SOME THOUGHTS ON THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Categories: Observations, Theology

This is a longer post than usual, it is material that I am working up into a paper and I'd value your thoughts on it.

Sometimes, people seem to imply that the only purpose of the Old Testament is to provide the background needed to understand what happens in the New Testament. I think there is a lot more to the story than that...

There are ways in which the Old Testament communicates some issues more clearly than does the New Testament and it is also true that there are certain audiences for whom the Old Testament is far more accessible than the New.

The length of the Old Testament, which renders it such a challenge for translators, in itself communicates something. Through the Old Testament God spends such a long time teaching the nation of Israel that he is a Holy God, concerned for justice and truth in all aspects of life. The New Testament picks up on these themes, but to a much lesser extent and it always assumes background knowledge of the Old Testament.

Much of the teaching of the Old Testament comes through extended narrative which is capable of expressing a great depth of meaning. The story of Hosea, a man married to a serial adulterer is a very powerful explanation of the love of God for his unfaithful people, expressed in the most human of terms. It is hard to read Hosea and not to be moved deeply, it speaks in a way that even John's great phrase "God is love" does not.

Many of the communities who currently do not have access to a complete Bible relate more closely to the Old Testament than they do to the New.

"Cultural affinities with the biblical world lead African and Asian Christians to a deep affection for the Old Testament as *their* story, *their* book. In Africa particularly, Christians have long been excited by the obvious cultural parallels that exist between their own societies and those of the Hebrew Bible."

Examples of this affection and affinity with the Old Testament could easily be multiplied from the literature, but I will give an example from our own experience. When translating the book of Ruth, we were concerned about the Hebrew term *goel* rendered "kinsman redeemer" I the NIV. English translations struggle with expressing terms related to levirate marriage because the concept does not exist in our context. We assumed, wrongly, that it would be equally difficult to express the concept in Kouya. However, when we came to explain the issue to our Kouya colleagues, we discover that they use more or less the same system, and the story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz made perfect sense to them.

Western Christians, conditioned by their cultural milieu, tend to disregard some parts of Scripture. One example would be the genealogies of the Old Testament, the "begats" which are generally regarded as of little interest and only important to specialists in the field. However, in much of Africa and Asia, where special reverence is given to the ancestors and family history, the genealogies are

seen to have great importance and relevance. It is absolutely essential that the Bible should provide genealogies of the key figures, especially Jesus.

There is one group in particular for whom the Old Testament often has a special resonance; oral learners. For many Christians around the world, the way they engage with the Bible is not by reading it, but by listening to it as someone else reads out the text. It is well worth remembering that Scripture is addressed to those who have ears to hear!

The choice between reading and listening to a text is not simply a case of preference for one medium over another. Oral learners comprise an estimated two thirds of the world's population and they process information in a different way to literate learners. Oral learners tend to prefer engaging with information through stories and struggle to follow written modes of communication â€“ even when the written communication is delivered orally (like this lecture)while written learners tend to prefer material which is presented in an argued, propositional format. So, Christians in the West tend to prefer the tightly argued material in Paul's Epistles, whereas oral learners tend to prefer the Old Testament and Gospel narratives.