

Beginning at Moses

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A Guide to Finding Christ in the Old Testament

Michael P. V. Barrett



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To Sandra Ann—my wife
next to Christ, the best thing I've ever found

That is how I dedicated the first edition, and nothing has changed.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Beginning at Moses was my first book. I've written a few other books since then, and I've often wondered how many more I could list on my curriculum vitae if I had started sooner. But for various reasons, it was always my personal conviction that I had no business writing books until I had achieved some level of teaching maturity and experience. My self-imposed launch age was fifty. So as that milestone approached, along with over twenty years of classroom and ministry experience, I determined that I had earned a right to make some contribution to the world of books. The book came out a few months before I turned fifty, but it was close enough. The problem with my philosophy was that by the time I started to write, nobody knew who I was except those who sat in my classrooms to hear me teach or in pews to hear me preach! Maybe if I had a chance to do things differently I would, but I don't.

When the time had come to write, there was no question what my first book would be about. My principal field of study is the Old Testament, and my principal passion in teaching is to expound the message of the Old Testament, demonstrating its contemporary relevance even though it was written so long ago. The message of the Old Testament is always relevant because it is the everlasting gospel, the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Christ is the key that unlocks the meaning of the entire Bible; He is the central person and the unifying theme. Christ Himself made that clear in His postresurrection conversation with Cleopas and his companion on the way to Emmaus: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

It is my firm conviction that since the first announcement of the gospel in Eden immediately after sin entered the world, Christianity has always

been the one and only true religion. The only gospel—good news—that God has ever had for fallen humanity is His Son, who would reverse the curse of sin. Therefore, since Christianity was the religion of the Old Testament, it is not surprising that Christ is the heart and pulse of Old Testament revelation. Tragically, too many tend to read the Old Testament without using the Christ key and then wonder why they get nothing out of their reading. That’s not surprising since Paul explained that the only way to get something out of reading the Old Testament was to read with reference to Christ (see 2 Cor. 3:14). So much of my teaching and preaching addressed this tragedy; therefore, when I decided to write, writing about Christ in the Old Testament was the foremost topic in mind. I thought Christ’s exposition that began with Moses suggested a fitting title for what I wanted to do—hence, *Beginning at Moses*.

Although I would have enjoyed following Jesus step by step in His expositional trek through the Old Testament and writing a thorough commentary of every Christ-revealing text, the teacher in me wanted to give instruction to help others to see Christ in the Old Testament. So I chose to write a guide, giving directions as to where to find Him, rather than a full-fledged Christology.

Notwithstanding my entrance into the marketplace so late in life, the Lord blessed, and the book soon required a second printing. It has been most humbling to see how the Lord has used the work to benefit so many. It has been out of print for some time, although I see on Amazon you can purchase some used copies for as much as sixty dollars. That’s flattering! I see as well you can purchase an electronic copy on Kindle for ninety-nine cents. That almost hurts!

I express my thanks to Reformation Heritage Books for their willingness to publish this revised edition. Special thanks go to Annette Gysen. Her editorial skills are exceptional, and her graciousness when making corrections or comments always made clicking the “accept” icon easy to do. In this new edition, I have made some modifications, particularly regarding eschatology, and have added questions for thought at the end of each chapter. I want to thank and acknowledge Andrew Farr, my research assistant here at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, for formulating many of the questions. I have known Andrew since he was a babe in arms, and it has been a joy to see his surrender to kingdom work and to have had some part in his preparation for ministry.

Introduction

The tension between doctrine and experience is the stuff of Christian life. What we believe and know to be true doesn't match up sometimes with what is happening in our lives. In other words, objective truth seems to conflict with subjective experience. Although we affirm that God is good and great and that all things work together for good for those who love God, we quickly despair at the first hint of trouble. Why are these things happening? We boldly affirm our belief that God answers prayer, yet we wonder and doubt when heaven seems to be brass and we do not perceive any answer. We experience countless occasions when something happens that tries our faith and raises some doubt whether what we believe is really true. More often than not our experience becomes more credible than our doctrine; this creates the tension in our hearts. This tension extends even to the Bible, which is the source of everything we believe and the rule of everything we are to do. We believe that the Bible is God's word and that it is living—"powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword" (Heb. 4:12). But notwithstanding that confession of faith, Christians far too frequently read the Bible and get nothing from it. Apart from a few familiar stories or favorite verses, the majority of the Bible, even for believers, seems to be irrelevant. Few know anything of David's experience when he confessed God's word to be more desired than gold and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Ps. 19:10). It is my prayer that this work will find the key that unlocks the true meaning of all Scripture and creates true joy in the hearts of all who read God's Word, both the Old and the New Testaments.

