of Jesus is central for the fulfillment of the prophetic hopes for a new age. Even more startling, for Christians, the inauguration of the New Covenant through the death of Jesus is often contrasted with the Sinai covenant. Christians regularly characterize this covenant as “old” (hence Old Testament) and, in some quarters, presumed no longer in effect or even relevant. Thus, not only do we approach the same texts with different theological presuppositions; we also concentrate on different texts within the canon.

### **A Proposal**

My encounter with the Jewish students was an important learning experience. It was a reminder about how Christians often ignore large bodies of



filiation with the Baptists (an association which lasted close to fifteen years). The sermon, based on Romans 8:3, followed common forms of argumentation of the time. A series of premises was noted about the law (of Moses). This included its inadequacies and the answer offered to them—righteousness and eternal life in Christ. The sermon ended with practical conclusions drawn from the premises. The heart of the sermon was that a clear distinction was drawn between the Old and New Testaments. In matters of normative practice the Old Testament was for Israel, the New Testament for the church. In contemporary parlance, nothing could be reckoned to be a salvation issue unless it was warranted by the New Testament.

The real target at which Campbell was aiming was a certain understanding of the Mosaic Law popular at the time in the Reformed tradition.<sup>4</sup> When spiritually interpreted, the Old Testament covenants, especially Sinai, were thought to contain not only eternal laws but also the gospel demands. Christ is eternal and thus, in a real sense, must have been present in the course of the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup>

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teenth century it was reprinted in various places. Even today it is easily available on the internet. References in this essay are from *The Millennial Harbinger* Series 3, vol. 3/9 (1846): 42–44. In introducing the reprint Campbell made an important comment. “It is, therefore, highly probable to my mind, that but for the persecution begun on the alleged heresy of this sermon, whether the present reformation had ever been advocated by me.” Here Campbell is referring to a difference that clearly became apparent between him and Calvinists on the issue of the nature and normativity of the Old Testament covenants.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Hall, “The Old Testament in the Early Stone-Campbell Movement,” in *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, vol. 2: *Engaging Basic Christian Doctrine*, ed. William R. Baker (Abilene: ACU Press, 2006), 246–47, gives a helpful summary of the views Campbell opposed. The Old Testament laws were commonly divided into three parts: the moral, civil, and the ceremonial law. In substance, the Mosaic or Old Covenant was understood to be identical with the New Covenant, only under different administrations. The “moral” part of the law was still in effect and considered binding for the Christian. Through the use of various forms of symbolic exegesis much of the civil and ceremonial aspects of the law emerged in restated form in the New Covenant. Despite the questionable exegesis, this discernment had one advantage: it did preserve the normativity of the Old Testament. Versions of this position are still popular in many contemporary Evangelical circles. Note most of the essays in *Five Views of Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> In my own work in studying the theology of the modern Reformed professor of Old Testament, Brevard Childs, I have come to see how important this claim was for



Campbell set himself strongly against this hermeneutic. He argued that the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) is a historical book. It must be read in the same way one would critically study an ancient historical work. When one approaches it this way one discovers quickly that the Old Testament is essentially a collection of literature documenting what took place as Israel entered into covenant relationship with the Holy One. Specifically, the Law of Moses “was given to the Jewish nation and no one else.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the foundation for the familiar Restorationist theological discrimen of maintaining a clear distinction between the covenants was put in place. What is striking is how persistent this theological position has remained over the years. The significant works on biblical theology in the Restoration tradition continued within these parameters.<sup>7</sup> It is still not uncommon practice for Bible teachers in Restorationist churches to instruct students that there are three different dispensations in the Bible (Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Christian).<sup>8</sup> One should determine the purpose of each stage and subsequently ad-

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him. Cf. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 97-122.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, “Sermon on the Law.” To utilize the Old Testament as narrative for the practices of the Christian community was a fundamental category mistake. It was like claiming a proclamation made by the President of the United States as binding on the subjects of the French Government. Moreover, not giving sufficient guidance on “polygamy, divorce, slavery, revenge, etc.” it was an incomplete moral system; indeed, it was only an anticipation of the perfect form of the statutes of the New Covenant. Here, as an aside, Campbell seems to be close to advocating a view of progressive revelation. In any case, it seemed perfectly understandable to him to claim that for the followers of Christ the Old Testament had been superseded. There is much that has stood the test of time in his analysis. Nevertheless, one wonders whether he appreciated that he would leave a legacy of confusion among his theological heirs with respect to how precisely the Old Testament was authoritative.

