

RETHINKING THE BIBLE—WITH JACK PELHAM

Episode 7: Why I Wish We'd Drop the Terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament"

Welcome to Rethinking the Bible with Jack Pelham. This is an audio podcast, where we apply Reality-Based Thinking to interpreting the Bible. Reality-Based Thinking is my name for a philosophy that seeks to make constant use of honesty, rationality, and responsibility in seeking out the reality of things. And I define reality as the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to one's perceptions, beliefs, or wishes about them.

I mentioned in an earlier episode that I wish people would stop using the term, "New Testament", so I wanted to stop and explain that before we get any further down the trail of forgetfulness. This topic also gets into hermeneutics somewhat, so I'm also glad on that account to make the time for it. At some point, I want to do an episode called "What Is the Bible?", and today's topic would definitely fall under that umbrella. But I'll be brief about it today.

We have in the Bible a collection of 66 documents. And some of these documents might also contain more than one source document themselves. For example, I think it's very likely that Genesis Chapter 1 was a separate document than the part that starts in Chapter 2, but that they were put together into a collection called Genesis, that itself was part of what is sometimes called the Pentateuch, which simply means "five books". And those five books are also called Torah, which means "instruction" or "law". And there's another set of books in the Bible called the Nevi'im (or the Prophets), and one called Ketuvim (the Writings).

All these are parts of the first half-or-so of the Bible---the part where the original documents were written in Hebrew (mostly). And in the second half-or-so of the Bible, most of those documents come to us in Greek. That second half is the one that's also commonly called "The New Testament", and the first half is commonly called "The Old Testament". And if you have a typical Bible in a hardcopy, you'll find a page just before Genesis that says "Old Testament", and another page just before Matthew that says "New Testament".

But no prophet of God wrote those two pages. No apostle wrote them. God didn't commission them, as far as we know. Nor did Jesus. So, what are they doing in there?

Well, I don't want to take the time to research how all that got started, but I'll tell you that I wish it hadn't. And now let me tell you why.

When I started reading the Bible for myself (probably in middle school), I had a Red Letter edition of the King James Bible. It was medium sized, and came in a black cover with a zipper. And when I read it, what did I read? Well, I was most naturally drawn to the red letters. After all, those were the words of Jesus---so they must be the most important ones, right?

I had no idea that so much of what Jesus said was an allusion to, or a commentary on, what had already been said in the other Bible documents that were recorded before the First Century when he was here. Nor did I have any idea how often the writers after him would reference or allude to the things that he said. So basically, what I was doing was reading the red letters, and making of them whatever it seemed to me should be made of them. I was completely without the benefit of knowing the context of them.

That is, if I were reading some red-letter verse in, say, Matthew, I had no concern about whatever was the immediate context of that verse. I didn't care to read about the situation in which Jesus said the thing he was saying in the red-letter verse. No, I just took the red-letter words for whatever they meant to me.

There's a word for this---two words, actually: foolish and ignorant. But I imagine that I'm not the only one in the world to approach the scriptures like this. After all, where's the introduction to the Bible, where it tells you how to read it?

But I eventually matured out of the red-letter-only sort of reading. And then I got suckered into the idea that the so-called "New Testament" is more important to know than the so-called "Old Testament". After all, it's the part where Jesus shows up and dies on the cross, and where "the church" (and I'll tell you in another episode why I'm no fan of the word church)---where "the church" got started.

So I loved the "New Testament"---and a friend bought me a leather-bound "New Testament" that was small enough to fit into the back pocket on my jeans---and we'd call it a "switchblade", which was a play on how we'd call the whole Bible the "sword"---as in "the sword of the Spirit", which we got from a passage in Ephesians 6.

But I was still caught in a context trap. That's because those First-Century, Greek-based writings in the so-called "New Testament" were by no means something new and separate from the greater context of the Bible documents. No, they were completely tied to what had been written and prophesied beforehand---the things that we have in the so-called "Old Testament".