The Problem

This disconnection from Scripture is nowhere more evident than in the Old Testament. For various reasons, the Old Testament is a closed book

for many Christians today. In theory (or better, according to doctrine) this ought not to be, but if we hope to solve the problem of the Old Testament's relevance, we first have to admit there is a problem. There is something about the Old Testament that corresponds to Peter's assessment of Paul's epistles: "in which are some things hard to be understood" (2 Peter 3:16). From Genesis to Malachi, the reader encounters hard sayings, obscure details, unfamiliar and enigmatic expressions, forgotten customs, family trees with unpronounceable names, and detailed laws that have no immediately discernible application or relevance to modern life. Much of the Old Testament seems to have no apparent value or purpose. Who has ever read Exodus 25–31 without wondering why Moses gave such extremely detailed instructions concerning the building of the tabernacle and the dress of the priests, only to repeat the same details in chapters 35–40, after the tabernacle was built and the priests clothed? Why should we bother slogging through all those details when we have neither tabernacle nor priesthood? That is a lot of hard reading without a lot of blessing. Who has ever read Numbers 7 with its twelfold repetition of the same list of gifts brought by the twelve princes of the tribes of Israel for the dedication of the altar without wondering why Moses did not simply say once that they all brought the same thing? Why should we bother wading through those detailed lists when we have no altar now and most of us have no idea where to get, among other things, a "silver bowl of seventy shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary" (v. 13 and eleven more times throughout the chapter)? That is also a lot of hard reading without a lot of blessing. It seems to have no value for Christian living.

Other passages seem to be outdated, both theologically and culturally. Leviticus is a good example. On the one hand, Hebrews makes it unmistakably clear that there is no place for animal sacrifices after the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it issues severe warnings to those who would return to the Old Testament ceremony. Yet the book of Leviticus goes on and on in its details of the proper methods of sacrificing animals. In light of the New Testament revelation, it would seem that Leviticus is something to be avoided rather than obeyed. To obey the strict regulations of the Levitical sacrifices would mark us religiously as a strange cult and culturally as an offense to animal rights advocates. In addition to the outmoded sacrifices, Leviticus is filled with detailed laws that belong to a culture long dead. Not wearing garments of mixed material (19:19) and not marring the corners of beards (19:27) hardly seem relevant to modern

culture, where most men are clean shaven and manufactured fabrics are seldom of a single material. In short, Leviticus, too, is a lot of hard reading without a lot of blessing. Why bother?

These examples illustrate the problem. Whereas in theory Christians affirm belief in the Old Testament, in practice their frustrations with the Old Testament drive them to more familiar and more obviously devotional texts. Familiar and devotional texts are good. But when believers ignore much of the Old Testament—the majority of the Bible—they miss the blessing of finding precious nuggets of truth that are just as vital for modern Christians as they were for Old Testament believers. Indeed, that God's word is compared to silver and hidden treasures suggests that the prize is not always lying on the surface. Part of the problem in most Bible study is that unless the message is on the surface, average readers move on in their reading, kicking up dust, until they find an obvious surface lesson. Shuffling along does not typically result in discovered treasures; sometimes we have to dig. Proverbs 2 says that if we will seek truth as silver and search for it as if for hidden treasure, we will not be disappointed, for the Lord promises to give wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Even the digging becomes profitable and enjoyable when we realize we are handling the very word of God—the word without which we cannot survive. From Genesis to Malachi to Revelation, the word of God reveals changeless and eternal truth. Let us keep our Bibles open and not give up until we discover the truth because we know that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. The Lord promises that when we seek Him we will find Him if we seek Him with all our heart (Jer. 29:13). That is the truth.

