

Testament

TEXT: Hebrews 12:1-2

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on October 30, 2022

The Bible begins with the creation of the universe and ends with the destruction of that universe and the establishment of a new heaven and new earth. That has led many people to believe that the Bible is organized chronologically. It isn't, except for the two largest sections, the two Testaments, Old and New.

All of the books of the Old Testament, including those we call the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books, were written before a single word of the New Testament. "Old" in this case doesn't mean outdated; it simply means that it came first. In our culture, where we glorify the new and the young, Christians have taken that bias to their Bibles and it has caused problems. So, I want to talk a bit about the two Testaments in the Christian Bible and clear that up.

The word "testament" comes from the Latin *testamentum*, which means to bear witness, usually to a written document. We encounter it today when we write our last will and testament, which is attested by others, and bears witness to how we want our assets to be distributed at our passing. Another English word from the same Latin root is testimony—again, it is someone bearing witness to events or documents.

Broadly speaking, the two testaments in the Bible are written records that bear witness to the way God's people have lived out their relationships with God, with one another, and with the world in which they lived. The words "old" and "new" merely designate which of those testimonies came first. They could easily have been called the "First Witness" and the "Second Witness" without changing the meaning.

A harmful practice of many Christians is supersessionism, which is the belief that the New Testament supersedes the Old—that the New Testament replaces the Old and that the covenant God established with Israel in the Old Testament is replaced by God's covenant with the followers of Jesus in the New. Nope. Not true. That belief is rooted in antisemitism, and we need to correct our thinking.

The First Witness, the Old Testament, is the story of the people of Israel, the Jews. For that reason, as well as to avoid our bias against anything "Old," the Old Testament is sometimes called the Hebrew Scriptures. While the Old Testament is almost entirely made up of the Scriptures that are sacred to Jews, the Hebrew Scriptures, as a standalone text, arranges the contents differently than the Christian Old Testament does, and there are a few differences in the actual text.

So, if you hear me talking about the Hebrew Scriptures, I am referring to the sacred text of the Jews, as they have it arranged, and without the New Testament attached. When those writings are bound together with the New Testament and in the order the church uses, I call it the "Old Testament."

It's important to remember that it was never the intention of the New Testament writers to replace the Old Testament with the New. They had no idea their particular testimonies and letters would ever be considered sacred scripture. When 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," the only "scripture" in existence was the Hebrew Bible.

That passage, which is found in our New Testament, is talking about our Old Testament. In the passage from Hebrews 12 that Joyce read, the great cloud of witnesses—those whose testimony inspires us to be courageous and faithful—is detailed in the previous chapter, Hebrews 11. The stories of every last person named in Hebrews 11 come from the Hebrew Scriptures. The First Witness inspires and makes possible the Second Witness.

The problem of supersessionism isn't new. In the mid-second century CE, a bishop named Marcion of Sinope in Asia Minor decided that the entire Old Testament, along with anything in the early Christian writing that smacked of Judaism, had become irrelevant. He believed that the God of the Old Testament was a different and inferior being to the God of Jesus Christ. He issued his own collection of Scriptures based on that premise.

That got him excommunicated and labeled a heretic. His attempt to label some writings as valid and to discredit others was one of the things that spurred the official bodies within the church to actually define which were the authoritative writings of the Bible.

Jesus and each of his twelve main disciples were Jews. Jesus was addressed as a rabbi and taught in synagogues. Jesus was born, lived, and died a Jew. Paul was a Jew. And the Hebrew Scriptures, those stories and histories, poems and songs, laws and proverbs in our Old Testament, were the writings that formed both Jesus and Paul as Jewish men. Christianity as a distinct religion did not exist at any point in the writings of the Bible. Jesus' followers developed their own way of living out their Judaism, but so did many other branches of Judaism at the time.

We'll look at that more down the road. But for now, the most important thing to recognize is that the Christian New Testament adds to the Old. It does not take away from it, and it certainly does not replace it. The Second Witness springs from the First and could not have existed without it. By ignoring the First Witness, we misunderstand the Second.

But perhaps the biggest mistake we make when forgetting the Bible's Jewish foundation is in misunderstanding the type and purpose of the literature in front of us. Judaism has never in its history advocated taking the Bible literally. In fact, a major tenet of rabbinic Judaism is specifically NOT to take it literally. I mentioned that the Hebrew Bible is organized differently than our Old Testament. Both are organized by category, but the categories differ.

The Hebrew Bible has just three categories: The Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. There are only 24 books, up against our 39 because they combine things we don't. For example, instead of 1 and 2 Kings, they just have one book of Kings. Christians have a category called the Minor Prophets, consisting of twelve shorter books. The Hebrew Bible lumps them all together in one book called "The Twelve." They also combine Ezra and Nehemiah.

