

COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A REVIEW OF *KNOWING JESUS THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT*  
BY CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

A BOOK REPORT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL COMPLETION OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR NT 220 - LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF JESUS

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In his Preface to *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*, Christopher J. H. Wright says “the deeper you go into understanding the *Old Testament*, the closer you come to the heart of Jesus...That has been my conviction for a long time, and it is the conviction that underlies this book.”<sup>1</sup> This thesis statement sets the stage for his presentation of the connections between the promises Jesus fulfilled in coming to earth, his identity, his mission, and the ethic he taught with Old Testament scripture. Wright’s linkage of a deeper understanding of Jesus with our understanding of the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, is an important point often lost in many of today’s churches by many of today’s Christians.

It is the lack of this connection, he argues, that leads to the often distorted, diluted understanding of Jesus in modern culture. He is saddened by the fact “that so many Christians in these days love Jesus, but know so little about who he thought he was and what he had come to do...He is cut off from the historical Jewish context of his day, and from his deep roots in Hebrew scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> In this book, written not for scholars but for anyone who seeks to deepen both their knowledge of Jesus and their knowledge of the Bible he read, what we know as the Old Testament, it is Wright’s stated goal to provide a resource to help believers re-establish this lost connection.<sup>3</sup> With the heightened interest in the subject of Jesus’ identity in recent years associated with what has come to be known as the Third Quest for the historical Jesus, particularly in the academy, Wright notes the irony in the fact that there is such a dearth of knowledge of the connections he outlines in the book.<sup>4</sup>

Wright’s approach in presenting his argument is to look at selected events in the life of Jesus as well as selected teachings to draw parallels with Old Testament themes and types and to show how these texts pointed to Jesus. In talking about Jesus’ relationship to the Old Testament promise, for example, he notes Matthew’s use of the idea of fulfillment in his description of events in Jesus’ life, in particular five scenes from Jesus’ childhood:

1. Joseph’s vision in Matthew 1:18-25 fulfilling Isaiah 7:14
2. Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem in Matthew 2:1-12 fulfilling Micah 5:2
3. The family’s escaping to Egypt during Herod’s purge in Matthew 2:13-15 fulfilling Hosea 11:1

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1. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), ix.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid.

4. Herod's purge itself in Matthew 2:16-18 fulfilling Jeremiah 31:15
5. The family's settlement in Nazareth in Matthew 2:19-23, which Matthew notes as "fulfilling the prophets"<sup>5, 6</sup>

The fulfillment concept points to Jesus as the realization of God's promises beginning with Abraham, through David, and finally with Jesus to bless all nations through his chosen people.

Similarly, Jesus' presentation of his own identity is firmly rooted in Old Testament scripture and was initiated by God's direct word naming him "my beloved Son."<sup>7</sup> With this declaration by God as a foundation, Wright puts forward several connections to the Old Testament ideas about son-ship including: David's promised son (Psalm 2:7, which the Matthew 3 passage echoes); the idea of the beloved one (Isaiah 42:1); and the beloved son typified by Isaac (Genesis 22:2).<sup>8</sup> He also brings in the Father/Son relationship of God and Israel and that relationship's connection to God's ultimate purpose of salvation, relying on Isaiah 63-64 and Jeremiah 3-4 as key illustrations of this relationship.

Wright's two fundamental premises — that greater understanding of Old Testament scripture leads to greater understanding of Jesus, and that there is a significant lack of attention to the Old Testament in our day — are well founded. In his presentation *Preaching from the Old Testament* at the Together for the Gospel conference in April 2006<sup>9</sup>, J. Ligon Duncan III, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi and moderator of the Presbyterian Church in America in 2005-2005, noted this lack in preaching in churches generally. By his response to the results of a show of hands by the pastors from a variety of churches in several denominations attending the conference at the beginning of this talk, he indicated that very few were actively preaching from the

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5. (Matthew 2:23 ESVS) "And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene." Wright notes that this precise language does not appear in any particular prophetic writing, which he concludes implies an interpretation of several unspecified references. Ibid., 56.
  6. Ibid., 55-56.
  7. (Matthew 3:16-17 ESVS) "And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."
  8. Ibid., 106-107.
  9. Ligon Duncan, "Preaching From the Old Testament," *Together for the Gospel 2006*, MP3 file (Louisville, KY: Together for the Gospel, 2006), <http://sgm.edgeboss.net/download/sgm/teaching/t4g2006/a2235-03-51.mp3>.

Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> While not scientific, this informal poll of an audience of pastors supports Wright's second premise.

The technique Wright uses is presented in an engaging, convincing style, clearly demonstrating his background as an Old Testament specialist. While the fact that his area of specialty brings with it a natural bias for raising the importance of the Old Testament in the church in our culture and time, he presents an overwhelming case that is clearly supported by the texts. Certainly the best argument presented is the example of Jesus himself as Wright, pointing to Luke 24 as an example, notes:

“...Jesus was not just an identikit figure pasted together with bits of the Old Testament. He transcended and transformed the ancient models. He filled them with fresh meaning in relation to his own unique person, his example, teaching and experience of God. So that, for his followers, what began as a shaft of recognition and understanding of *Jesus* in light of their Scriptures, ended up as a deepening and surprising new understanding of their *Scriptures* in light of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

It is this central idea of this two-way increase of understanding that makes this book relevant to the church and individual Christians in our day. As a culture, we are more interested in an abridged, bullet-pointed presentation of just about everything rather than the kind of thoughtful, analytical study Wright's ideas require of us. We want the 30-minute Jesus, rather than the Jesus whose identity, mission, and teachings are more deeply rooted in Scripture that was written in an ancient time and foreign culture. Wright makes a case for this deeper kind of study that is both convincing and engaging, leaving the reader wanting to delve into more depth on his own.

Wright closes his chapter on Jesus' mission with a section that discusses our mission in light of Christ's. This sections extends the connection between Jesus, his mission, and the Old Testament to today's church, adding a dimension to the importance of his main thesis. If, as Wright asserts, who Jesus is, what he came to do, and the nature of what he taught cannot be fully understood without consideration of the Old Testament text, then we likewise cannot truly and completely understand our mission as the church in our day without it. If we see our mission and teaching as a continuation of Jesus' mission, if we are to tell our culture who he really was, if we are to teach accurately what he taught, we must, as Wright argues, understand and value the Old Testament as equal to the New Testament.

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10. The pastor of the church I attend was present for this presentation at the Together for the Gospel 2006 conference and verified that few raised their hands in response to Duncan's questions about preaching from the Old Testament.

11. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*, 117.

## Sources Used

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