<sup>7</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century note Walter Scott; *The Gospel Restored: A Discourse of the True Gospel of Jesus Christ* (reprint of 1836 edition; Kansas City: Old Paths Book Club, 1949); Robert Milligan, *An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1957). Probably the most significant work on biblical theology expressive of the mainstream views in Churches of Christ in the twentieth century was that of Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996). Although the latter is primarily concerned with ecclesiology it is significant that the opening section (1–18) deals comprehensively with the question of covenant in biblical religion.

<sup>8</sup> In some circles these are remembered by the nomenclature starlight, moonlight, and sunlight.

just one's life to the demands of the dispensation that is relevant.<sup>9</sup> This has had a number of odd effects with respect to the way certain sections of the Bible are studied. Not only have Leviticus and Numbers been ignored, even the Gospels—written for early Christian believers after the New Covenant was in effect—have sometimes been marginalized. Some have argued that since Jesus lived and taught under the Mosaic dispensation, Jesus' teachings during his earthly ministry are not applicable to the people of the New Covenant. Clearly, this confusion can be traced to widespread misunderstanding about the relationship between the covenants. The whole matter needs to be seriously revisited.

### **Revisiting our Understanding of the Testaments**

While it is clear that there is a connection between the Old and New Testaments, finding that connection has proved elusive. James Barr has noted the problem. He states that at the heart of the New Testament is the claim that the Father of Jesus was the God of Israel. It is therefore a matter of more than trivial interest that, for theological reasons, we should study the actions of that God in the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> Thus it seems to be an obvious truism when people use the cliché, “You can't understand the New Testament without or apart from the Old.”<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, for the average reader, let alone the literary critic, the contents of the two Testaments are very different. Sometimes they appear to be in dissimilar worlds. For example, Barr notices that many issues of major concern in the Old Testament (polemics against the nations or the divisions between Israel and Judah) are hardly taken up in the New Testament. At the same time issues such as Adam, the Fall, sin and death, so central to the theology of Paul, are mainly peripheral to the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the two Testaments are very different in emphasis and content. How do we keep them together? The difficulty is present whether one follows Campbell's emphasis on stressing the distinction between the covenants, the Reforma-

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<sup>9</sup> Hall, “The Old Testament,” 247–48.

<sup>10</sup> James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 373.

<sup>11</sup> James Barr, “Biblical Theology,” 373.

<sup>12</sup> James Barr, “Biblical Theology,” 375.

tional dialectic between law and grace or the *sensus plenior* hermeneutic traditionally used in Catholic exegesis.

In this connection, one other point needs to be made. Campbell had a deep and lively appreciation for tracing texts in the Old Testament that supposedly functioned as shadows and types for practices that emerged in the New Testament. Indeed, it is well documented that Campbell used the traditional “proofs from prophecy” in his defense of the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> Even today as I talk with students and listen weekly to short talks at the Lord’s table I am regularly reinforced with the impression that these are the grounds that many believers use to connect the Testaments and bolster faith.

But we need to be careful at this point. Alexander Campbell was a transitional figure. He was rock solid in traditional convictions about the faith. But by reading the Bible with similar literary tools that one would read any other ancient literary work, he also stood near the beginning of the modern era, when this latter manner of reading would have tremendous significance. This would mean that in the academy and other influential circles the kind of figural reading of biblical texts popular in Campbell’s era would fall on hard times. More and more, understanding the point of a text centered on what it was saying in its original context. This manner of reading a biblical text has been devastating to the kinds of theological argumentation that build on “proofs” from prophecy and typology. As a prominent scholar of the last generation has noted:

The classical apologetic argument, that Jesus was the Messiah because he fulfilled the messianic prophecies, simply does not work any longer. It presupposes that a Christian concept of “the Messiah” was first read into the Old Testament. A number of [OT] texts that Christians had used to talk about Jesus Christ did not at all relate to “the Messiah.”<sup>14</sup>

I do not wish to demean the creativity of many great exegetes who used typology in Christian and Jewish history. Much of their exegesis I personally

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<sup>13</sup> Gary Hall, “The Old Testament,” 246–50.

<sup>14</sup> Nils Dahl, “The Crucified Messiah and The Endangered Promises,” in *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine*, ed. Donald H. Juel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 70.

find suggestive. All that I am saying is that the tide of modernity has not been kind to it.