When Christians arranged the Hebrew Scriptures, we not only divided up books the original Hebrew Bible put together, we added two categories, which resulted in a different order. We divided the Major and Minor Prophets—which is about the length of the books, not the importance of the content—but we also added a category called "History." In the Christian Old Testament, those are the books from Joshua through Esther. That category primes us to think of those books in literal terms. If they are "history," then they must be "historical," which we equate with being factually correct.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books we have labelled as "history" are split up between the Prophets and the Writings. We also add a category of Poetry. All of the books we label poetry are among the third category called "Writings" in the Hebrew Bible, along with six we label "History" and two we label "Major Prophets." The last category in our Old Testament is the Minor Prophets, with the final book being the prophet Malachi. The last category in the Hebrew Bible is The Writings, and the final book there is Chronicles—one book, where we have two.

Nothing in the descriptions of categories of the Hebrew Bible or in rabbinic teaching encourage a literal reading. Jews wrote those books, and had studied them for centuries before Christians came on the scene. Those were the books that formed the Judaism of both Jesus and Paul, who read and interpreted them without a literal lens.

So, then Christians march in and say it's all literal and the earth is only 6,000 years old? And Jesus, a Jewish rabbi, and Paul, a Pharisee, meant everything they taught should also be taken literally? There is just no basis for making that leap, and doing it has done enormous amounts of damage both to people's ability to read and appreciate the Bible and to Christianity and the Church more broadly.

The Bible wasn't written to transmit **facts** of all kinds to future generations. The Bible was written to preserve the oral traditions and stories of a particular people that described the **truth** about the nature of God as they experienced and understood it. Truth and facts are different things.

Some of those stories pre-date writing itself by several thousand years, and every bit of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, was recorded in a time when a primary source was considered to be a person and not a text. It has only

been in the last four to five hundred years that we became a text-based rather than an oral culture, thanks to the invention of the printing press and improved literacy around the globe.

Because we are a text-based culture, whose primary sources are written documents and not people, we have become fixated on the textual details of the Bible in a way that those who originally recorded those stories and accounts were not. The ancient scribes who recorded the traditions preserved for us in the Bible were very careful to get it right—but “getting it right” meant the accurate transmission of truth, not the accurate transmission of facts.

Today we often make no distinction between truth and facts and that has left us impoverished and made our stories sterile. While all facts are true by definition, not all truth is factual. Jesus teaches truth through fictional stories called Parables. The book of Job begins with the Hebrew equivalent of “Once upon a time.” I have been in way too many Bible studies that get bogged down in debates—sometimes nasty, heated debates—over whether something is factual; and, in the process, the actual truth of the story gets completely lost.

Further, I see this confusion of truth and facts on all sides of Bible debates. People try to condemn the Bible by saying it is “just a myth.” I hate to break it to you but myth was a key means of transmitting truth for millennia. Read Joseph Campbell if you doubt me. The great myths are designed to get at some truth experienced by a specific people or culture—whether you’re talking about the epic Creation myths, the Greek and Roman myths, or Star Wars and Lord of the Rings. They contain truth, regardless of whether any of it actually happened.

Those who take the Bible literally, on the other hand, think that suggesting even the smallest detail of the Bible isn’t factual is the same as saying you don’t believe the Bible is true. From that side we get the insistence that the Bible was meant to teach science, history, and social policy—that the Bible is factual on all those counts and therefore should take precedence over the facts learned by academic disciplines.

You can believe that God inspired these stories and accounts without having to believe that God was also trying to be your geology professor. The purpose of the Bible is to transmit religious **truth**, not facts about science, history or anything else—not even facts about God and religion.

Which is not to say that there is nothing factual in the pages of the Bible. There are historical people, places, and events in there. It’s just that the writings were not subject to fact-checkers charged with making sure nobody skipped a generation in the begats or checking Methuselah’s birth certificate to see if he really was 969 years old. They were subject instead to **truth**-checkers who made sure that the tradition they recorded was in keeping with the oral tradition passed down through those people charged with keeping the story alive.

I said last week that, in the Bible, truth is not a “what” but rather a “who.” The truth the Bible is trying to convey is the truth of relationship: Who God is, who we are, and how a love that is balanced between love of God, love of ourselves, and love of others can bring peace and stability to a troubled world.

Sometimes that truth is expressed positively, by showing how the most faithful of God’s people have overcome challenges. Sometimes it’s expressed negatively by showing the many ways that both individuals and nations have failed to honor those relationships. Most frequently it teaches us the truth of how very hard it is to keep those relationships in balance. Harder than a camel going through the eye of a needle.

The two testaments are our two witnesses to a particular set of successes and failures. They witness to the ways God shows up for us and the ways we so frequently misunderstand God’s teaching and purpose for our lives. They bear witness to the saints long gone as a way to inspire or warn the saints of today. Together, we are a cloud of witnesses who testify to the nature of God in what we do and say. May we run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Amen.