

Uncertain Terms: The Title of the First Volume of the Christian Bible

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Framing the Question¹

The topic that I propose to take up concerns a practical and yet deeply theological question: how shall we refer to the first volume of the Christian Bible? Stated differently, is it time for the title, “Old Testament,” to be replaced? A growing number of Christians say “yes” to this question. In fact, in many situations today the mere use of the title “Old Testament” is enough to identify one as unenlightened vis-à-vis Judaism. I intend to describe briefly why it is that the title “Old Testament” is currently under seige. I will then move into a longer discussion of why I think the traditional terminology should be maintained.

Some may be surprised to learn that at a growing number of Christian denominational seminaries the title “Old Testament” has already been effectively jettisoned. Just by perusing a handful of academic catalogues, even at random, one will find courses entitled, “Introduction to the Hebrew Bible” instead of “Introduction to the Old Testament.” Or, “Hebrew Bible Theology” instead of “Old Testament Theology.” Some seminaries have even changed the titles of their biblical professors. Positions that were once called “Professor of Old Testament” are now called “Professor of Hebrew Bible.” And the title “Hebrew Bible” is by no means the only new one in use. What Christians have traditionally called “Old Testament” is now variously called “Hebrew Scriptures,” “First Testament,” “Older Testament,” “Former Testament,” “Shared Testament,” “Israel’s Bible,” “the Bible of Israel,” “the Scripture,” “the Jewish Bible,” and even sometimes by names derived from the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition, like “Tanakh,” or “Miqra.” While all of these disparate names have something to recommend them, no single one enjoys anything like a consensus. For those who are so inclined, the only thing seemingly approaching a consensus is the dictum: “Use any title other than ‘Old Testament!’”

Whence comes this debate? In the United States particularly, the very face of biblical studies has changed over the last generation. The center of gravity in the study of the Bible has shifted from the denominational seminary to the largely secular college and university setting. Together with this shift new groups of voices have entered the scholarly conversation as well: women, people of color, and since Vatican II, Roman Catholics. But the new voice that most profoundly affects the

¹I dedicate this lecture to the two teachers from whom I have learned most: Duane A. Priebe, Professor of Systematic Theology, Wartburg Theological Seminary, and Jon D. Levenson, Albert List Professor of Jewish Studies in the Divinity School and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University.

study of the Old Testament, in my view, is the Jewish voice. In more and more schools across the country, both graduate and undergraduate, Jewish scholars occupy teaching positions in biblical studies that historically have not been possible for them. As a result, in many places in the United States today we now have this fascinating phenomenon of Jewish and Christian students sitting around the same table, studying what Christians have traditionally called “Old Testament,” and being taught by a Jewish professor. The fact that it has become commonplace makes it no less fascinating. In addition, if one attends any session on Hebrew Bible or Old Testament at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting, one would be hard-pressed to find a session that is not a mixed group of Jews and Christians. One could also mention the area of scholarly publication in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament where it is now possible for Christians and Jews to publish in the same series, like *Hermeneia* or *Old Testament Library* or *Anchor Bible*. Understandably, given the sheer religious demographics in the modern study of the Bible, numerous Christian presuppositions which used to frame the conversation are now subject to serious challenge. Scholars in particular have been engaged in the search for religiously neutral terminology in order to facilitate scholarly discourse.

But this phenomenon in and of itself is not enough to make our question a pressing one. Something else is needed in order to bring the question into focus. There is no doubt but that this something else derives from the inner-Christian struggle to come to terms with the role of the Jews and Judaism in Christian theology. Christian theology today is rightfully very wary of many of the standard supersessionist models that have been utilized by the church over against Judaism for two millennia. To put it differently, Christian theology (both systematic and biblical) is learning to speak of Judaism in the present tense rather than only in the past tense. In the shadow of unspeakable twentieth century atrocities, Christians are reexamining the church’s long, and in numerous cases, sorry history with Judaism and with the Jewish people. A significant part of this reexamination has been the willingness on the part of Christians to listen to the historical testimony of Jews. Testimony like the following from Samuel Sandmel, an American Reform Jew: “The pogroms in eastern Europe from which my parents fled began with the ringing of church bells. I remember as an American boy how my mother used to shiver whenever the bells rang in the church near our home.”² More and more Christians have begun to listen, and this listening has led to profound introspection. But it’s not just listening. In many places across the country Jews and Christians are talking with one another at a deep level. At places like the *Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies* in Baltimore, Christians have done and are doing hard work on a whole spectrum of issues that concern Christian-Jewish relations. It has taken a long time, but at least in the mainline churches perhaps we can finally say that anti-Judaism is no longer regarded as a Christian virtue.

