

The Old and the New

*Christ as the Center
of Both Testaments*

Laurent Clémenceau

Translated by Damon DiMauro

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The Old and the New: Christ as the Center of Both Testaments

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Questions	5
1. Creation and New Creation	7
2. Adam and New Adam	15
3. A Family Story	23
4. Old and New Covenant	31
5. One People: Israel and New Israel	41
6. Land, Homeland, and New Earth	49
7. Exodus and New Exodus	57
8. Prophets and <i>the</i> Prophet	65
9. Sacrifices and <i>the</i> Sacrifice	71
10. Priests and <i>the</i> Priest	79
11. Temple and <i>the</i> Temple	87
12. David and New David	93
13. Wisdom and <i>the</i> Wise One	101
14. The Servant of the Lord	109
15. The Son of Man	117
16. When All the Threads Come Together: A Portrait of Jesus	125

INTRODUCTION

In the course of my Christian journey, it took me a long time to become cognizant of the links that exist between the Old Testament and the New and to assess their implications. I then observed that many Christians seem to have similar difficulties, and that they appear at a loss before a greater part of the assertions of the New Testament regarding the Old and the storyline that unites the two.

This observation appears, however, all the more important in that the New Testament itself insists on these links. It articulates its message in close relationship with the Old Testament, consistently presenting Jesus, his person, and his work, with the support of themes taken from the Old Testament. The purpose here is to attempt to give an account for this, with the intention of contributing to a better understanding of the Bible as a whole, its unity, its lines of continuity, and the veritable backbone that structures it—in the final analysis, to help to make better known the One who is at the heart of the Christian faith.

From chapter to chapter, I have sought to explore each of these foundational themes in as simple a manner as possible, through a general overview rather than an in-depth study, and with a view to providing the reader with practical applications. The same basic structure is found in most of the chapters: highlighting an important theme, commentary on one or more passages from the Old Testament and then from the New Testament, where the theme is developed, followed by current considerations. The intention here is not to be exhaustive with respect to the treatment of the theme in question: the approach is meant to be introductory, retaining only those aspects of the biblical passages that can illustrate it.

The final chapter seeks to synthesize the entire work. Due note is taken therein of a difficulty common to many readers of the Bible:

namely, the feeling that a large part of the material does not readily lend itself to practical application. As a result, while preparing these chapters, which were originally sermons, I myself was tempted not to see the investigation to the end. It was the conviction that there was something vital in striving to capture the biblical message as it presents itself, even if it is not always comfortable and easy, that allowed me to stay the course. The Bible was not designed to be a feel-good book; nor is it a recipe book, always immediately accessible and “applicable” to our daily lives. It is the word of God, and God speaks to us there in a manner that disentangles us from our current concerns, redirecting us to a reality infinitely richer than the one to which we would spontaneously be drawn.

Most of these chapters were prepared without recourse to technical aids: that is, the consultation of Bible commentaries or specialized theological works. Rather, it was more a matter of gleaning, in part intuitively, some of the fruit of regular meditation on Scripture. One book has served, however, as a dialogue partner on several occasions to enrich my reflection: *La Doctrine du Christ* (*The Doctrine of Christ*) by Henri Blocher, a course published in 1986 in two parts by the Faculté Libre de Théologie Évangélique in Vaux-sur-Seine, France. Since then, the work has been reissued and updated in a single-volume edition (coll. Didaskalia, Édifac, 2002, reedited 2014). It is not always easy to consult for someone who is still unfamiliar with the Bible and theology, but it remains an important reference work. For those who would like to go further in their study, the following books are available for their perusal:

- T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001);
- The various works of Graeme Goldsworthy, such as *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament*, Biblical Classics Library (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994); or, for preachers, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity

Press, 2000). I recommend reading these, even if I depart from some of Goldsworthy's positions: on a general level, I am indeed persuaded that the biblical narrative is richer than the axis around which Goldsworthy believes it turns (namely, the theme of "the Kingdom of God");

- Finally, an even simpler and more concise work, influenced by Goldsworthy's approach: Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

At the same time, I remain convinced that it is, above all, the continuous application and prayerful attention paid to the biblical text that allows readers to discover truths for themselves and to anchor them deeply within themselves. Beyond and through these reflections, my intention is to point to the Bible and to the One whom it presents and invites us to know, to serve him ever more faithfully.

