

The Theological Relationship Between the Two Testaments

Introduction

The area of study that seeks to bring an understanding of the theological relationship between the two testaments is one that is diverse and challenging. History has demonstrated a tumultuous relationship, not just in this arena, but also between two groups that are seeking to understand the concept of God in a Judeo-Christian context. Getting beyond the collective/personal animosity that has existed from the 1st century between Jewish and Gentile believers as it relates to understanding, not just the New Testament, but also the interpretation of the Old Testament, we can proceed to delineating a few definitions. Our topic is of itself filled with presuppositions. We should elucidate what is meant by Theological relationship. Inherently, relationship can only exist between multiple partners which might required us to define the partners first. We are seeking to bring forth a relationship of two testaments. One of the best synonyms for testament is that of *testimony* or *witness*. Secondly, we are assuming or maybe disproving, that there is a theological relationship between two witnesses. This puts us into the realm of theology and thus moving beyond mere human witness into the realm of God speaking to us in His Word. Those of the non-Christian Jewish persuasion will immediately reject the New Testament witness as corrupt and having no connection with the Old Testament witness. Others in the Gentile might reverse and say the New Testament is only loosely similar and in contradistinction to the bankruptcy and failure of the Old Testament. David Baker outlines this challenge and attempts to bring some understanding this issue by writing about the problem (briefly alluded already), some modern solutions, and similar themes which also are reflected in the continuity and

discontinuity in the relationship.¹ His outline is useful in that it provides a standard rubric in trying to realize the challenges inherent in demonstrating this relationship between the two witnesses. This essay will seek to briefly summarize some of the problems and modern solutions that scholars continue to wrestle with.

Problem

One of the immediate challenges when addressing any material that claims to be a word from God is one of authority. This could easily be a paper seeking to understand the theological relationship between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. The Old Testament from the beginning has within it quotes or admonitions that are purportedly from God Himself. We are told in the Pentateuch that Moses to write down the authoritative words of God in a book. Subsequent to this later historical and prophetic books speak forth the truths of God and inferentially and many times overtly demand a submission to its authority. Assessing the Old Testament witness is not just one of the problems in the relationship but is The Problem.² It is something that is at the core of any and all discussions.

The New Testament makes similar claims to be the word of God. It's newness is not that it is entirely distinct from the Old Testament, but that it brings forth the prophetic words after a centuries long hiatus. This issue comes ultimately to understanding the nature of the canon or accepted authority from God³. This comes into clearer focus as we realize that even though the Jews in general reject the New Testament, Christians

¹ Baker, D.L. *Two Testaments, One Bible: A study of the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*. Leicester: Intersarsity Press, 1991.

² Janowski, Bernd. "The One God of the Two Testaments." *Theology Today* 57 Issue 3 (2000): 298.

³ The issue of canon is a highly important topic in this endeavor. What constitutes the Old Testament witness and when was it finalized. See Gerhard Hasel's approach as well as Steve Motyer at the challenges of text criticism and finalizing what text is entailed in developing this relationship.

recognize and revere the Old Testament. Eugene Roop delineates the relationship between the two as having been understood historically in three ways: allegorical, doctrinal, and historical.⁴ Without delving too deeply into these because of space constraints, the allegorical approach teaches that the Old Testament at times did not speak specifically enough concerning the promises and it was necessary to see the New Testament fulfillment read back into the Old Testament.⁵ Another approach was to a systematic theological approach. This sought to establish that the great theological teachings were consistent in the Old and New Testament witnesses. Finally, there was the historical approach. Roop mentions that this approach veered away from the deficiencies of the systematic approach, it emphasized the continuity from the Old Testament into the New Testament as a product of Hebraic and Hellenistic religions into one.⁶ One can even mention that those in the time of the reformation struggled to find solutions to these exact issues. The Swiss Brethren resorted to understanding the Old Testament as simply a time when the fullness of God's revelation was not yet revealed. It was here that some sought to establish continuity while simultaneously underscoring the distinctive character of the new spiritual kingdom inaugurated by Christ.⁷

Modern Solutions

The modern solutions to the understanding of the Old and New Testaments are quite varied and at times contradictory in their respective foci. Baker outlines four main

⁴ Roop, Eugene F. "The Problem of Two Testaments: We Can't Have the New Without the Old." *Brethren Life and Thought* 19 no 3 Sum (1974):158.

⁵ Challenges to this approach and a return to the *sensus literalis* see Brevard Childs in "The Nature of the Christian Bible: One Book, Two Testaments." *The Rule of Faith* ed. By Ephraim Radner and George Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998), 123.

⁶ Roop, Eugene F. "The Problem of Two Testaments: We Can't Have the New Without the Old." *Brethren Life and Thought* 19 no 3 Sum (1974):159.

⁷ Roth, John D. "Harmonizing the Scriptures: Swiss Brethren Understandings of the Relationship Between the Old and New Testament During the Last Half of the Sixteenth Century." *Radical Reformation Studies* ed. By Werner O Packull and Geoffrey L. (Dipple. Bookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999): 48, 52.

solutions with a variety of comparisons and criticisms. He mentions the New Testament and Old Testament as the essential Bible respectively, the Old and New as equally Christian Scripture and both as one salvation history.⁸ Rudolf Bultmann gave the first modern solution with two works he published in the 1930s and 1940s. His view took a seemingly logical step from the traditions that the Old Testament speaks nothing of Jesus Christ except through allegory.⁹ It is within this framework that the Old Testament can only be interpreted Messianically through eisegesis. This approach focuses much on the discontinuity between the two testaments.