As Christians have examined the role of anti-Judaism in Christian thought, we have tried to isolate the origins of this persistent Christian tendency. It has now become common to argue that the origins of Christian anti-Judaism are reflected most clearly in the name “Old Testament” itself. It is for this reason that our topic is more than merely a practical one. The argument is that supersessionism and anti-Judaism go hand in glove. The Church supersedes, replaces, displaces, the Temple and Synagogue in the same manner as “the new” supersedes “the old.” The

²Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 154.

conviction here is that the name or the title is at the root of the problem, and that to change the name is to begin to get at the problem. This is the broad context within which the debate over the title of the first volume of the Christian Bible is located.

But my argument in a nutshell will be that the name change (from “Old Testament” to something else) finally creates more problems for Christian theology than it solves, and that a richer understanding of the traditional Christian terminology will, in the final analysis, serve to advance Christian-Jewish dialogue rather than hinder it.

Before the Christian Bible

Where does the name “Old Testament” come from in the first place? More precisely, where does the name “Old Testament” as a title for the first volume of the Christian Bible come from? The first theologian to use this designation was Melito of Sardis (died ca. 190), but he uses the designation as one among several, and it is clearly not yet a technical term for him. It is apparently the case that the title as a technical term is coterminous with the title “New Testament” as used for the second volume of the Christian Bible. When did Christians begin to call the first volume of their Bible “Old Testament”? Only at the point when the second volume, the “New Testament,” was added. In other words, the title “Old Testament” was a relational term from the beginning. Before the New Testament was added, the Old Testament was not called Old Testament.

Primitive or early Christianity knew only one Bible, and that was the Jewish Bible (in Hebrew or more commonly in Greek). In the Gospels and Paul, this Bible is called “Scripture,” or “the Scriptures,” or “The Law and the Prophets,” or “The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” In introductory New Testament courses, students are always blown away when they figure out for the first time that the writings of the New Testament did not become “the New Testament” until long after they were written. There is no two-volume Christian Bible as we know it until the third century, and thus no Old Testament either.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves a bit. For while it is correct to say that the Jewish Bible was the only Scripture that the early Christians knew, it has to be acknowledged that these same early Christians developed ingenious methods for dealing with this Scripture. These methods were such that, from the perspective of Pharisaic and then Rabbinic Judaism, the Christian movement rather quickly came to be viewed as no longer Jewish. Early Christian interpretation of the Scripture yielded three broad results, and these are everywhere evident in early Christian writings. 1) The cultic/ritual demands of the Scripture were regarded as abolished. 2) The ethical/moral demands were considered to be still in force. 3) The Scripture as a whole was understood as primarily a collection of mysterious oracles/predictions/prophecies. There is nothing particularly peculiar about numbers 2 and 3. From the perspective of the rabbis, for Christians to acknowledge that the ethical/moral demands of the Bible were still in force, would have been a kind of “duh” moment. Regarding Scripture as primarily prophetic and oracular in character was not necessarily problematic either, because we now know from Qumran that such a view was thoroughly at home in the Judaism of that time. Where the Christians ran into trouble was with their teaching that the cultic/ritual demands of the Scripture had been abolished. Early on in the Christian movement, Christians distinguished between the cultic/ritual and the

ethical/moral. But if you have ever read the Pentateuch, you know that such a distinction is foreign to this literature. It is a fundamental characteristic of the Pentateuch, and of Judaism since the Pentateuch, that the cultic/ritual and the ethical/moral are inseparably interwoven. The great oddity of the Christian movement was that on the one hand it revered the sacred literature of the Jews as Scripture, but on the other it ignored most of the practical demands of this same Scripture, all of the cultic/ritual stuff.

