KNOWING JESUS
through the
OLD TESTAMENT
SECOND EDITION

CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT
To the memory of Jim Punton
# Contents

Preface to the Second Edition .......................... 9
Preface to the First Edition ....................... 11

1 Jesus and the Old Testament Story .............. 15

2 Jesus and the Old Testament Promise .......... 63

3 Jesus and His Old Testament Identity .......... 109

4 Jesus and His Old Testament Mission .......... 142

5 Jesus and His Old Testament Values ........... 184

6 Jesus and His Old Testament God ............... 252

Bibliography ........................................... 281

Scripture Index ....................................... 286

About the Author ..................................... 289

More Titles from InterVarsity Press ............... 290
Preface to the Second Edition

The convictions on which the book was first based, as expressed in the preface to the first edition, are as firm in my mind as they ever were. And they have been strengthened through ongoing teaching on the subject. Wherever I teach on this topic, there is usually a moment of eye-opening fresh insight on Jesus when he is presented in the light of how he saw himself in relation to the Old Testament. Somehow, and not surprisingly, the whole Bible comes to make much more sense when Jesus Christ, as the Bible’s center of unity, is brought into focus in a way that affirms rather than overlooks all that went before him.

This edition of the book has an additional sixth chapter. When I wrote the original book with its five chapters, I had in mind readers for whom, as for myself, the deity of Jesus of Nazareth is an absolutely solid affirmation of faith and an assumption that author and readers could share. It goes without saying, I thought. Comments I have received from time to time have made it clear that it is dangerous to make that kind of assumption. If it goes without saying, it needs even more to be said! In fact, I have realized that the omission of any discussion of the way in which the Old Testament also shapes what we mean by speaking of Jesus as God was a serious defect of the original book. So I have added this sixth chapter, explaining how the Old Tes-
tament reveals the God whom Jesus embodied. Some of the content of the chapter is abbreviated and adapted from my book *The Mission of God*, chapter four.

I have added a few questions and exercises at the end of each chapter that I hope may be used either by individuals or by groups.

It is pleasing to hear from time to time that the book is being used in a number of institutions of theological education on the list of textbooks for courses in biblical theology—even though it was intended for a more popular readership. For that reason, I have included a few more items in the bibliography at the end for those who wish to study further the whole vast field of historical Jesus research and the Old Testament background to the New Testament. Of these, by far the most significant in my view have been the magisterial works of N. T. (Tom) Wright. With enormous erudition and historical scholarship, he has argued in phenomenal depth for an understanding of Jesus in relation to Israel of the Old Testament and intertestamental period, with which my own much more amateur portrait here is in broad accord. For those who need to study further, most of the books listed provide comprehensive additional bibliography.

I express my thanks to Pieter Kwant and the staff of Langham Literature who have kept encouraging me to believe that this book has an ongoing future. I am delighted that at least part of that future will be within the global fellowship of Langham Partnership.

*Chris Wright*

*March 2014*
Preface to the First Edition

My love for the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament came somewhat later in life than my love for Jesus Christ. But each has reinforced the other ever since I entered the world of biblical studies. In the midst of the many intrinsically fascinating reasons why Old Testament study is so rewarding, the most exciting to me is the way it never fails to add new depths to my understanding of Jesus. I find myself aware that in reading the Hebrew Scriptures I am handling something that gives me a closer common link with Jesus than any archaeological artifact could do.

For these are the words he read. These were the stories he knew. These were the songs he sang. These were the depths of wisdom and revelation and prophecy that shaped his whole view of “life, the universe and everything.” This is where he found his insights into the mind of his Father God. Above all, this is where he found the shape of his own identity and the goal of his own mission. In short, the deeper you go into understanding the Old Testament, the closer you come to the heart of Jesus. (After all, Jesus never actually read the New Testament!) That has been my conviction for a long time, and it is the conviction that underlies this book.

For it saddens me that so many Christians these days love Jesus but know so little about who he thought he was and what he had come
to do. Jesus becomes a kind of photo montage composed of a random mixture of Gospel stories, topped up with whatever fashionable image of him is current, including, recently, the New Age caricatures of him. He is cut off from the historical Jewish context of his own day, and from his deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is ironic that this widespread lack of biblically informed knowledge about Jesus is growing at the very time when there is a new impetus and enthusiasm in scholarly circles, both Christian and Jewish, for historical research on Jesus. The so-called Third Quest for the historical Jesus has already generated numbers of exciting and fascinating works of scholarship, which at times almost persuaded me I would rather be a student of the New Testament than of the Old!

