

By Fr. Dennis Gallagher, A.A., the provincial superior of the North American Province of the Augustinians of the Assumption

The article was first reported by Catholic Digest Magazine.

Q: Does the New Testament “cancel out” – or outweigh – the Old Testament? Is one of

these parts of the Bible more important than the other? – Newbie Bible student

A: Dear Newbie Bible student:

Thanks for your question. I suppose one way of approaching an answer to it is to note the use of the Bible in the Church's liturgy. On Sundays during the liturgical year, except for the Easter season, the first reading at Mass is always taken from the Old Testament. Included among those readings are passages from many different books: the prophets, the book of the Law (the Torah), the historical books, the wisdom literature. If the New Testament simply cancelled out the Old, to use your term, the importance signaled by their place in the Church's liturgy would be difficult to understand. The Church clearly teaches that God continues to speak to us through the words of the Old Testament.

But how does he speak to us? The liturgy again provides some help. The Old Testament passage chosen for a particular Sunday always has some relation to the Gospel reading of the day. Often enough, the relationship is one of fulfillment: that something foreshadowed in God's dealings with the people of Israel is brought to completion in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. Sometimes we are presented in the Old Testament passage a "type" of something that is fulfilled in the New Covenant. Take, for example, the story of Joseph's brothers in the Book of Genesis selling him into slavery in Egypt, which is a type of Judas' betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Or the later episode in Genesis, when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, to be fulfilled beyond all measure by God's sacrificing his only Son, Jesus.

We begin to see, then, that the Bible tells one story that has a beginning, a long development and a dramatic conclusion. Since it is one story, there is an organic relationship between the parts. To cancel out the earlier part of the story is something like deciding to read a great novel by starting at page 300. Not only do you deprive yourself of everything that preceded, you can't begin to understand the force of the novel's conclusion without knowing all that went before. Much the same is true in listening to music. You might choose to skip over the first movements of a symphony to get to the glories of the final movement. That will not be without its pleasure, but small by comparison to listening to the whole symphony in its interrelated parts.

The Bible tells the one story of God and His relationship to his people – the story of Creation and fall, the call of Abraham, the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, the journey through the desert and the making of the covenant on Sinai, the conquest of the promised land; the political necessities – judges, then kings; the building of the Temple; the long history

of unfaithfulness to the covenant; exile in Babylon; the longing for a King who would gather all the tribes together; the fulfillment of those longings in the life, death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus, the source of our salvation.

It begins, then, with the Old Testament's account of God's creating the world out of love, the decision by human beings to go their own way apart from God, and God's relentless efforts to restore this broken relationship: first, by forming a people to exist as a sign of God's presence in the world, and then, in the face of the repeated disloyalty of his people, sending his Son to bring healing to the wound of sin and death. It is the long story of God's fidelity in response to the fickleness, ingratitude and treachery of the human heart.

To return to your question, then. It is incorrect to say that the New Testament cancels out the Old, because the New Covenant stands as a response to and a fulfillment of the covenant that God makes with the people of Israel. It does not stand on its own apart from that larger history. Is the New Testament more important than the Old? If one had to choose, of course nothing is more important than the salvation from sin and death won for us by Jesus Christ. But it is not a matter of choosing one over the other, since salvation itself cannot be understood apart from God's refusal to be deterred by the recalcitrance of the human heart. In this way, the Old and the New Testaments form one, integrated, glorious story of God's love for us.

By way of further illustrating the connection between the two testaments, allow me to end these reflections with reference to the theme of Exodus. Properly speaking, the Exodus refers to Moses' leading the chosen people out of slavery in Egypt, climaxed by the encounter with the superior forces of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. This exodus from slavery to freedom is the defining moment in the life of God's people in the Old Testament. It is remembered still, faithfully and with exactness, in the annual Passover meal of the Jewish people.

The defining moment in the New Testament, Jesus' passage from death to life, is also an exodus from slavery to freedom. This is an exodus whose meaning represents a deepening and, one could say, a redefinition of the human problem. This time, the freedom in question is not a freedom from forces that oppress from without, but rather from within, the enslavement of sin that distorts our relationships with ourselves, our neighbor, and God. The victory over the power of sin and the restoration of these relationships is the salvation won for us through the power of God's love. Like our Jewish friends, we faithfully remember these saving events in our own Passover meal, the celebration of the Eucharist.

This is but one example of the rich interrelationship and interdependence that exist between the Old and the New Testaments. My prayers are with you as you continue the study of God's Word. May it be "a lamp for your feet and a light for your path." (See Psalm 119:105.)