Thus it seems to me that the time to revisit this conversation is overdue. The still widespread view in Restorationist circles that the Bible should be divided into three distinct dispensations, each with its own promises and demands, remains a basic presupposition among many Bible teachers. When this premise is linked with a reading of Galatians 3 that presumes that the key promises to Abraham were fulfilled in Christ, separate and apart from the Mosaic administration, the rug is pulled out from under those advocating serious engagement with the Torah. Whether or not it was the intent of early Restoration leaders, an undue emphasis came to be placed on such texts as Galatians 3, 2 Corinthians 3:5–18, and Hebrews. The emphasis was always on freedom from the Law/Torah (the divine teaching). It was not balanced with texts like Romans 3:31 where Paul is stressing that the Law is the revelation of the character and will of God and that the righteousness it demands is realized only in Christ.<sup>15</sup> Thus it should be a major area of concern that in many Restorationist quarters the Ten Commandments are casually dismissed.

This re-assessment of the relationship between the Testaments should especially focus on the concept of covenant itself. It is claimed that Campbell took note of a diverse number of covenants in the Bible.<sup>16</sup> But it is far from clear whether this has left much of an impression on his successors. Critical scholarship has worked at great length on covenant in the twentieth century. Scholars have discovered a multiplicity of covenants in use among the Hebrews and in the wider Ancient Near East. It is recognized that at different

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 298–99. Rom 3:31 and similar texts should be read in conjunction with Jer 30:3–31:34, where the Lord promises the people of God a return to the land and contingent blessings including the forgiveness of sins. Presumably, this new or “resumed” covenant (there were no new stipulations to Moses) was meant to be fulfilled with the return of the exiles. For Paul the law “written on hearts” of Jer 31:33 was completed in Christ—the only one who kept the law, so that it was impossible for God to claim that his covenant was broken. Believers in Christ, aware that they fall short of God’s standard, through grace, appropriately claim the benefits of Christ with respect to Jer 31:31–34. See Norbert Lohfink, *The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, trans. John J. Scullion (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 52–57.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Hall, “The Old Testament,” 247, 260.

times in the history of Israel various covenants overlapped with one another. For example, the covenant with Noah was universal (Gen 8:1–19). Other covenants were between individuals (Gen 31:43–54). It is a good question what an ancient Jew would say if you asked whether he were in covenant. It would be very doubtful if any ancient Hebrew would list the main covenants of the Hebrew Bible along the lines taught in Restorationist Bible classes.

Let us consider one example. The book of Sirach is in the Greek Bible but not in the Hebrew Scriptures. It was compiled about 200 B.C. Among the Jewish people these were the last days of the Aaronide dynasty of high priests who, in the absence of kingship, had provided leadership for several centuries in Judea. Sirach concludes his work by rehearsing a summary of the story of the people of God at this time.<sup>17</sup> Notably, Sirach fits his narrative into a structure of seven major covenants. They are the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, Phinehas, and David (Sirach 44:17–47:11). Moses is praised for a number of things including *receiving* the commandments (45:1–6); but he is not mentioned as a covenant maker.<sup>18</sup> That honor is left to Aaron who inaugurates “an everlasting covenant” (45:7). This is passed on to Israel through his sons.<sup>19</sup>

My only reason in enumerating this history is to make a basic point. Sirach’s reckoning of the covenantal history of the people of God was one perspective. No doubt there were many others at different times. If Christians are going to connect the New Testament with Israel’s Scripture through a narrative of the history of covenant making they will be undertaking a difficult task. The historical record of the Hebrew people indicates there was no unanimity about this process. Indeed, it seems to be the case that there were different covenant theologies in Israel’s history over the centuries. We are therefore using a “weak reed” if we seek to connect the Old and New Testa-

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<sup>17</sup> The summary is traditionally called “The Praise of Famous Men” (Sirach 44:12–50:24). In recent years commentators have found other titles to avoid the sexist overtones of the earlier reference.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis Rivkin, *A Hidden Revolution: The Pharisees Search for the Kingdom Within* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 191–207.

<sup>19</sup> This line is duly noted as Aaron, Eleazar, Phinehas, and Zadok. Noticeably the tribe of Levi is marginalized and there is no reference to Jeremiah’s promise of a New Covenant. Biblical scholars note that this listing is highly dependent on post-exilic developments in Judea. Nevertheless it is not idiosyncratic. Biblical books such as Chronicles would have been sympathetic to the listing.

ments through some scheme of the history of covenant making among the people of God.

Thus I come to my proposal. Sir Walter Scott is reported to have said that the Bible is “The Book.” To me, as for many throughout the centuries, this means that—if indeed it is a book—a basic narrative can be drawn from its pages. I would suggest that the Old and New Testaments constitute a unity by telling the story of God’s relationship with Israel, the people of God. To put it in its simplest form, this narrative takes the reader from the origins of Israel through a complicated development to a vision of its anticipated consummation. Herein rests the unity.