The Answer

Faith is always the answer to the tension between doctrine and experience. Second Timothy 3:16–17 is perhaps the most direct statement concerning the doctrine of Scripture: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” The Bible is unique: its every word was inspired, or literally “breathed out,” by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16). Although the mechanics of this divine, supernatural, miraculous work defy explanation, the result of the process is that we have the inspired, authoritative, infallible word of God. The implications of the doctrine of inspiration are far-reaching

and important, but the salient point for our discussion is that what God breathed out, He breathed out on purpose. The words that we have are the very words God wants us to have. The history that we have is the very history God wants us to have. The laws that we have are the very laws God wants us to have. The gospel that we have is the very gospel God wants us to have. Everything is exactly what the all-wise and all-good God wants us to have. He gave every word on purpose, and Paul tells us that His purpose was to perfect and furnish us unto all good works. It is the purpose of God's word to bring people to a right relationship with Him.

Here is where faith must operate to resolve the frequent tension. Faith is not a subjective exercise of positive thinking that tries to convince that something is true contrary to fact. It is just the opposite—faith is based on objective truth, and it has value only in proportion to the worth of the object of that faith. This is why faith must always supersede and subdue experience. Experience is entirely subjective and can never be the final and sole judge of anything. This certainly applies to our approach to Scripture. Doctrine says that all Scripture is inspired and profitable. Faith believes it to be true. If experience concludes it to be without purpose, irrelevant, outdated, or in some other way without profit, experience is wrong. Faith ought to stop us short every time we are tempted to skip through or over any part of God's Holy Word just because we are not immediately blessed. Before giving up on the passage, we should ask ourselves this question: Why, of all the things that God possibly could have said, did He say this? By faith, we know why He said it—"that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." It remains for us to learn, understand, and apply what He said. Scripture is the means by which God reveals, not conceals, the truth.

Yet even here we must be realistic. To assume that we will understand everything in Scripture with equal ease is to reduce the Bible to a document that is less than ordinary and to set ourselves up for more frustration when we do not immediately get the point. The statement of the divines in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) is a good and comforting reminder: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in

a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them” (1.7).

God has made enough of His word so crystal clear that only blind and blatant disbelief will not understand. He has made enough of His word so deep that even the most faithful must depend on His enlightenment rather than on their intellect. There is no book like the Bible—clear enough to speak to the layperson yet challenging enough to keep the scholar humble. Neither layperson nor scholar should ever tire of this special revelation. Both should endeavor to increase the sphere of knowledge necessary to understand more and more. And the beauty of the Bible is that there is always more to understand. There is always more blessing to enjoy. May God increase our faith in His profitable word and open our eyes to behold wondrous things out of the law (Ps. 119:18). Faith is the answer to keep us from abandoning the Old Testament. Who knows—we may actually find some profitable doctrine, reproof, or correction in Leviticus or Chronicles! Faith assures us that even in those obscure books, God spoke on purpose.

Presuppositions

When we approach Scripture through faith, we do so with a set of beliefs that we take for granted to be true. These presuppositions are essential and inevitable. It is absolutely impossible to come to the Bible with an open mind. Liberal scholars often claim they approach Scripture with an open mind in order to evaluate the word of God and judge its accuracy. In reality they come with the presupposition that human reason is superior to divine revelation. That is not an open mind; it is a closed heart that evidences a mind-set predisposed against God and truth. People cannot stand as the judge of Scripture; Scripture stands as the judge of people. As believers, we must come with an open and receptive heart to receive and believe what God says. Every time believers open the Bible they must have the conviction that whatever the Bible says is true. We cannot trust our reason to determine what is true or false, right or wrong. By faith we believe in the inspiration of the Bible, and therefore we affirm its authority, infallibility, sufficiency, and effectiveness from cover to cover.

By *authority*, we mean that it is the absolute standard of truth (matters of faith) and the absolute rule for living (matters of practice). The Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) summarizes well: “The holy scriptures of

the Old and New Testament are the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience” (Q. 3).

By *infallibility*, we mean that the Bible is free from error. Truth is absolute, and all truth has its ultimate source in God, who is Truth and the revealer of truth. Infallibility extends to every statement of Scripture, including matters of history and science as well as matters of theology. The Bible, therefore, is the standard by which all matters of theology, history, and science are to be judged.