That feeling usually evaporated fairly quickly as I felt my own amateur status in that field, which needs to be made clear at this point. I have been acutely aware that to write anything at all on the New Testament in general or Jesus in particular is like crawling through a minefield under crossfire. However, with the help of several friends of undoubted New Testament scholarship, I have been bold enough to crawl on, trying to take into account as much of current scholarship as was feasible. My constant comfort has been to remind myself that I am not writing for fellow scholars but for people who want to deepen their knowledge of Jesus and of the Scriptures that meant so much to him. In that sense, I found it hard to decide whether this is a book about Jesus in the light of the Old Testament, or a book about the Old Testament in the light of Jesus. Perhaps it is both.

I have also managed to fulfill one other minor life's ambition with this book, which was to write at least one book entirely without footnotes. This again was dictated by the sort of reader I had in mind. Biblical experts will detect in every paragraph the sources of so many of my ideas, but it is tedious to hang them out at the bottom of every page. My acknowledgment to all those from whose books I have learned so much is paid by the bibliographical list at the end of the book.

More personal gratitude is due to many who have helped me through
the minefield in various ways. First, to my students at the Union Biblical Seminary in Pune, India, who bore my first gropings in this area, under the title “Old Testament Hermeneutics.” It was while teaching that course that I came across John Goldingay’s articles on “The Old Testament and Christian Faith: Jesus and the Old Testament in Matthew 1–5,” in *Themelios* 8, nos. 1-2, (1982–1983). They provided an excellent framework, first for that course and then, with his kind permission, for the broad structure of this book, which is rather loosely linked to the themes of the early chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. Second, to Dick France, who helped to prime the pump for my amateur New Testament research with some very helpful bibliographical suggestions that generated a flood of other discoveries. Needless to say, neither of these two friends bears any responsibility for the final content of this book.

My thanks are due also to Kiruba Easteraj and the Selvarajah family for their hospitality and kindness in Montauban Guest House, Ootacamund, India, where the first chapters were written during summer vacations.

My wife, Elizabeth, and our four children know only too well how much I depend on their love and support, and over the years they have learned to share or bear my enthusiasm for the Old Testament. They need no words to know my appreciation, but this at least puts my deep gratitude on paper.

Finally, a word of explanation for the dedication. It was Jim Punton, a man who always made me think simultaneously of Amos in his prophetic passion for justice and of Jesus in his warmth and friendship, who first sowed the seed of this book. “Chris,” he said to me once, putting his arm around me like an uncle, “you must write a book on how the Old Testament influenced Jesus.” That was nearly ten years ago. Sadly, Jim’s untimely death means that he cannot judge whether I have achieved what he had in mind.

*Chris Wright*
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*1992*
Jesus: A Man with a Story

Judging from the selection of readings in an average Christmas service, in the consciousness of the average Christian the New Testament begins at Matthew 1:18, “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. . . .” A natural enough assumption, we might agree, since Christianity began with the birth of Jesus and this verse proposes to tell us how it happened. What more do you need at Christmas?

If the average Christian pauses between the Christmas hymns to wonder what the previous seventeen verses are all about, his or her curiosity is probably offset by relief that at least they weren’t included in the readings! And yet those verses are there, presumably because that is how Matthew wanted to begin his Gospel, and also how the minds that shaped the order of the canonical books wanted to begin what we call the New Testament. So we need to respect those intentions and ask why it is that Matthew will not allow us to join in the adoration of the Magi until we have ploughed through his list of “begettings.” Why can’t we just get on with the story?

Because, says Matthew, you won’t understand that story—the one I am about to tell you—unless you see it in the light of a much longer story that goes back for many centuries but leads up to the Jesus you want to know about. And that longer story is the history of the Hebrew
Bible, or what Christians came to call the Old Testament. It is the story that Matthew “tells” in the form of a schematized genealogy—the ancestry of the Messiah.

His opening verse sums up the whole story: Jesus, who is the Messiah, was the son of David and the son of Abraham. These two names then become the key markers for the three main sections of his story:

- from Abraham to David;
- from David to the Babylonian exile;
- from the exile to Jesus himself.

For any Jew who knew his Scriptures (and Matthew is usually reckoned to have been writing primarily for Jewish Christians), every name recalled stories, events, periods of history and memories of their national past. It was a long story, but Matthew compresses it into seventeen verses just as Jesus could later on compress it into a single parable about a vineyard and its tenant farmers.