There is no question that the Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of how God called Israel to be his people. I suggest that the way to understand the New Testament is to view it as the climax of the same narrative. In Galatians 6:16, in a beautiful benedictory statement, Paul invokes blessings upon the entire “Israel of God.” Whatever we make of this text, it reminds us that both the writers and the writings that we know as the New Testament emerged out of the formative matrix of Israel. The New Testament understands that Israel is central to its story. Unfortunately, this factor is often neglected when Gentiles approach its pages. Several closing paragraphs will only allow a couple of sketches that are illustrative of my suggestions for a different reading. To make the effort manageable, I will note how my proposed reading of the biblical narrative provides insight into two representative writings: Matthew and Ephesians.

### **Israel’s Narrative Continues**

#### *Matthew*

From the time of the earliest collections of the canonical Scriptures, Matthew stood at the head of the New Testament canon. If there is to be a narrative connection between the Old and New Testaments, Matthew is vital. The Jewish people had lived in servitude for most of the previous five centuries. Now Matthew gives us the story of a prophet from Galilee, which stood at the margins of the traditional boundaries of the land. This prophet launches a renewal movement among the entire people of Israel. Anticipating the consummation of all things he seeks to prepare his people to be part of a community that will stand at the last day.

I would draw attention to the fact that Matthew presumes the people of God are Israel. These people stand in direct continuity with their predecessors in Hebrew Scripture. They are the same people. They are seeking renewal.

Into this environment Jesus is born. Immediately, a reader versed in Scripture knows something extraordinary is taking place. Usually the future king of Israel is born of the lineage of David and at his coronation adopted as Son of God. In the opening chapter of Matthew it is the opposite. Jesus, the Son of God, is born to a virgin. Through Joseph he is adopted into the Davidic lineage. His coronation will take place after his death when he is enthroned to God's right hand (Matt 22:41–46; 28:16–20).

As in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are two groups of people in Matthew: Jews and Gentiles. When Matthew is expounded in the church today this needs to be taken into consideration. Believers would do well to hear Matthew in a similar way as the ancient Hebrew who longed for the restoration of his people.

After the confirmation of Jesus' sonship at his baptism (3:16–17), and his successful resistance of Satan (4:1–11), Jesus announces the restoration of Israel is at hand (4:15–16).<sup>20</sup> The emergence of the awaited kingdom is at hand (4:23). As signs of this new era a sampling of Jesus' teachings and healings are given (5:1–9:35). Notably, they presume that instruction in Torah is a prerequisite (5:19; 23:23). Obedience to the Torah as interpreted by Jesus is necessary to attain the higher righteousness that is demanded for entrance into the kingdom (5:17–20; 22:34–40; 28:20). As a statement of his ultimacy, Jesus is reckoned to be the only Teacher (23:8–9).

However, any teacher must have assistants for his task. Out of the group of earliest followers Jesus selects twelve disciples (10:1–4). They are tasked to inaugurate a restoration throughout Israel through the announcement of the nearness of the kingdom (10:5–42). The mission is to continue until the consummation of all things, which will climax with the *parousia* of the Son of Man (10:23). The twelve are to constitute the foundation of Jesus' "assembly" or "church" (*ekklēsia*, 16:16–19; 18:18). They are given the keys of

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<sup>20</sup> The reference is to the outlying tribes of ancient Israel ("Those who sat in darkness have seen a great light") and is drawn from Isa 9:1–2.

the kingdom—which I understand to be the depository of the special instructions of the “one teacher.”<sup>21</sup> In no way did Matthew indicate the church was to be an entity separate and apart from the traditional people of God.<sup>22</sup> The church is simply the renewed people of God. They are the people of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31–34 who, by remaining faithful to the word of the one Teacher, will survive at the final consummation (25:31–46).

Although the church emerges out of Israel and its story, as the end-time people of God, according to Matthew, it was destined to become open to all nations. Believing Gentiles could enter the people of God while not losing their identity as Gentiles. Thus, despite its own special characteristics Matthew coheres with the narrative of the New Testament on the reception of the Gentiles.

Indeed, this is evident from the beginning of the Gospel. In Matthew 1:1, Jesus’ Davidic ancestry is traced back to Abraham, the father of the promises of blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1–3). At birth Jesus is visited by Magi and, in keeping with the testimony of Isaiah, receives gifts from Gentiles (cf. Isa 60:6). Some of the greatest expressions of faith in Jesus’ mission come from the Gentiles (Matt 8:5–13; 15:21–28). Ultimately, the commission to go only to Israel will be extended to include the Gentiles, presumably because at the consummation of the age people of all nations will be held accountable for their response (Matt 24:14; 25:31–32). At the end of Matthew, the commission is to take the gospel to all nations, which, I believe, is inclusive of a continuing mission to Israel as well (Matt 28:16–20).