By *sufficiency*, we mean that the Bible is all we need to direct us in how to know God and please Him. It is all we need to direct us safely and surely through this life and to the life to come. The psalmist declared that “the law of the LORD is perfect” (Ps. 19:7). The word *law* refers here to the whole body of God’s revealed instruction, the whole of special revelation. The word *perfect* refers especially to its completeness or wholeness. In simple terms, God’s word is complete. According to His infinite wisdom and good purpose, God has revealed all that we need for the welfare of our souls. Therefore, the psalmist concludes that this complete word converts the soul. There is no need for humanly defined philosophy, psychology, opinion, or experience to supplement the Bible. It may sound trite, but it is true: if God said it, that settles it.

By *effectiveness*, we mean that there is an inherent power in God’s word to accomplish what it says. The Lord Himself declared, “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). The word of God is the hammer that in judgment breaks rocks in pieces (Jer. 23:29); it is the means of grace whereby God communicates the message of the gospel that saves all who believe (Rom. 10:17).

The bottom line is that every time we open Scripture, we must do so with awe and reverence generated by the certain knowledge that the Bible is not an ordinary book but the very word of the eternal God, whose veracity is beyond question or doubt. The Bible is not what people define it to be; it is what God declares it to be. People can believe or deny that, but they cannot alter that. My premise that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative, infallible, sufficient, and effective word of God will be the foundation for the entire thesis and development of thought in this book. My premise is that all truth has its source in God and, consequently, that His truth

is universal and timeless. Although times change, truth is changeless. Although applications of truth can vary, truth is constant.

Procedures

Once we have established the proper presuppositions and mind-set about Scripture, we must develop proper procedures for interpreting the Bible. Interpretation is simply the process whereby we determine what something means, whether we read it or hear it. It is something that we do all the time; it is an indispensable part of communication. We all know how important it is to be understood when we speak to others. We all can tell stories, tragic or comical, of some misunderstanding of language. Husbands and wives sometimes even argue because one reads something into what the other said that was really not intended. This is an essential key in the interpretative process: we must be careful to figure out what the speaker or writer meant. When we start reading in meanings not intended, misunderstanding and possibly serious consequences can ensue. Those consequences will be more or less severe depending on the nature of the communication. It certainly makes sense that if we are seeking to interpret God's word, we should exercise every caution to figure out what God meant.

Truth is not what we define it to be; it is what God has revealed and declared it to be. One of the issues in modern discussions about biblical hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) is whether attention should be given to authorial intent or reader response. Focusing on authorial intent recognizes that there is an objective and understandable message conveyed that ought to be discoverable by the normal process of interpretation. It leads to objective truth. Focusing on reader response implies that what the author meant is irrelevant and indiscernible and that therefore what the reader sees becomes truth. It eliminates the possibility of absolute truth; truth is some floating abstraction that subjectively changes from reader to reader. The authority resides in the reader and not in the word. My premise is that what God means is infinitely more important than how I feel about what He said. Truth is whatever the Bible says, not whatever people think the Bible says. It may be trite, but it is true: God means what He says, and He says what He means. The purpose of His word is not to mislead but to lead people to truth. One of the objectives of this book is to help establish some guidelines for discovering what God has revealed.

Throughout the book we will be considering specific aspects of interpretation, but it is necessary first to suggest some basic principles of procedure that will govern all methods of Bible interpretation.

Begin every session of Bible study with prayer. As the psalmist prayed for God to open his eyes to behold the wondrous things of the law, so must we pray (Ps. 119:18). We must pray that the Holy Spirit will teach us truth. The Lord Jesus promised His disciples that the Spirit of truth would guide them into all truth (John 16:13). The specific implications of that promise relate to the inspiration of the New Testament, but it also has great significance for every believer who seeks to hear God in the inspired word. In 1 Corinthians 2:10 the apostle Paul refers to the great truths of the gospel as those things God has revealed to us by His Spirit. He then says concerning these truths that they are what the Holy Spirit teaches by “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (v. 13). This could be rendered literally “expounding spiritual [truths] to spiritual [men].” This statement highlights two essential points. First, it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to illumine and instruct believers in the things of God. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate and consummate teacher of every believer. Second, we must have regenerated hearts before we can understand anything God says: “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth [discerns] all things” (vv. 14–15). Understanding God’s word depends in great measure on knowing Him. It is the Spirit of God who regenerates sinners, turning them into spiritual men and thereby introducing them to the knowledge of God; it is the Spirit of God who leads saints into a more intimate knowledge of God through the Word. That is His job. As believers—whether preachers, seminary professors, or laypeople—we must learn more and more to depend on the Holy Spirit.

