

Essays On Bible Study

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The Jewish Testament?

Some time ago, in his "A Moment of Hope" radio commentary, a local preacher spoke of the power of words and how, if we want our lives to be hopeful, we need to keep our speech positive. He then quoted Proverbs 18:21 as wisdom on the subject: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

So far, everything was fine—and then he went and spoiled it by saying (paraphrasing), "You can find that in the Jewish Testament of your Bible."

The Jewish Testament? What is that? There is no such thing! We could call the Old Testament "the Hebrew Testament" with some legitimacy because it was written in Hebrew, but what would make it Jewish? Was he trying to say that, if we read only the Old Testament, we would become followers of Judaism? Or, that the Jews somehow own the Old Testament? Or, that because the Old Testament is revered by Jews as their holy book, it is somehow inferior to "the Christian Testament?"

Certainly, the Bible never calls the Old Testament "the Jewish Testament." Paul calls it "the Holy Scriptures" in II Timothy 3:15. Jesus calls it "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" in Luke 24:44. In many places, the writers simply refer to it as "the word [of God or of the Lord]" or "the Scripture(s)." The only hint that the Old Testament "belongs" to the Jews is a misinterpretation of Romans 3:2, "to them were committed the oracles of God." This means only that the Jews are responsible for their accurate transmission throughout history, not that they apply only to Jews or that Jews exclusively possess them in some way.

No, this all stems from the mistaken idea that the Old Testament is the Old Covenant, "becoming obsolete and growing old . . . ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:13), while the New Testament is the New Covenant. Thus, to a "Christian" under the New Covenant, anything that appears in the Old Testament is of lesser value than what appears in the New Testament. This error has led to countless misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the message Jesus brought to mankind.

In fact, the New Testament cannot be understood without the foundation of the Old Testament—and not just in historical terms. Paul is not overstating things when he says the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles *and prophets*, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). After His resurrection, Jesus "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, . . . expounded to [the disciples] in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). Later, "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (verse 45). Which Scriptures? The Old Testament, of course, the only ones written at the time!

Just these few verses say that we New Covenant Christians cannot understand Jesus Christ, His doctrine, His church, and God's plan without the Old Testament. We can see this by how frequently the apostles quote from the writings of Moses, David, and the prophets to support and fill out their

doctrinal teachings. There is hardly a page in the New Testament that does not have a quotation or allusion to the Old Testament on it. It is a vital part of New Covenant—New Testament—Christianity!

Lack of space does not permit an explanation of the differences between the Old Covenant and the New. However, let it suffice to say that the major problem in the Old Covenant was the *people* with whom God made it (see Hebrews 8:7-12; Romans 8:3). The New Covenant is modeled after the Old with its basic law, the Ten Commandments, retained in all its force and wisdom. In fact, Jesus makes it plain that He added intent to the law's scope so that it is now *stricter* under the New Covenant (Matthew 5:17-48)!

In the end, we must conclude that the Bible is a whole with two parts, which came as a result of the ministry of Jesus Christ and the languages in which the two parts were penned. The theology and the goal of the instruction in the two are the same. The same God who never changes rules, acts, and speaks in both. Those who believed and lived by faith in both eras will receive the same gift of eternal life (I Thessalonians 4:14-17; Hebrews 11:40).

Please be aware of this false notion of the Old Testament's inferiority to the New, as it colors a great deal of "Christian" biblical commentary. The Word of God is God's Word, whether spoken in 1400 BC or AD 60. Above all, remember our Savior's instruction, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every word* that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Prophecy's Place

Bible students know that Scripture is about thirty percent prophecy, and preachers have cautioned that prophecy should take no more than the equivalent percentage of our study time. With some people, though, prophecy *is* their Bible study, and that, frankly, is a shame.

The Bible divides itself neatly into thirds: one-third doctrine, one-third history, and one-third prophecy. History, of course, gets short shrift from most, who remember Mrs. Jones' tenth-grade history class as a collection of names and dates and boring lectures on various monarchs and wars. Doctrine is just not very stimulating; studying it brings up visions of long and involved passages in dusty commentaries written by long-dead theologians, intricate studies of unpronounceable words in ancient languages, and saccharine devotional passages with little application in the real world.

Prophecy, though, is cool. Its imagery and symbolism are fascinating with its strange beasts, lurid women, armies and battles, plagues and destruction, conquering kings, and even a red dragon. It is infused with a sense of mystery and expectation. There are enigmatic numbers to ponder and riddles and word plays to solve. Beyond all this, many prophecy buffs believe that the preponderance of the Bible's predictions will come about soon, heightening the excitement.

For evangelists, prophecy makes a wonderful hook to get people interested in God's Word. For years, the Worldwide Church of God's most-requested literature had prophetic themes: "The U.S. and Britain in Prophecy," "The Book of Revelation Unveiled at Last," "Who or What Is the Beast?" etc. These booklets were most often requested by those hearing the radio broadcast or seeing the television broadcast for the first time because the program itself frequently dealt with prophetic subjects. As a hook, prophecy works well, but as a staple in our spiritual diet, it produces deficiencies in spiritual health.