I wish to thank Élisabeth Martinez and the Ollé family from Toulouse, who were especially supportive during the early stages of my Christian walk. As I reread these pages, I take stock of how far I have come since then and how much they have contributed to my growth. Their support and friendship have been and remain dear to me. My thanks go to my daughter Lucie for the drawings in my book, and for her concern to give it her best effort. I rejoice to think her collaboration brightens and illustrates the content of this book, and that it might aid in understanding it. Thanks as well go to Monique Peyrard for her proofreading and to the entire team at Excelsis for the rigor and care expended on formatting the book. In so doing, they encourage me to pay more attention to detail and to write with my potential readers more in mind. It has been challenging for me.

QUESTIONS

If you were asked to present

- the essential features of the story narrated by the Bible,
- the main arc of the story and its major themes,

how would you respond?

If you were asked to detail

- how the Old and New Testaments relate to each other,
- what connections link them together,

how would you respond?

If you were asked to explain

- who Jesus is,
- what he accomplished,
- and especially how the Bible presents him and what he accomplished,

how would you respond?

If you were asked to cite the most commonly held views of Jesus

- in the world today
- and in Christian communities,

how would you respond?

Lastly, how would you respond if you were asked to compare these commonly held views and the way in which the Bible seeks to present Jesus?

1

CREATION AND NEW CREATION

“In the beginning,” says the Bible, “God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). We also learn that the earth was unformed and barren, that darkness draped the deep, and that the Spirit of God fluttered over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. (Gen. 1:3)

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. (Gen. 1:31)

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. (Gen. 2:8–10)

“In the beginning,” according to Babylonian mythology, “when on high the heaven had not been named, / Firm ground below had not been called by name, / Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter, / [And] Tiamat, she who bore them all.” In other words, two gods were at the origin of all that exists, and before all the other gods, as we then read: “When no gods whatever had been brought into being / Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined / Then it was that the gods were formed within them.”¹

Difficulty arises when these child gods begin making a huge racket (all those who have had or who currently have young children

1. Incipit from the *Enuma Elish*, compiled circa 1200 BC, and based on various Mesopotamian traditions dating back several centuries before. Translated by E. A. Speiser and quoted here from Philip Riley, ed., *The Global Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 4.

around will readily identify!). These diminutive beings cry out at night or quarrel with one another, so Tiamat cannot seem to get any rest. She asks her husband to step in, but one of the sons, Ea, kills his father. The widow Tiamat then gathers those gods who are her followers. She confronts her opponents led by one of Ea's sons, Mardouk. Mardouk combats Tiamat and takes her captive. He tramples on her and crushes her skull. He slits her veins. He examines his grandmother's corpse, dividing it in two, one part to form the sky, in the contours of a ceiling, another part to mold the earth. Hence the creation of the universe.

"In the beginning," says Hesiod, Greek poet of the eighth century BC, there was Chaos, Gaia (Mother Earth), and then Tartarus (Hades), and then Eros (Desire). Then appear Erebus (Darkness) and Nyx (Night).

The next generation will be born from the sexual relations among the gods: Ether (Brightness), Hemera (Day), and Ouranos (Sky) appear. Ouranos comes to unite with Gaia and gives birth to several sets of offspring: Ocean, Cronus, and then the Titans, having a hundred arms and fifty heads.

But Gaia apparently tires of being regularly sexually solicited by Ouranos, unless it is the contempt their children inspire in their father. She forges a sickle (or a scythe) and calls her children to avenge her. It is Cronus, son of Ouranos, who seizes the sickle. The story then takes a rather "gory" turn. At the very moment when Ouranos returns to couple with Gaia, "from his ambush [Cronus] stretched forth his left hand and in his right took the great long sickle with jagged teeth, and swiftly lopped off his own father's members and cast them away to fall behind him. And not vainly did they fall from his hand; for all the bloody drops that gushed forth Earth received, and as the seasons moved round, she bare the strong Erinyes and the great Giants with gleaming armor, holding long spears in their hands."² In the aftermath, other strange beings, even more monstrous, will then appear.