What Matthew is saying to us by beginning in this way is that we will only understand Jesus properly if we see him in the light of this story, which he completes and brings to its climax. So when we turn the page from the Old to the New Testament, we find a link between the two that is more important than the attention we usually give it. It is a central historical interface binding together the two great acts of God’s drama of salvation. *The Old Testament tells the story that Jesus completes.*

This means not only that we need to look at Jesus in the light of the history of the Old Testament, but also that he sheds light backward on it. You understand and appreciate a journey in the light of its destination. And certainly as you journey through the history of the Old Testament it makes a difference to know that it leads to Jesus and that he gives meaning to it. We shall look at that in more depth after we have reviewed that journey in the next section. First let us note several things as regards Jesus himself that Matthew wishes us to understand from his chosen means of opening his story.
Jesus was a real Jew. In Jewish society genealogies were an important way of establishing your right to belong within the community of God’s people. First Chronicles 1–9 and Ezra 2 and 8 are examples of this. Your ancestry was your identity and your status. Jesus, then, was not just “a man.” He was a particular person born within a living culture. His background, ancestry and roots were shaped and influenced, as all his contemporaries were, by the history and fortunes of his people. We need to keep this in mind, because it often happens that we can talk and think (and sing) about Jesus in such general and universal terms that he becomes virtually abstract—a kind of identikit human being. The Gospels bind us to the particularity of Jesus, and Matthew anchors him in the history of the Jewish nation.

There are (and always have been) those who do not like this Jewishness of Jesus, for a wide variety of reasons. Yet it is the very first fact about Jesus that the New Testament presents to us, and Matthew goes on to underline it in countless ways in the rest of his Gospel. And as we shall see throughout this book, it is this very Jewishness of Jesus and his deep roots in his Hebrew Scriptures that provide us with the most essential key to understanding who he was, why he came and what he taught.

Jesus was a real man. Jesus was “the son of Abraham.” When Abram first makes his appearance in the Old Testament story in Genesis 12, the stage is already well set and populated. Genesis 10 portrays a world of nations—a slice of geographical and political reality. It is a world of real human beings, which we would have recognized if we’d been there—not some mythological utopia full of heroes and monsters. This is the human world whose sinful arrogance is described in the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. And this is the world within which, and for which, God called Abram as the starting point of his vast project of redemption for humanity.

The main point of God’s promise to Abram was not merely that he would have a son and then descendants who would be especially blessed by God. God also promised that through the people of
Abram God would bring blessing to all nations of the earth. So although Abraham (as his name was changed to, in the light of this promise regarding the nations) stands at the head of the particular nation of Old Testament Israel and their unique history, there is a universal scope and perspective to him and them: one nation for the sake of all nations.

So when Matthew announces Jesus as the Messiah, the son of Abraham, it means not only that he belongs to that particular people (a real Jew, as we have just seen), but also that he belongs to a people whose very reason for existence was to bring blessing to the rest of humanity. Jesus shared the mission of Israel, and indeed, as the Messiah he had come to make it a reality at last. A particular man, but with a universal significance.

At several points in the most Jewish of all four Gospels, Matthew shows his interest in the universal significance of Jesus for foreign nations beyond the boundaries of Israel. It emerges for the first time here in the opening genealogy in an unexpected and easily overlooked feature. In his long list of fathers, Matthew includes just four mothers, all in Matthew 1:3-6: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. It may be that one reason for Matthew including them is that there were question marks and irregularities in their marriages, which may be Matthew's way of showing that there was scriptural precedent even for the “irregularity” of Jesus’ birth from an unmarried mother. But probably more significant is the other thing they all have in common. They were all, from a Jewish point of view, foreigners. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites (Gen 38; Josh 2); Ruth was a Moabitess (Ruth 1); Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, a Hittite, so probably a Hittite herself (2 Sam 1). The implication of Jesus being the heir of Abraham and his universal promise is underlined: Jesus the Jew, and the Jewish Messiah, had Gentile blood!

Jesus was the son of David. Matthew states at the outset what he will develop and demonstrate through his Gospel: that Jesus was the expected Messiah of the royal line of David with the rightful claim to
the title “King of the Jews.” He establishes this further by tracing Jesus’ descent through the royal line of kings descended from David who ruled over Judah (Mt 1:6-11). Probably this represents an “official” genealogy, whereas Luke (Lk 3:23-38) has recorded Jesus’ actual biological parentage (or rather that of Joseph, his legal but not biological father). The two lists are not contradictory but rather trace two lines through the same “family tree” from David to Jesus.