Yes, we should know the Bible's prophecies. Yes, we should be watching world events. Yes, we should be speculating to see how current events might fit the Bible's scenarios. But none of these things should be done at the expense of doctrine and Christian living.

What is the purpose of prophecy? Ultimately, it is to glorify God. Through prophecy, we can see God at work in His plan over millennia (for instance, the many Old Testament prophecies of Jesus Christ's first coming). We see proof of God's existence and power in fulfilling the Bible's prophecies (Isaiah 40:12-29). Prophecy exhibits for all to see that God is sovereign in the affairs of men (Daniel 4:17), and what He desires He brings to pass (Isaiah 55:11).

Is prophecy in the Bible so we can know what is going to happen? Yes, but not to the degree most people think. "Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7), but this does not mean that we will have a complete or precise foreknowledge of events. Jesus Himself warns us, "But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matthew 24:36), and just a few verses later, He tells His own disciples, "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming *at an hour when you do not expect Him*" (verse 44).

This is a massive hint that our understanding—as much as it has expanded over the last few decades—will still not be enough to remove the surprise from Christ's return! Paul also warns us in I Corinthians 13:9, 12, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part. . . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly." This should convince us that we do not know for certain how things will work out as the end approaches. We understand in part, meaning we have a vague idea of the course of events, but we cannot honestly be dogmatic about any speculative scenarios we devise. Every interpretation of end-time biblical prophecy should be accompanied with a proviso such as, "This is where things seem to be headed from what we understand right now."

It is good for us to remember what the apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:8: "Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; . . . whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away." The point of Christianity is not to know the final score before everyone else does. God has called us to glorify Him by putting on the image of His Son (II Corinthians 3:18). We must be careful that we do not let ourselves be distracted from what is most important.

Putting Out Flawed Study Practices

As managing editor of *Forerunner* magazine, I occasionally receive unsolicited articles from readers who want their work published. The articles are often substandard and sometimes even doctrinally wrong, but initially, I give them the benefit of the doubt and peruse their offerings.

Recently, I received an article on disfellowshipping from a person outside the Church of the Great God. God gives the church the authority to disfellowship a member who is habitually committing sin or is a danger to the congregation (Matthew 18:17; Romans 16:17-18; I Corinthians 5:1-5, 9-13; II Thessalonians 3:6, 14; Titus 3:10-11). Every private association possesses power of this sort. For instance, the Boy Scouts of America has the right as a private group to dismiss a scoutmaster if he does not meet its stated qualifications. While this authority to dismiss members is assumed by private groups in America, the church has it by direct command from the Word of God.

The fundamental reasons for using the authority to disfellowship are to protect the church and to convey to the disfellowshipped person the seriousness of his actions. It is, in a sense, spiritual quarantine. The sinning member is separated from the rest of the congregation so he will not "infect" them, and he is given time and space to deal seriously with his problem.

Disfellowshipping does not—indeed cannot—take away a person's salvation; it does not confine him to the Lake of Fire. Jesus Christ is the Judge (John 5:22; Acts 17:31; II Timothy 4:8), not any minister or church council. All disfellowshipping does is exclude the rebellious member from fellowship with the church. However, if he does not repent and continues in his sinful practices, he is indeed in danger of the second death (Revelation 20:14-15; see Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-31).

The author of the article I received on this subject, however, is definitely antagonistic to this practice, and he goes to great lengths to "prove" from Scripture that it should not be used. He begins by spiritualizing the perverse sexual relationship Paul condemns in I Corinthians 5, saying that the Bible is a "coded book," and when we decode this section, the apostle is really writing about getting involved in politics!

The author continues through several other points, pulling various verses out of context to support his plainly emotionally motivated assault on this doctrine. Peter warns us to treat Paul's epistles carefully, ". . . in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the rest of the Scriptures" (II Peter 3:16).

The author does this with I Corinthians 5:11: "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person." The apostle's meaning here is clear, but within a paragraph or two, the author of the article concludes that Paul is saying that the church has no authority to disfellowship one of its own! However, in verse 13, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 17:17 to back up his decision: "Therefore 'put away from yourselves that wicked person.'" And this is a section of Paul's writing that is not "hard to understand"!

This should sound a warning to those of us who study the Bible. There are proper ways to determine what it teaches, and there are downright improper and dishonest ways. We see several of the latter in this example:

- » First, our attitude must be that of a seeker of truth, not one of trying to prove a point.
- » Second, the context of a verse is vital to its meaning, and cutting it from that context and pasting it into another abuses the teaching.
- » Third, spiritualizing a scripture at the expense of its plain meaning over-complicates matters and increases the possibility of error.
- » Fourth, no one scripture will hold all the truth about a doctrine; one must gather all the biblical material on a subject to determine God's teaching.
- » Fifth, understanding the Greek or Hebrew meanings of words is fine, but no word's definition is enough to formulate a doctrine.

These are just a few of the principles of Bible Study we should follow in coming to understand the way of life God has called us to. We have a lifetime of study, contemplation, and prayer to learn and grow in it. We might as well do it correctly!