2. Hesiod, "Theogony," in *Homeric Hymns, Epic Cycle, Homeric*, trans. Evelyn-White, H. G. Loeb Classical Library, vol. 57 (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 176.

“In the beginning,” we are told today, for example,³ fifteen billion years ago, there was the Big Bang. One hundredth of a second later, basic particles appeared: protons, neutrons, and electrons. Then the deuterium nuclei (i.e., the assembling of a proton, a neutron, and an electron). Three hundred thousand years later, there appeared the slightest atoms, hydrogen and helium, which after a million years formed cold clouds. From there, one hundred million years after the Big Bang, these became the first galaxies. More than ten billion years after the Big Bang, there occurred the birth of planet Earth (in other words, 4.6 billion years ago).

The Earth was originally a mass of molten lava, which cooled and solidified. Oceans formed, bacteria appeared; then increasingly complex organisms, plants, insects, amphibians, and reptiles. Three hundred million years ago, dinosaurs appeared. Humankind’s earliest ancestors appeared four million years ago. Seven hundred and fifty thousand years ago, they mastered fire. The human being of today, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, appeared two hundred thousand years ago.

Now, according to a method commonly presented (which, by the way, is hardly unanimous), the theory goes that the fittest species survived, and the others disappeared through chance and necessity. This is the law of the jungle. It also echoes the impression that still haunts us today—an impression of chaos, of struggle, for so many difficulties overwhelm the day-in and day-out existence of many of us. The impression of having to deal with an almost impersonal and painful world, of having to struggle to maintain the minimum necessary to live, or to gain a share of the market, to become or remain competitive. On an individual level, one has to fight for a job, fight for the last carton of milk left on the supermarket shelves, fight for a place on the bus or a parking space. “It’s either you or me—and if push comes to shove, it might as well be me!”

“In the beginning . . .” So many different, even conflicting or opposing narratives. Mythical narratives, faith-driven narratives, “science” narratives.

3. The following account is intended to be delineative and may not be entirely consistent with the soundest scientific hypotheses. It has been borrowed from a website chosen “at random”!

In Mesopotamia and in Greece, the roots of our civilization, we are aghast to observe that violence is part and parcel of foundational texts. At the creation of the world, there was violence. Violence, evil, and suffering comprise an integral part of reality. They stalk us, and they even lurk among the gods themselves. The gods seduce one another, become irritated, get annoyed, grow angry, declare war against one another, strike one another, and slay one another. Blood is spilled, and life follows its natural course against this backdrop.

According to the commonly held scientific view, evil also belongs to the basic structure of things. This is natural selection. Blood flows. Eat or be eaten; insofar as possible, live and let die. “The mother of fish . . . her little ones like her, she is very nice. As for me, I love her with a touch of lemon” (to quote the children’s song “La Maman des Poisons”/“The Mother of the Fish” by Bobby Lapointe). Too bad for her, but all the better for me!

In one case or the other, evil and violence exist quite simply. They are rooted; they make up reality as much as bricks make up a wall, just as much as DNA shapes and defines us. It is not something we can deny or overlook. “That’s the way life goes.” It seems impossible to escape, to become disentangled. The world emerged out of a great explosion, out of chaos, and it evolves in chaos, a bit like the striking of a pinball, hurled to the left, hurled to the right, slung back again, and knocked around at the whim of the bumpers.

In Europe in 1755, this was the fate of Lisbon, then one of the wealthiest cities in the world. Suddenly, there was a ten-minute earthquake, the sky became black with dust, the city burst out in flames, and thousands of residents fled to the port to find refuge. There they were met by a massive tsunami. Belief in God took a major hit that day, and the image of a world in which we are tossed about like marbles without rhyme or reason gained ground.

To be sure, any event of this sort rattles faith. Did God want to punish the inhabitants of the city? If so, how do we make sense of the fact that most of the churches were destroyed, while what might be called “the red-light districts” were left virtually untouched? The people of Lisbon, a pinball?

