

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Book Review

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Old Testament Orientation I

by

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## 1. Introduction

*Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*, by Christopher J.H. Wright, asserts that we cannot fully know Jesus without knowing the full story – not just the part laid out in the New Testament, but the story that begins in Genesis 1. Over the course of the book, Wright makes his case through five categories, or styles of writing in the Old Testament, and their connections to Christ. Ultimately, there can be no full understanding of the salvation message of Jesus without the foundation laid in the Old Testament. This understanding recognizes the critical importance of valuing both Testaments equally, as opposed to prioritizing one above the other.

Dr. Christopher J.H. Wright was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He received his doctorate from Cambridge, with a focus on Old Testament ethics. He has taught at Union Biblical Seminary in India, and All Nations Christian College, a missionary training school in England, where he also served as principal. He is currently the international director of the Langham Partnership International, also known as John Stott Ministries, as well as serving on the staff of All Souls Church in Langham Place, London, England. He has written a number of books over the years and is well known for his expertise.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Wright and his wife Liz currently live in London England. They have four adult children and a number of grandchildren.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Summary

Wright divides the book into five chapters, for the five lenses in which he sees connections between the Old Testament and Jesus, with each chapter containing a number of sub points.

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1 [https://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/author.pl/author\\_id=343](https://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/author.pl/author_id=343)

2 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher\\_J.\\_H.\\_Wright](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_J._H._Wright)

In his first chapter, Wright opens with Matthew 1:1-17. His contention is that it is no random decision to have Matthew lead off the New Testament (even though Mark was most likely written first), with the decision to strategically start that gospel with the genealogy also being strategic in leading off the New Testament while connecting it to the Old. Wright sees in the genealogy the history of the Jewish nation, working his way through generation after generation in the chapter, telling the stories and the individuals that lead up to Christ. In other words, the New Testament begins with the genealogy because Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the completion of something of a story that has been being told for thousands of years. While it may seem a stretch to the modern American reader to see so much story packed into the first 17 verses of Matthew, for the Jewish believer those names represent a great deal and in their culture, the implied connection would have been obvious.

The second chapter looks at Matthew 1 and 2, specifically five stories from the childhood of Jesus with the purpose of showing that Christ fulfills prophecy from the Old Testament, another point of connection between the two. Wright goes into great detail with the five stories, demonstrating their fulfillment of Old Testament passages. The stories are<sup>3</sup>:

1. The assurance to Joseph regarding the child conceived in Mary.
2. The fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.
3. The escape to Egypt and the return.
4. The murder of the boys in Bethlehem, as commanded by Herod.
5. The settlement of Jesus' family in Nazareth.

In the third chapter, Wright continues his pattern of using the beginning of Matthew to frame his discussion of Jesus and the Old Testament, this time using Matthew 3 as his launching

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, Christopher J.H. *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992. 55-56.

point for this chapter. In Matthew 3, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, with God identifying Him as His Son. From there, Wright introduces the idea of typology – that stories/individuals in the Old Testament could be a type, representation, or actually Christ - and works his way through some of the stories in the Old Testament connected to Christ's identity, demonstrating Jesus' connection through typology in the Old Testament.

Chapter four takes its launching point also from the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3, but with a different application and perspective. This time the focus is on Jesus' mission, and Wright makes a compelling case over the course of the chapter. He demonstrates how Christ's mission originates and is shaped through the Old Testament, one that He then passes on to believers as our mission as well. To sum it up, that mission is to know God and make Him known. Wright puts together a compelling case that is hard to refute over the course of the chapter.

Finally, chapter five uses Matthew 4 as a launching point and looks at the values of Christ in connection with the Old Testament. Ultimately, Wright contends that Christ's values could be summed up in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). While the Jewish people had practiced that value for generations, Christ was the first to live them out perfectly, even to the point of His sacrificial death. By doing so he fulfilled the Old Testament laws, which the Jewish people had also lived under for generations, but Christ was again the first to live them out perfectly. Having made the case for Christ fulfilling the law, Wright then makes the case for Jesus being the true prophet of Israel. He wraps up with the point he opened the book with, that the story of the Old Testament is completed in Jesus.

### **3. Critical Interaction**

Wright does an incredible job of systematically making a strong case for connection between the Old Testament and Christ. I found the different steps in his thought process

fascinating. However, for me, the only disconcerting point in the structure of his book was his decision to root the overall narrative in Matthew 1-4. At times I felt as though he was taking a bit of a leap in linking all that he was writing to that handful of verses. Perhaps the Jewish reader may have made the same connections as he did, but for me I found it distracting.

Removing that element from the equation, though, leaves me riveted with all of the different connections he points to between Christ and the narrative of the Old Testament. It confirmed in far greater detail something I learned about as a teenager.

My family served with New Tribes Mission in Bolivia, South America. The primary focus of NTM is to reach primitive tribes of people who have never had any exposure to Christ whatsoever. The process generally involves searching through the jungles, spending years building relational bridges and learning the language, and then finally sharing the gospel message. When NTM originally began, when they would reach the evangelizing stage they would immediately launch into the gospels and the message of Christ. For a while they were mystified at how ineffective that was until they finally realized the full importance of the Old Testament.

Going forward they reworked the process for how they would reach unreached tribes. Instead of starting with Christ, they developed a year long curriculum with which they could take a group of people through the entire Old Testament. They were stunned with the first group when, before the year was up, the natives began lamenting how lost they were in the face of God's holiness. By the time they got to the gospels and Christ, the group was ready for the message and understood the need for a Savior! Just like Wright asserts, the story of Christ is incomplete and does not make sense without the foundation of the Old Testament. Seeing the last twenty minutes of a movie will always leave the viewer confused at what the big deal was.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Perhaps because of my background with New Tribes Mission I am biased, but I felt strongly that Wright achieved his goal in communicating the critical nature of Christ's connection throughout the whole Bible, not just the New Testament. He clearly articulated Jesus' role in completing a story that began in Genesis 1. While perhaps a challenging read for the casual reader, this book is a must for pastors, leaders, and serious students of the Word. Where so often believers may inadvertently see the Old Testament, by virtue of its title "Old", as no longer relevant, Wright does a powerful job proving otherwise. Perhaps Christianity would have done better to label the testaments "First" and "Second" instead of "Old" and "New"!