But as an American---which is quite a different culture from the one that produced the Bible---that is, the Ancient Near Eastern culture---the word "New" definitely says to me---and I probably learned this from TV commercial---that it's better than anything called "Old". And we'd talk in "church" (and I'm doing air quotes in my mind when I say the word "church") about how the New Covenant was better than the Old Covenant, so this kind of cultural influence definitely had the effect of encouraging me to minimize the importance of the so-called "Old Testament".

Even so, there were a few in my church who would call that leather-bound New Testament "half a Bible"---but their objection wasn't enough to overcome the stubborn, cognitive-miser attitude that the New Testament was really where it's at when it comes to important scriptures. And I think that this sort of bias is very common in all manner of churches.

And I can't tell you how many times I've seen Christians debating over the meaning of some so-called New Testament passage, without ever once thinking to research the so-called "Old Testament" to see if the topic had been previously addressed by other Bible writers. So, even though those older books are definitely there in their Bibles, they tend to overlook them when they're wrestling with how to understand the newer writings.

And I trust that at this point, you can see the problem with this. But just how big a problem is it?

Well, I think it's a HUGE problem. And it goes far beyond the whole "Old Testament" / "New Testament" consideration. Just like the red-letter thinker doesn't consider the black letters in the immediate context---and just like the "New Testament" thinker doesn't consider the "Old Testament" documents---there are even greater problems of context neglect that go on. Even someone who is

unlike the rest, and has actually made a thorough study of what's in both ends of the Bible, is likely to be ignoring the greater literary context of the Bible documents. I'm referring to many other books that didn't make it into the Bible collection (and we'll discuss that sometime). And I'm not talking about far-out stuff like the Indian Vedas or the National Enquirer---but other writings from the Ancient Near East culture, or even the smaller subset of that culture, known as the Hebrews---the ones we're told about in great detail in the first half of the Bible.

Now, a lot of people start to get pretty uneasy when you mention some of these books, but we owe it to ourselves to take a mature view of it, and to learn what was going on. Some of them were considered for inclusion in the Bible---and of course, there are different versions of the Bible collection, such as the Roman Catholic version, which include more than the 66 documents of the so-called Protestant Bible.

And so many people get very uptight as to certain questions about these extrabiblical books, such as "is it canonical?" or "is it scripture?" or "is it inspired?" And these are good questions, all. But I think that there's one question that's even better. And that is, "Is it true?" But of course, if you wanted to give an honest, rational, and responsible answer to that question, you'd have to actually READ the document in question. Right? And many are afraid to do that because they think that they're sinning to read anything not found in their own Bible---whichever version of the Bible that is.

But I take a broader view of the matter. Again, I'm open to the possibility that some things written by extrabiblical authors could actually be true. I don't believe they're necessarily true, mind you, but I'm too responsible to rule them out, labeling them all false, just because this or that group of Christians in this or that century decided they did not belong in their own denominational Bible collection.

So, I haven't forgotten about that "Old Testament" page and that "New Testament" page---and we're going to keep talking about that in a minute. But I wanted to mention another page in your Bible that you need to think about. It's the one quite near the beginning, and at the top, it says "Contents". If your Bibles are like mine, none of them have God's signature on that page. None of them have his initials at the bottom---or a rubber stamp saying "God approved." Nor do Jesus' initials appear there. Nor the initials of any prophet or apostle, or angel, even.

No, whatever documents are listed in those contents, it was a group of humans who made the decisions as to what should be included, and what should not.

And that idea is naturally troubling to folks who like to have everything tied up in neat little packages---who like to have simple answers for all the common questions. But in my world, it's a topic of a much wider scope than it is in the worlds of some others. So I try to read it all. And that has greatly affected my understanding---even of just what's in the Bible collection---and of what's in that smaller subset called "The New Testament"---or in that smaller-still subset of what's in the red letters.