And more recently, there were the traumatic events of Auschwitz, 9/11, and other upheavals and genocides. Times when blood was apparently shed for no good reason. If such is the case, how and in what can we find hope? How can we tell ourselves that it *should not* be the case?

“In the beginning,” says the Bible, “God created the heavens and the earth.” God separated day from night, without violence, without pressure applied, without meeting resistance. All he had to do was speak. All it took from him was one word. There was no contest, no winner, no loser.

And at the end of the beginning, we read that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day” (Gen. 1:31). There was no victor, no one was vanquished, no victim, no one was violent. Creation was beautiful and good, and God was like a painter who takes a step back to admire his canvas. The biblical narrative is unique in the history annals of religion in offering such a pleasant and peaceful perspective. There is a couple, there is a garden, there are trees, a particular tree called the tree of life, there are streams that irrigate the garden, there is a flourishing, and an abundance of life.

Significantly, those streams and that tree, are found again at the end of the Bible, in the midst of the new city that will come down from heaven:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal. . . . On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city.
(Rev. 22:1–3)

And as the previous chapter declares,

“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Rev. 21:3–4)

GENESIS	REVELATION
creation	new creation
heavens	new heavens
earth	new earth

At the end of the Bible, we rediscover the beginning of the Bible—we see again the images of creation. Here, we find creatures that coexist peacefully with God, a river, the tree of life, a bounteous tree whose fruit is edible and nourishing. We learn of the absence of death, of mourning, of suffering—which the Bible reports were unleashed upon the world in the beginning. The end brings us back to the beginning. The end is depicted with the words and images of the beginning. It is creation, but creation renewed. The end makes us privy to a new beginning. And it speaks to us of the disappearance of evil; it speaks to us of peace and hope.

And then we read, “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (Rev. 21:5). Renewal. New creation.

Is this a storybook image?⁴

Between the creation and the new creation, there is another story that plunges us deep into the heart of our own story with all its turmoil and struggles, complexity, beauty and suffering. A story written in the first century AD. “In the beginning,” says the first chapter of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . .

He came to that which was his own [literally, according to verse 14, he did tabernacle among us—an image that is reprised in Revelation], but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to

4. The author uses here the expression *image d'Épinal*. Épinal prints were sold in France in the nineteenth century and treated popular subjects rendered in bright sharp colors. The proverbial expression means something that is an emphatically traditionalist and naive depiction, showing only its good aspects.—Trans.

those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. (John 1:1, 11–13)

Listen here, John says to us, to the story I am going to tell you. It does not begin with “Once upon a time” but with “In the beginning.” In other words, John makes it clear that he wants to relate to us a creation story. A story that can only be told in relation to the beginning because it is indeed the beginning—the backdrop to this story—that gives it meaning. It is the story of a new creation. It is the story of Jesus Christ, the Word. It is the story of a new beginning. The story of Jesus is the story of the beginning.

GENESIS	GOSPEL †	REVELATION
creation	new creation begins	new creation

As for those who believe in him, theirs is not a natural birth. Theirs is the story of a veritable new birth. “If anyone is in Christ,” as one of the first Christian writers says, “the new creation has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

At the heart then of our human story—in which human beings and the elements seem to collide like pinballs, in which death pervades and will one day strike us down, in which blood continues to be shed—is also the story of the man who will let himself be struck down, who will let death strike him and shed his blood.

This is clearly what the end of the Bible refers to when it speaks about the throne of God and the Lamb—the word *Lamb* alluding to his sacrifice. But this sacrifice did not occur by chance or by accident: it took place intentionally, so that the wound that disfigured God’s good creation might be healed. With the advent of Jesus, in fact, the new creation began. And this is the story that allows us today to hope that at the last day there will be no more mourning, no more tears, no more suffering. “For the old order of things has passed away.”

In the midst of the chaos, of the whirlwind of our collective story, from the Lisbon earthquake to Auschwitz, down to the deepest

and most scarring traumas of our individual lives, when we despair of being able to hope again, let us hear him who is the Word, the one who was there in the beginning, the one who has *already* inaugurated a new beginning. And let us begin, let us begin again to hope, cleaving to him, no matter what happens and no matter what the cost.

If anyone is in Jesus Christ, the new creation has come.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12 ESV)