What this means is that the literature that the Christians called Scripture was in a precarious and unstable position. This precarious position was exacerbated by the fact that a whole body of Christian literature was beginning to accumulate. Gospels, letters of various kinds, little theological treatises, apocalyptic works, church manuals. (Christians also had access to the great plethora of Jewish pseudepigraphical works as well). But there was no consistency in the way in which these Christian documents handled the Scripture. We so easily forget how complicated and confusing Christianity was in the first two centuries of its existence, that is, in the centuries prior to the canonization of the New Testament. Lutherans especially would do well to remember, or learn, that most Christian writings of the second century show only “slight Pauline influences.”³

Christianity’s ambiguous relationship to the Scripture could not go on indefinitely. The time was ripe for a Christian to step on the stage with the burning desire to achieve some clarity about the Scripture on the one hand, and about what constituted true, genuine Christian literature on the other. The individual who filled this role was Marcion of Sinope. Marcion came on the stage in the middle of the second century, his most important years being 145-160. According to Marcion’s great modern interpreter, Adolf von Harnack, “No other religious personality in antiquity after Paul and before Augustine can rival [Marcion] in significance.”⁴ Marcion was a reformer, a purifier, who wanted to return Christianity to what he regarded as its original pristine state. He solved the problem of the Church’s ambiguous relationship with the Jewish Scriptures by severing the relationship altogether! Marcion believed that Christ was completely unrelated to anything that had come before; in fact, that the Father of Jesus Christ was *not* the God who created heaven and earth, much less the God who chose the Jewish people, much less the God of the Jewish Scriptures. For Marcion, God the Father of Jesus Christ was merciful, redeeming love. Period. Marcion completely rejected the God of creation, the God of Sinai, the God of the Prophets, the Jewish Scriptures, and above all Judaism itself. The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with any of this, according to Marcion.

How could he justify such a move when most of the Christian literature then in circulation made no such claims? He justified it by rejecting most of the Christian literature then in circulation. Anything that contradicted his conviction that the God of Jesus Christ was merciful, redeeming love and nothing but merciful, redeeming love, had to go. Anything in Christian literature that contradicted or nuanced this understanding of God was the result, according to Marcion, of Jewish contamination. He systematically paired away these contaminations, and when he was

³Adolf Von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, translated by John E. Steely and Lyle Bierma (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1990), p. 9.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

finished, what was left was a highly edited and shortened version of the Gospel of Luke and ten similarly edited and shortened versions of Paul's letters. Marcion proposed what was in fact the first Christian Bible, which he called "The Gospel and the Apostle." No Jewish Bible, no God the Creator, no Jews, no Sinai, no prophets, no law, no cry for justice, no retribution. Just God the Father of Jesus Christ, pure, merciful, redeeming love. Pure grace. Before you think Marcion was completely off his rocker, just recall how many Christian sermons you've heard that essentially make the same point. Marcion, like many a modern Christian sermon, had no idea of what to do with the God whose 13 attributes are described in Exod 34:1-7.

Marcion believed that he was not creating a new theology. He genuinely believed that he was making it possible for people to hear what Paul had originally said before his writings were contaminated, along with all other Christian writings, by Jewish additions. How could he have interpreted Paul in such fashion? The easiest way to see it is to say it this way. Those things which for Paul are in creative tension become for Marcion things that are blatantly contradictory and mutually exclusive. Law and Gospel. Faith and works. Creation and redemption. Jew and Gentile. Justice and mercy. Universalism and particularism. For Marcion, one of these always rules out the other. Quite obviously, if that is the kind of theologian that you are, then the complex God of the Scripture of Israel is going to cause you all kinds of problems.

"OT" + "NT" = Christian Bible

The first attempt at a "Christian Bible" was Marcion's Bible. Marcion's theology was powerful and extremely popular, no doubt because he was utterly consistent. He clarified the problem of the church's ambiguous relationship with the Jewish Scripture by severing the relationship altogether. At the foundation of his theology was the conviction that the God whom we meet in the Jewish Scripture is not the Father of Jesus Christ. But the great problem with Marcion's theology had to do with what one has to give up in order to be a Marcionite. The two great theologians of the early church, Irenaeus and Tertullian, said that the cost is too high. Their arguments with Marcion centered around the conviction that the Christian story simply cannot be told in the way that Marcion wanted to tell it. That it is wrong to say that what happened in Jesus Christ was completely unrelated to anything that had come before. And above all that it was wrong to say that the God of the Jews, the God of Israel, was a different God than the God of Jesus Christ.