So, the more I study, the sillier I think it is that so many have the idea that the so-called "New Testament" is where it's really at, and that that's what you really need to know if you want to understand the Bible. The result of this kind of thinking is so often that we end up believing things, or making so-called "Bible applications" that the writers would have *never* intended anyone in a million years to make.

Further, I'm compelled to point out one more amazing issue for your consideration. I've posted in the show notes on the website---which is rethinkingthebible.com---a graphic that's one of the most amazing

things I've seen in years. It's a collaboration between Chris Harris and Christoph Römheld, showing the geography---so to speak---of how there are nearly 64,000 cross references in the Bible---where one passage either predicts something that eventually come to pass and be recorded in later passages---or how the later passages refer to things that had happened, or that had been prophesied before in earlier passages. It's a fascinating graphic that will bring the rainbow to mind at first glance. But as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. So I've taken a screen shot, and then linked it to Chris Harris' description of the project (<https://chrisharrison.net/index.php/Visualizations/BibleViz>)

I've also linked it to Jordan Peterson's brief talk on the same topic I'm addressing right here at the end of this episode. Now, I don't know much about Jordan Peterson, but I know he's controversial to somebody or other---so please don't take my reference to him as an endorsement of everything he believes and says, for I simply don't know. But I really like what he has to point out in the video here. (<https://youtu.be/HPO1cUXZ8Dk>)

So please go study this graphic of what they call the first-ever hyperlinked book. The Bible, of course, is not actually hyperlinked, since that's a modern computer technology, and the Bible is not a computer program in its most natural state. But you get the idea. So go gaze at that image for a few minutes, and then you'll have an even fuller idea of why I really wish people would stop talking about "Old Testament" and "New Testament". The terms tend to bias those who hear them constantly---and who use them---into thinking---or rather, into NOT thinking about how the Bible makes up an amazing whole of related parts.

Had I not done away with the "New Testament" page (in my mind) many years ago, I could not have understood many of the things I have grasped since then, for it would have continued to skew my understanding of what the Bible is, and of what's important to know.

CONCLUSION

Now, somebody's going to ask me, "OK, Jack, so if we shouldn't keep using "Old Testament" and "New Testament" to describe these various sections of the Bible, then what terms *should* we use?"

Well, frequently, whatever we're talking about that calls for some sort of sectional term like this can often be referred to by some smaller subset that doesn't cause problems. For instance, if you want to discuss something by the term "New Testament" that could be referred to instead by the subsets "the gospels" or "the epistles", that would not only avoid the term "New Testament", but would also be more specific. Or, you could refer to "the later Bible documents", as opposed to the earlier ones. Or you could refer to "the First-Century writings", as opposed to those from before the First Century.

And this brings up a bonus point: I've seen many preachers over the years who like to bolster the points of their sermons by continually reminding their audience that "the Bible says...." this, and "the Bible says..." that. It seems they think that their point carries more authority if they remind us that "the Bible says" it. And as a side point, I've noticed that sometimes---not all the time, mind you, but sometimes---you have to watch them to be sure that the Bible actually says what they say it says. That is, since they don't give an actual book-chapter-and-verse reference to a specific place in the Bible collection, whatever they're saying it says may not actually be as accurate as one might like to assume it is.

It would be better, then, if people would say "Matthew says..." rather than the less-specific "the Bible says....". And it would be better yet to get "Matthew 3:14 says...", because then, we could all consider

the actual words of the specific passage, rather than simply to take the preacher's word for it---trusting his or her interpretation of the passage in question.

I doubt very seriously if the habit of referring to "New Testament" or "Old Testament" will ever go away. And it certainly won't as long as Bible publishers keep inserting such divisional pages into the Bible collections. But trying to be an always-honest-rational-and-responsible Bible student will always be (metaphorically speaking) like swimming against the tide of what everyone else is doing.

So that's why I wish everybody would cut it out with the "New Testament" and "Old Testament" language. But I'm not going to hold my breath!

Thanks for joining in!