Much more was involved in asserting that Jesus was the Davidic Messiah than mere physical ancestry. We shall look at the implications in chapters three and four. They expected that when the true son of David would arrive, God himself would intervene to establish his reign. It would mean the rule of God’s justice, liberation for the oppressed, the restoration of peace among humankind and in nature itself. Furthermore, the mission of the Messiah was also connected to the ingathering of the nations. The universal scope of being the son of Abraham was not canceled out by the particular identity of being the son of David. In fact, in Old Testament expectation there was a link between the two. It would be through the son of David that the promise to Abraham himself would be fulfilled.

Psalm 72 is a good illustration of this. It is a prayer on behalf of the Davidic king, with the heading “Of Solomon.” As well as looking forward to prosperity and justice, it includes this hope and expectation:

May his name endure forever;  
may it continue as long as the sun.  
Then all nations will be blessed through him,  
and they will call him blessed. (Ps 72:17)

This is a very clear echo of the personal and universal promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3. (Compare also Ps 2:7-8; Is 55:3-5.)

Jesus is the end of the time of preparation. At the end of his genealogy, Matthew 1:17, Matthew makes an observation about it before he moves on to the birth of Jesus: “Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to
Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.”

Matthew is very fond of threes and sevens in his presentation of material in his Gospel. Both were symbolic numbers for completeness or perfection. Three double-sevens is pretty complete! His purpose is not merely statistical or just a matter of a historical curiosity. From that point of view his observation is not strictly accurate, since at several places in the genealogy biological generations are skipped over (as was quite common in Old Testament genealogy). Rather he is being deliberately schematic, with a theological intention. He is pointing out that Old Testament history falls into three approximately equal spans of time between the critical events:

from the foundational covenant with Abraham to the establishing of the monarch under David;

from David to the destruction and loss of the monarchy in the Babylonian exile; and

from the exile to the coming of the Messiah himself who alone could occupy the throne of David.

Jesus is thus “the end of the line” as far as the Old Testament story goes. It has run its completed course in preparation for him, and now its goal and climax has been reached.

The Old Testament is full of future hope. It looks beyond itself to an expected end. This forward movement, or eschatological thrust (from Greek eschaton, “ultimate event” or “final conclusion”) is a fundamental part of the faith of Israel. It was grounded in their experience and concept of God himself. God was constantly active within history for a definite purpose, working toward his desired goal for the earth and humanity. Just as Matthew has summarized that history in the form of his genealogy, so his concluding observation in verse 17 points out that it is a history whose purpose is now achieved. The preparation is complete. The Messiah has come. In that sense, Jesus is the end. The same note is echoed throughout the Gospel in the urgency of Jesus’
preaching about the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand.”

**Jesus is also a new beginning.** Matthew’s Gospel (and the New Testament itself) opens with the words, “An account of the *genesis* of Jesus, the Messiah . . .” (my translation). A Jewish reader would immediately be reminded of Genesis 2:4 and Genesis 5:1, where exactly the same expression is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The same word in the plural (*geneseis*, “origins,” “generations”) is used several more times in the book of Genesis to introduce genealogies and narratives, or to conclude them and mark off important divisions in the book.

So the use of the word *genesis* here, by a careful author like Matthew, is fairly certainly deliberate. With the echo of the book of Genesis we are meant to realize that the arrival of Jesus the Messiah marks a new beginning, indeed a new creation. God is doing his “new thing.” Good news indeed. Jesus is not only (looking back) the end of the beginning; he is also (looking forward) the beginning of the end.

So much of significance is contained within Matthew’s opening seventeen verses. In its own way, it is rather like the prologue of John’s Gospel, pointing out dimensions of the significance of Jesus before introducing him in the flesh. We see that Jesus had a very particular context in Jewish history, and yet that he also has the universal significance that was attached to that history ever since the promise to Abraham. We see him as the messianic heir of the line of David. We see him as the end and also the beginning. Only with such understanding of the meaning of the story so far can we proceed to a full appreciation of the gospel story itself.

Returning, however, to our average Christian in a Christmas service, probably the succession of names in Matthew’s genealogy will not make her quite so aware of the outline of Old Testament history as it would have done for Matthew’s original readers. So at this point it may be helpful to step back and very briefly review the Old Testament story, following the three broad divisions that Matthew observes.
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