Irenaeus and Tertullian shared the Christian belief that something radically new had happened in Jesus Christ, but they also believed that the radically new was nevertheless integrally related to and dependent upon God's history with the people Israel and with the Jewish Scripture. Is there a tension between these two assertions? Absolutely. Radically new, and yet integrally related and dependent. It was in order that this tension might be preserved that the titles "Old Testament" and "New Testament" were coined. The church, led by Irenaeus and Tertullian, moved to preserve that which Marcion wanted to jettison, and a primary means of this preservation was in the naming of the Jewish Scripture as "Old Testament" and the linking of this Old Testament with a new sacred collection of specifically Christian writings, the "New Testament," complete with all of its Jewish contaminations. By the third century, the church had countered Marcion's Bible with a Bible of its own. It was a Bible that was still a little fuzzy around the edges, but the basic components of this new Bible were set. Henceforth Christianity would be characterized by a

Bible the two volumes of which were called “Old Testament” (Vetus Testamentum) and “New Testament” (Novum Testamentum). The term “testament” (in Latin) or “covenant” (in Greek) was shared by both volumes and pointed clearly to the absolutely crucial Christian claim that it was the same God who was at work in each, while the adjectives “old” and “new” pointed to the dialectical and even tensive relationship between the two volumes. It is not incidental to note that the church took over the Jewish Bible, lock stock and barrel, with no editorial additions.

But why and how did these two titles suggest themselves as names of the two volumes of the Christian Bible in the first place? Why these two names? The name “Old Testament” only occurs once in New Testament literature, and not at all in the Old Testament itself. In its only New Testament occurrence, in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul apparently uses the term to speak of the written covenant or testament of Mt. Sinai, but not to the Jewish Scriptures as such. The name “New Testament” as well occurs only a handful of times in New Testament writings, and in all of its occurrences it surely does not refer to written material, but rather to the cup of wine in the Eucharist. It is clear, therefore, that the names “Old Testament” and “New Testament” as titles for the two volumes of the Christian Bible have the character of impositions. Though occurring rarely in the material itself, the terms are imposed on the material in the form of theological titles, and as Christopher Seitz has argued, both “are derived from a selective understanding of the literature’s wider meaning and purpose.”⁵ Another way to say it is that the Bible does not name itself.

It is vital to recognize that the terminological issue with which we are wrestling is not a problem of earliest Christianity. Our problem cannot be resolved, for example, by returning to the practice and terminology of the New Testament period, because in the New Testament period there was no New Testament. The earliest Christians did not have the problem that we have, which is the problem of a two-volume Bible, how to explain the relationship between the two volumes, and what to call them. Equally crucial to recognize is that the terminology of “Old Testament” and “New Testament” did not emerge willy nilly; it was chosen very carefully. The simplicity of the terminology should not lead one to underestimate its sophistication and deeply theological character. The test of any alternative terminology is the extent to which the alternatives can accomplish theologically what the traditional terminology accomplishes for the church: which is to claim the Jewish Scripture as the foundation of the Christian story, to link this Scripture with another set of sacred writings (the specifically Christian ones) and to do so in dialectical and tensive fashion, and to preserve the all-important Christian conviction that both collections bear witness to the God of Israel. That is no small challenge.

Why The Traditional Terminology Should Be Maintained

I will now attempt to draw the threads of this lecture together by asking three questions. 1) What are some examples of wrong or offensive uses of the traditional terminology? 2) Why do the newer proposals not measure up? 3) What would an expanded understanding of the traditional

⁵Christopher Seitz, “Old Testament or Hebrew Bible?,” in *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 66. In Seitz’ own argument, the two titles in question are the Christian title “Old Testament” and the Jewish title “Torah.” It is these two titles that “are derived from a selective understanding...” But his argument fits with the point I am making as well.

language look like? None of what I have argued to this point is in any sense to imply that there are no problems with the traditional terminology. No theological language is without its problems. But I do intend to argue that the traditional language can and should be maintained by Christian theology, in spite of its weaknesses, and in spite of its vulnerability.

I.

I strongly resist the claim that it is wrong, or unenlightened, or offensive, or inherently anti-Jewish, for Christians to continue to use the title Old Testament. I grant that the title can be used, and has been used, wrongly, or offensively, but I resist the notion that the title as such is wrong or offensive. To the best of my knowledge, Jews have never objected to the Christian use of the title Old Testament as such. What Jews have objected to is the Christian presupposition of exclusivity in the use of this title, the presupposition of an exclusive claim to name the material and interpret the material. This has happened whenever Christians have spoken of the Old Testament in a manner that is merely oblivious to Judaism, or when Christians have used the title in a strictly polemical manner over against Judaism by insisting that the Old Testament is incomplete and can only be understood when read in the light of the New. As an inner-Christian phenomenon, however, Jews have no interest in dictating to Christians what our theological language should be. What Jews do resist is having Christian language and Christian presuppositions imposed on them. And Christians would certainly have to admit as well that we have learned much from Jews about what much of our terminology can imply either explicitly or implicitly about Jews and Judaism.