Spend time in the Bible. This may be a strange point to make in setting up the proper procedures for Bible study, but far too frequently Christians tend to substitute reading about the Bible for reading the Bible. While there is nothing wrong with reading commentaries or devotional books, there is simply no substitute for reading the Bible itself. Much of what the majority of Christians know about Scripture, God, and Christ is hearsay. The Bible seems strange to many people simply because they are strangers to it. In my years as a seminary professor, I have frequently taken a survey of my students who are prospective ministers. One of the questions is, How many

times have you read the Bible completely through? Taking into account that some have been saved longer than others, it nonetheless shocks me how few times on average these ministers-in-training have read the Bible from beginning to end. Some confess they have never read it completely, and usually it is the Old Testament that has suffered the neglect. If these are men who testify to God's call to be professional students and preachers of Scripture, how tragically low must be the average in the church-at-large. Needless to say, proper interpretation of the Bible depends on reading the Bible. Familiarity with the source always aids in accurate interpretation. My wife and I can understand each other's idiosyncrasies and subtleties of speech because we have listened to each other for years. Because we are together so much, we almost intuitively know what the other means. So it ought to be with God's Word. The more we read, the less strange the language is. The more we read, the more we understand. Knowledge of Bible content is an essential tool in interpretation. Read your Bible.

Pay attention to the context. Taking something out of context is one of the most common errors of interpretation. We all know what it's like to come into the middle of a conversation and jump to the wrong conclusion because we have heard only part of what was said. It is unfair to any writer or speaker to extract statements from here and there and thereby totally misrepresent the intended meaning. If fairness demands caution and care in everyday communication, how much more vital it is to interpret Scripture in its context. Sometimes the quest for "proof texts" or the attraction to isolated favorite verses has resulted in interpretations and applications that are far distant from what the original author intended. Giving attention to the context is only being fair to Scripture. If our desire is to discover what God means and not just to prove our point with "biblical" evidence, then we will make sure to keep verses in context. To ignore the context is to jeopardize the authority of the message, or at least make it suspicious.

By context I simply mean the location or environment in which the text occurs. It certainly includes the immediately surrounding verses, but it extends also to the larger context of the entire book, and then ultimately to the whole context of divine revelation. It is like looking at a target, with the bull's-eye in the center and the various rings extending from the center. The bull's-eye is contained within the entire ring structure and has no significance as a bull's-eye independent from the other rings. Obviously, to hit the bull's-eye you must stay within all the rings. The point is that there is

a unity of meaning in all of Scripture because all of Scripture, whether Old or New Testament and regardless of human author, has a single author, the Lord God Himself. God is invariably consistent and so never contradicts Himself. This consideration of the larger context is often called the analogy of Scripture, which simply means that Scripture must be interpreted in the light of Scripture. First Corinthians 14:32 may hint at this principle: “And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.” The Bible is its own best commentary. The Westminster Confession summarizes well: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly” (1.9). Paying attention to context involves reading and knowing the content of the Bible. Read your Bible.

Meditate on what you read. The blessed man is he whose “delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Ps. 1:2). This word *meditate* has the idea of being consumed or preoccupied with something. The blessed man just cannot get the law out of his mind. This clearly defines the difference between what the Bible means by meditating and what the typical notion of the world is. Whereas worldly meditation seeks to empty the mind of everything, biblical meditation seeks to fill the mind with the word of God. According to that biblical definition, there is precious little meditation in the average Christian’s life. Far too frequently Christians read the Bible without thinking. The eyes fall mechanically over the ink for a designated number of pages without the mind comprehending a thing. Devotions sadly consist of little more than a few verses before leaving home at the beginning of a busy day or a few verses before going to bed at the end of a busy day. There is just so much to do, and we feel guilty if we are not busy doing. The amount of blessing we receive from the Bible and the degree to which we understand the Bible will be in proportion to how much time we meditate on what we have read. Very simply, meditating is thinking, and here is the proverbial rub: thinking takes time; thinking is work. But thinking time is not wasted time. Many Christians get nothing from the Bible not because they are ignorant but because they are thoughtless. At the very least, this exhibits irreverence toward God’s Holy Word. Although our tendency when we read Scripture is to skip over the parts we don’t understand immediately, it is important just to pause and think and ask the Teacher, the Holy Spirit, to explain.