

# Need help understanding the Old Testament? Ask an African Christian

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## Need help understanding the Old Testament? Ask an African Christian

**By Hannah Elliott**

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SAN DIEGO (ABP)—African Christians tend to understand and appreciate the Old Testament far better than their Western counterparts, author Philip Jenkins told a group of evangelical scholars.

Jenkins, a professor of religious studies and history at Pennsylvania State University, spoke in San Diego to fellow members of the Evangelical Theological Society. His speech was one of several addresses and papers presented during the body's 59th annual meeting.

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Many ideas about Christianity that are most difficult to convey to a contemporary Western audience make intuitive sense to many indigenous African audiences, as well as some Asian audiences, Jenkins asserted.

Cultures that espouse tribal identities and are intimately acquainted with animal sacrifice, dietary restrictions, polygamy, sacred rocks and the like are well-equipped to read and identify with the Hebrew Bible's stories, Jenkins said.

"Teaching people (in the developing world) to obey the Bible if it means the Old Testament is not difficult," he said. "In fact, for many of the new Christians in the world today the big problem is ... telling people that the old law must be made subordinate, must be treated as inferior, to the new law."

In Africa, Jenkins continued, Western missionaries often must convince people the Old Testament is not the only or primary revelation of God's work. If Martin Luther hated it, he joked, it goes down great in Africa.

In light of that cultural context, Jenkins said, the fundamental task of Christian believers should be to determine how much of the old religion has to be done away with in order to bring in the faith of Christ and to teach hearers to obey the things Jesus commanded.

On the up side, Jenkins said, African and Asian tribes easily recognize and understand aspects of the traditional religion of the Old Testament as shaping what they should practice in light of the New Testament. And they often understand those aspects better than Christians in the Western world.

The idea of atonement, for instance, is difficult to describe to someone who does not come from a culture that embraces animal sacrifice. But it is easy to talk of the sacrifice and atonement of Jesus with someone who understands sacrificial rituals as "a continuing reality," he said.

Most evangelicals never have seen an animal sacrifice or even a harvest, Jenkins said. “Now imagine that ideas like this are part of the fabric of your mind!”

Another aspect of the New Testament that connects easily with many indigenous African and Asian cultures, he added, involves Jesus’ subversion of his society’s class markers. Just as in Jesus’ culture, one of the clearest markers of class is what—and with whom—wealthy or powerful people are allowed to eat.

Jesus’ inclination to share meals with low-caste people like prostitutes, or his tendency to touch or spend time with people that his society considered unclean, make him an even more striking figure in African and Asian cultures than in Western ones, Jenkins said.

“Look at so many of the passages that we are used to in the West and that we don’t even read any more and which are the most explosive,” Jenkins said.

“Look at the passages which carry the most weight for women’s groups reading the Bible in the global South. Think of the story of the woman with the issue of blood. Now imagine reading that story in a society that believes in blood contamination (and) that believes in blood impurity.”

After receiving the faith of Jesus, churches should “cauterize the culture” that has grown out of Christianity over the past two millennia and leave the core message, Jenkins concluded. But that is something, he said, the new Christian communities must do for themselves.

“It is not for outsiders, for Westerners, to tell rising African and Asian churches what to do in this regard,” Jenkins said. “The best example of teaching to obey is by teaching to read—teaching to think and absorb and make relevant.”

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