

The Usefulness and Limits of the Old Testament



"One might wonder why the Old Testament, with such problems, occupies the majority of the Bible. In my view, there are only two legitimate reasons for its existence. First, it helps to use religion as a tool of rule by striking an expedient compromise with the New Testament. Second, it is needed to justify the collection of the tithe. Apart from these two, I can find no other reason." 1)

Convenience for Governance

"Theodosius I (AD 347–395; r. 379–395) prohibited pagan worship and, in 381, designated Trinitarian Christianity as the Roman Empire's sole official religion. From the beginning, Christianity was a religion of power." 2)

"Unfortunately, the early Christians incorporated into their canon the Jewish documents, filled with barbarism, which reflect ideas from a lower stage of civilization. It is by no means easy to relate how merciless, violent, and intolerant teachings and examples—such as devout readers who blindly believe in the Old Testament revelations can hardly help approving—have wrought so much mischief

and corrupted human morals. The Old Testament was an arsenal for theories of persecution." 3)

Rulers have long used religion to protect or enlarge their own interests. Through clerical authority, they made the populace believe that a ruler's failures stemmed from the people's lack of faith, appeased unrest by sacrificing some as scapegoats in ritual acts, and enjoyed impunity. In return, they granted various financial benefits to clergy who sought luxury by touting outrageous doctrines, while turning a blind eye to the exploitation of believers.

In March AD 415, to prevent the exposure of errors in the Christian doctrine they had adopted, they branded Greek philosophers as "pagans" and committed the atrocity of burning the Library of Alexandria, the treasure-house of ancient civilization. This foreshadowed the medieval dark age.



Those in power and those with wealth can deploy Old Testament content to suit circumstances. Kings or clergy shift blame for their misrule onto the people: God has cursed them, they say, because the people do not believe in Yahweh, follow other gods, or are insufficiently faithful. For monarchs and rulers, the Old Testament

is a gift tailor-made to secure kingship. Ecclesiastes 10:20 says, "Do not curse the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich even in your bedroom; a bird of the air will carry your voice, and a winged creature will tell the matter," warning against criticizing the powerful. Psalm 28:8 declares, "Yahweh is the strength of [the people] and the saving fortress of his anointed," elevating the king's status to one who is saved by drawing on the people's strength—through their sacrifice and exploitation.

Roman emperors could also appeal to Isaiah—often cited in connection with Jesus' advent, besides "Immanuel"—to demand that they be called gods. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder [i.e., he will bear and exercise rule]; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end" (Isa 9:6–7). Claiming, "Yahweh has said this," a Roman emperor could insist that the people address him not only as king but as a god.

Tithes

The first person to pay the tax called the tithe was Abraham. Genesis 14:20 states, "And [Abram—Abraham's name before it was changed] gave him a tenth of everything," indicating that, as a condition for settling in Canaan, Abram paid a tithe from the spoils to Melchizedek, king of Salem—the origin of the tithe as a tax.

In Protestantism, because it is called a "tithe," churches demand that believers pay 10% of their income. Yet according to Numbers 18:21–29, Moses collected a tithe from Israel's eleven tribes (excluding the Levites), set aside 10% of that tithe as

Yahweh's portion, and directed that this be given to the Levites. In other words, the tithe was a state tax to run the nation; after collecting it, 10% of that revenue was allocated as expenses for the Levites who performed Jewish religious rites.

Nehemiah shows that this standard continued to be observed down to the 400s BCE and beyond. If this principle is applied as is, Protestant churches should not demand "10% of a believer's wages or income" for the church; at most, they could speak of **a tenth of the taxes already paid to the state**—the "tithe of the tithe." "A priest descended from Aaron shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes, and the Levites shall bring a tenth of the tithes up to the chambers of the storehouse of the house of our God" (Neh 10:38).

Just as value-added tax (VAT) is a kind of tax—often 10% of sales—so the tithe should be understood as a tax by which the state collected 10% of the by-products from those engaged in production. The tithe is called "ten percent" because that was the rate levied; if the state had taken 20%, the "tithe" would have been 20%, and if it had taken 5%, the "tithe" would have been 5%. "Tithe" is simply the **name of a tax**, just as "VAT" or "income tax" are names independent of the particular rate.

Where the amount granted to the Levites is specified, it is set at a **tenth of the tithe**. The explicit word "tax" appears in the Old Testament only in 2 Kings 23:35 and Daniel 11:20. In 2 Kings it denotes tribute paid to the king of Egypt. In Daniel, the "tax collector" is mentioned because that book was written under Roman hegemony; there, "tax" refers not to Israel's internal tithe but to the tribute the Herodian feudal kingdom paid to Rome.

In the Gospels, "tithe" appears three times—Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42, and Luke

18:12. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and garden herbs, and yet you have neglected the weightier matters of the Law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23). Jesus exposes the error of those who faithfully pay tithes within the Herodian system while ignoring what is foundational. If one insists on offerings given to a religious body, under the Old Testament’s own principle this would refer to **a tenth of the tithe (the tax)**—not 10% of believers’ gross income.

Religions that trust in the Old Testament—or that are built upon it—share a pattern: they refuse fellowship with those who do not believe in their god, fight to the end, and seek to force submission. In reality, they bear responsibility for many wars that have scarred the earth. Religion—called to pursue human peace through love and service—has instead fomented division and conflict, even inciting war. Corrupted in this way, such religions have unsettled the world and still strain to expand their ranks. They skew opportunities—supposed to be equally granted to all—in favor of established interests and then rationalize the result. So long as these scriptures remain, humanity can only drift toward an unfortunate future.

Finally, as seen above, we should all soberly reflect on whether it is right to urge our precious children and others to read and believe the Old Testament—this corpus of Jewish myths rife with countless errors; the fickle and distorted ordinances of Yahweh; and hateful, violent, anti-human, and immoral content—by calling it a sacred book.

Sources

1. **Spirit and Spirit** (영과 영), Byung Youn Kim, Dures Management Research Institute Co., Ltd., 2010, p. 364.

2. **The Great Questions of God** (신의 위대한 질문), Cheol-Hyun Bae, 21st Century Books, 2015, p. 21.
3. **Everyday Violence, Violent Religion** (일상적 폭력 폭력적 종교), Jong-Lok Lee, Koomran Publishing, 2017, p. 379; John Bagnell Bury, *A History of Freedom of Thought*, trans. Hong-Gyu Park, **A History of Freedom of Thought** (Seoul: Bao Publishing), 2006, p. 66.