Moving on in the next era was the focus on the unity of two testaments as equally being Scripture. Most of those advocating this view focused on the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth and his logically deduced unifying work. If the Old Testament points forward to Christ and the New Testament points back to Christ, then there has to be unity.¹⁰ It is here that Brevard Childs developed the canonical approach to theology. He maintains that there is indeed continuity and discontinuity but there is no need to overexhaust either. Instead both testaments make a discrete witness to Jesus Christ that must be heard, both separately and in concert.¹¹ In a different article Childs shares his thoughts at seeking unity when he says that “the central point to emphasize is that the biblical text itself exerts theological pressure on the reader, demanding that the reality and undergirding the two witnesses not be held apart and left isolated and fragmented,

⁸ Baker, D.L. *Two Testaments, One Bible: A study of the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*. Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1991.

⁹ Ibid. 67-82; Roop, Eugene F. “The Problem of Two Testaments: We Can’t Have the New Without the Old.” *Brethren Life and Thought* 19 no 3 Sum (1974):160.

¹⁰ Baker, D.L. *Two Testaments, One Bible: A study of the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*. (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1991): 104-105.

¹¹ *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002): 53.

but rather be theologically united.”¹² What precisely is the theology that unites the two? He acknowledged that there is neither one theological interpretation that has become absolute¹³ nor is there any absolute hermeneutic.¹⁴ Christopher Seitz’s canonical attempts have sought to modify Childs by trying to underscore the deference of the developing Christian kerygma to a scriptural (OT) witness it assumes will continue to sound forth alongside it as the New Testament writings develop and take their own canonical form.¹⁵ This allows the attempt to bring forth a more precise theological unifying theme that still inherently revolves around the person of Christ.

Just as we saw the reaction of Bultman to the New Testament superseding any continuity from the Old Testament, others such as van Ruler, focuses instead on the incongruities. He is joined by others such as James Barr and Kornelias Miskotte.¹⁶ Some of these differences include national particularism versus universalism, earthly salvation versus other worldly salvation, tsedaqah-righteousness versus agape-love.¹⁷ Although Barr doesn’t fall fully into this camp, the summary here is that the Old Testament can stand alone in its revelatory character and depending on the particular writer, may seem to have a higher priority due to its being revealed first.

The final modern attempt is that of highlighting the Two Testaments as revelation of Salvation History. This seems in my view a consistent approach (though not without problems) to realizing that the Bible is not a systematic theology textbook, but instead is

¹² Brevard Childs in “The Nature of the Christian Bible: One Book, Two Testaments.” *The Rule of Faith* ed. By Ephraim Radner and George Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998), 124.

¹³ *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002): 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

¹⁵ Seitz, Christopher. “Two Testaments and the Failure of One Tradition History.” *Biblical Theology* ed. By Scott J. Hafemann. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2002): 207.

¹⁶ Baker, D.L. *Two Testaments, One Bible: A study of the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*. (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1991): 117-142.

¹⁷ Koch, Klaus. “Two Testaments- One Bible.” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 28 no 1-2 (1996): 39.

a revelation that brings forth God's works in history with the goal of salvation. We can see this beginning in the garden of Eden to the book of Revelation where God Himself dwells with redeemed humanity (Rev. 21:3). This approach has many adherents and also various forms. Roop comments that the Salvation history presented by Wright and Cullman falls short in that Jesus being the goal of a chain of events in which God acted in a revelational manner doesn't allow the Old Testament to act in its own integrity. If it is just a series of events, then there really is not need for the Old Testament to the Christian.¹⁸ A modified form of this is that of Von Rad and is labeled the tradition-historic method. This method prizes itself on taking into account both the continuities and discontinuities. Yet it is not without its critics.¹⁹

Conclusion

Where can one end up with so many various approaches to understanding the relationship between the two testaments. I personally seem to favor the canonical approach advocated by Brevard Childs among others. I think what stands out for me is the fact that when the Two Testaments were brought together in harmony, no "decision was made to exclude certain books or passages. No attempt was made to 'Christianize' it by introducing redactional intrusions."²⁰ If the early New Testament writers and leaders of the church felt that there were ultimate in congruencies between the established canon and developing canon, I find myself comfortable with that same canonical approach. It can at least be understood, even by Childs, that there is no one unique hermeneutic or

¹⁸ Roop, Eugene F. "The Problem of Two Testaments: We Can't Have the New Without the Old." *Brethren Life and Thought* 19 no 3 Sum (1974):161.

¹⁹ Seitz, Christopher. "Two Testaments and the Failure of One Tradition History." *Biblical Theology* ed. By Scott J. Hafemann. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2002): 207-209.

²⁰ Janowski, Bernd. "The One God of the Two Testaments." *Theology Today* 57 Issue 3 (2000): 303.

theological theme that is completely and universally satisfying. The approach by Hasel emphasizing a multiplex approach which establishes a two step process seems most favorable to me. The first step allows the various books of the entire canon to stand together in all their richness and variety. The second step speaks towards the multitrack treatment of longitudinal themes and motifs and concepts that have emerged from a book by book/group by group presentation.²¹ We can see finally that the Bible has one author and the theme that is multi-faceted is that of accomplishing God's will in this world. Whether that will is kingdom, salvation, revelation, etc., we can still trust in the unity of the Old and New Testaments revolving around the person of Jesus Christ.

²¹ Hasel, Gerhard F. "Proposals for a Canonical Biblical Theology." *Andrew University Seminary Studies* 34 no 1 (1996): 32-33.

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