

Yesterday I started describing a trade book that I'm thinking about writing, tentatively called (in my head) "The Battle for the Bible." Here is the next part of my self-reflections:

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A major part of my book will deal with one of the great puzzles in the history of religion: Why does the Christian Bible even have an Old Testament? And how did the early Christians, most of them gentiles, manage - in their own minds - to wrest it from the Jews by and for whom it was originally written? If Christians chose not to keep the biblical laws and follow its customs, why did they retain the book?

In my experience, many Christians still wonder about that. I frequently hear Christians claim there are essential differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament and the religions based on them: Jews have a religion of laws and judgment, but Christians have a gospel of grace and mercy; Jews think they have to earn their way into heaven on their own merits, but Christians meekly accept the salvation of God as a gift; Jews are condemned for their disobedience, but Christians are saved by their faith. And then the most frequent claim of all: the Old Testament portrays a God of wrath; the New Testament a God of love.

These stereotypes can easily be shown to be wrong, just from the Bible itself. Anyone who wants to see a God of wrath need simply read the final book of the New Testament, the Revelation of John.

Why then do Christians assume a dichotomy between their faith (with their God) and the Jewish religion (and theirs)? The short answer is that ...

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The short answer is that Christians have long read their Bible differently from Jews. My argument in this book is that in the early years after Jesus' death, his Jewish followers began to read their Scriptures in ways that created controversies with Jews who did not accept him as the messiah. The ramifications of this historical phenomenon were enormous and tragic. Controversy over the correct understanding of these Scriptures led to serious opposition; opposition led to rejection; rejection led to hatred; hatred led to violence; and violence eventually led to the entire history of Christian anti-Semitism. It may seem to be an outlandish claim, but the historical lineage can be shown: varying interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures eventually led to the Holocaust.

I should say at the outset that the vast majority of Christians today have never thought about it that way and, without seeing the evidence, would flat out deny it - especially the millions of good and decent Christians who pride themselves on being decidedly not anti-Jewish and who oppose all forms of anti-Semitism. That would be true of the vast majority of my undergraduate students, a good number of whom are good Southern Christians (principally Baptist) who oppose religious violence but unreflectively subscribe to views that, historically, led to it.

Most of my students really don't have any idea why they have an Old Testament in their Bible. It is just there, so they take it. I understand that view perfectly well, since it was the one I myself had as a late teenager. I knew nothing about the Old Testament, of course,

and never ever thought that I might want to follow its laws. Except the Ten Commandments.

More or less. Today, when Christians tell me (as they often do) that they are not obliged to keep the laws of the Old Testament except the Ten Commandments, I ask them why those commandments and not the 603 others. They've almost never thought about it, except to say that Jesus did away with all the rest. Then why keep the Bible at all? And why retain these particular ten? They generally say that these ten were meant to be valid for all time. So then I ask them whether they have any principled objection to working on Saturday. Of course not. But one of the commandments is not to work on Saturday. My sense is that most Christians are content to follow the Nine Commandments.

But what else is the Old Testament good for, if it is filled with laws Christians don't follow, customs they don't keep, and religious views they don't accept? Throughout the ages, theologically more sophisticated Christians have argued that the entire Old Testament was a necessary "preparation" for what was to come. It was principally meant to point forward to a reality beyond itself, to Jesus and the inspired writings of the New Testament. For these Christians, the Old Testament is a kind of extended prologue by and large of no real importance or abiding relevance in itself, apart from some of the comforting Psalms and a number of interesting stories about Abraham, Joseph, and Moses that can be taught to children in Sunday School classes. But the real and ultimate theological significance of the Old Testament is that it anticipates Jesus, through its prophecies of the coming Messiah.

This may seem to be an innocuous interpretive stance. But it is anything but that. I will be arguing this is the view that originally drove the historically disastrous wedge between Jews who became followers of Jesus and Jews who did not.

I see this line of thinking, and its results, every semester. I regularly have students tell me that they simply can't understand why Jews don't accept Jesus as the messiah. The Old Testament predicts everything the messiah would do, and Jesus did it all. It's all there, in black and white. The Bible says that the messiah had to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and Jesus was born in Bethlehem. His mother was to be a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), and Mary was a virgin. The messiah was to suffer and die to atone for his people (Isaiah 53), and Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world. The messiah was supposed to be raised from the dead (Hosea 6:3), and Jesus was gloriously resurrected.

The list goes on and on. My students genuinely don't understand: Why don't Jews see this? How can they possibly miss it? Are they willful and hard-hearted? Can't they read? Are they blind?

My students are not the first to ask these questions. They go all the way back. My book will argue that such Christian incredulity at Jewish failure to accept "the truth" of their own Scriptures is what led to the earliest controversies between the followers of Jesus and their non-Christian Jewish families, neighbors, fellow synagogue members, and broader acquaintances. The questions, and the controversies, then continued and massively intensified for two millennia. They are rooted in the long-standing Christian view that the Old Testament, properly understood, is a Christian book, not a Jewish one.

The story of how it happened - how Christians, in effect, co-opted the Jewish Bible - is both historically intriguing and socially tragic. One part of my book will explore the historical intrigue; the other the social tragedy.



[Should the Old Testament Even Be in the Bible?](#)  
[Why Do Christians Have an Old Testament? Another Trade Book.](#)