Yet I am absolutely convinced that Matthew is a very Jewish book and interpreters ignore this at their peril. It has a strong defensive posture defending the church, anchored on the Twelve, over against the leaders and teachers of mainstream Israel of the day (21:43). We who come on the other side of

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<sup>21</sup> According to Matthew 18 this teaching was nothing like the later tradition of St. Peter meeting us at the gates of heaven and determining who would or would not gain entrance to the fold. Instead the task is to shepherd the community of the end-time with a view to help the straying brother (18:10–14). They are to encourage the flock through their teaching from the Master on prayer, forgiveness, the love commandment, and even such matters as the proper use of wealth. Note Matthias Konradt, *Israel, Church and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 327–53.

<sup>22</sup> Konradt, *Israel, Church*, 336.



this founding situation within Israel appreciate its strong overtones in defense of the universality of the people of God. We should appreciate it just as much for its deep roots in the story of Israel.

### *Ephesians*

After looking at a book anchored deeply in the Jewish world we now turn to a writing that emerged out of a Gentile context within the Greco-Roman world. In *Ephesians* the Gentiles have become the dominant figures in the communities addressed. Yet, despite a situation in which the recipients differ greatly from those in *Matthew*, the need to accommodate and develop an appropriate relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers remains a central concern. What is striking is that even in this neighborhood the centrality of Israel is stressed.

This is clearly seen in *Ephesians* 2:11–22, a key passage in the letter.<sup>23</sup> Because the Gentiles did not belong to “the commonwealth of Israel”—the possessors of the covenants of promise (*Rom* 9:4)—they were without hope (2:11–12). Indeed, the Gentiles were “far off” (2:17). Outside of the gates of the household of God, they were “strangers and sojourners” (2:19). The Gentiles who have become part of God’s people need to remember that they were once in a situation where they had no hope of salvation (2:11–12; 4:17–19; 5:3–13).

Astonishingly, the writer of this letter needed to remind the primarily Gentile audience of a basic fact. Israel had a long history as the people of God. In the day-to-day world, where there were few believers of Jewish origin, this reality was becoming increasingly difficult.<sup>24</sup> Now the shoe was on the other foot. There was even a danger of dismissing the heritage of Israel.

*Ephesians* will have nothing of this disparagement of Israel. The writer echoes *Romans* 11:16–24, stating that it was always the plan of the Creator to bring unification between the Jew and the Gentile. This was a mystery, the

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<sup>23</sup> Derwood C. Smith, “Cultic Language in *Ephesians* 2:19-22: A Test Case,” *Restoration Quarterly* 31/4 (1989): 207–17.

<sup>24</sup> Nils Dahl, “Gentiles, Christians, and Israelites in the Epistle to the *Ephesians*,” in *Studies in Ephesians*, ed. David Hellholm, et al., *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 1/131 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 444–47.

outcome of which was now unfolding (3:1–13; 6:10–20). The story of the people of God is a process culminating in one unified body of both circumcised and uncircumcised believers brought together in the church through Jesus. Contrary to the evil powers that reckoned they were in control of the universe, it is in this one unified body (the church) that God’s wisdom concerning his purpose for the human community is made known (3:9–12). This reality should be accepted and not resisted by the Gentiles.

On the other hand, although the Law still determines the life of the people of God, a certain shaping of Torah rules that emerged to maintain Israel’s distinctiveness from other peoples was no longer valid (Eph 2:14–15).<sup>25</sup> No doubt this included circumcision and some other features designed to separate the Jews from others. But for the biblical narrative to work it remained a matter of absolute necessity to recognize the need for unification of Jew and Gentile in the one people of God. Or, in keeping with the theme of this essay, Old and New Testament must be reckoned to constitute one book.

### Conclusion

In this essay I attempted to raise a question about the implications of the claim made in Campbell’s essay that Christians are no longer under the Law of Moses. In my judgment, the implications have taken us in unfortunate directions. Specifically, in some quarters, the normative authority of Scripture has been limited to Acts and the Epistles. More generally, we have had a problem understanding the central place of Israel in the Bible. What is the authority of the Old Testament? Even when we read the New Testament, how do we account for the central importance of Israel in God’s plan? Is our traditional reading of covenant plausible?

If the Bible is “The Book,” I have suggested that it must have a common narrative. I believe that common narrative tells the story of the people of God. Starting with the call and divine promises to Abraham, the story culminates in the emergence of a universal community of Jews and Gentiles united through Jesus Christ. For us, the majesty of the Bible’s one story of the “Israel of God” should unite the two Testaments, rather than pulling them apart.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77.

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