In this regard, the context in which one is speaking or studying, or the audience for which one is writing, is all-important. In a secular, or religiously “neutral” context, like the university classroom, or like the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting, a religiously neutral term like “Hebrew Bible” is a logical choice. It happens to be a term that can be agreed on by Jews and Christians, as well as by those who are either indifferent or hostile toward both. Another way to say it is that neutral terminology (non-theological terminology) like “Hebrew Bible” works very well when the parameters of the conversation are limited. For example, when the conversation is limited to the asking of purely historical questions, or if the task is to investigate the Hebrew Bible for its own sake. Christians and Jews can engage one another and the text very fruitfully at this level, and we do so.

But that which makes us Jews or Christians is ultimately not derived from this level of engagement with the text, as important as it is. We are Jews or Christians in large measure because of the other, broader contexts within which we read and interpret this material. And it is precisely these broader contexts of interpretation, literary, theological, and liturgical, that have generated the theologically charged titles that each of the religions has given to the Hebrew Bible: Torah for Jews and Old Testament for Christians. But there is a huge, unavoidable difference between the two ways that Christians and Jews refer to the Hebrew Bible. Judaism does not require Christianity in order to make sense of itself, and therefore the theological titles that Jewish tradition has imposed on its Bible do not implicate Christianity. But Christianity in its non-Gnostic, non-Marcionite form needs Judaism; it cannot be indifferent to the Jewish Scriptures or to Judaism. There are lots of ways of being Christian, but that which links Christians past and present, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, is the conviction that the story of Christ, the Apostles, and the Church includes the story of Israel, that they are integrally related. Franz

Rosenzweig, who has been described as the greatest religious mind that Judaism has produced in the twentieth century, put this issue in prophetically poignant terms: “Christianity is well aware of this relationship, of the dependence of its own development on the existence -- and no more than the existence -- of Judaism.”⁶ Thank God that since WWII, many Christian theologians have worked tirelessly to construct a theology that has effectively removed Rosenzweig’s parenthetical “and no more than the existence.”

II.

Early on I provided a list of some of the newer terminological proposals. To this point, I know of no terminology that can match the semantic density or the semantic possibilities yet untapped of the pair “Old Testament -- New Testament.” Some have argued that since “Old Testament” is not the way that the early Christians referred to the Scripture, that we are justified in casting it off and returning to early Christian terminology, like “the Scriptures” or “The Law and the Prophets.” But I think that to do so would only be to speak anachronistically. As I have already mentioned, the early Christians did not have our problem. It does us no good to adopt the language of a period that precedes the rise of the problem in the first place.

Other proposals can be described as neologistic, which is the opposite end of the spectrum from the anachronistic. Titles like “First Testament” or “Former Testament” or “Older Testament” are brand new, having never been used before, by anyone, Jew or Christian. Which is not necessarily a negative, but it’s just that in theology a neologism has to be very very good, not in order to catch on -- neologisms catch on all the time -- but in order to endure. And that is not even to mention that terms like “First Testament” and “Former Testament” are highly problematic from a Jewish perspective! They are far from religiously neutral terms. A title like “Shared Testament” may initially sound like a winner, but in the final analysis it suffers from the same flaw as does the misused notion of a “Judeo-Christian tradition.” It implies a level of mutuality between Judaism and Christianity that is historically false. The baggage of history cannot be so easily jettisoned.

The remaining proposals present a different kind of problem. For example, “Hebrew Bible and New Testament,” or “Tanakh and New Testament.” Hebrew Bible or Tanakh do not work so well for Roman Catholics or Orthodox Christians because these terms represent a smaller canon rather than the broader canon preserved in LXX and the Vulgate. Nor can they work for Protestants because, although we adopt the smaller Jewish/Hebrew canon, we nevertheless adopt the overall configuration of LXX.⁷ But a deeper problem becomes evident when we add the similarly sounding proposal of “Scripture and the Apostolic Witness.” These three proposals taken together are problematic because they are not really pairs at all. Calling our first volume “Hebrew Bible/Tanakh” and the second volume “New Testament,” only serves to obscure the relationship between the two volumes. In fact, the proponents of such terminology often abandon

⁶Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translated from the Second Edition of 1930 by William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 414.

⁷The theological implications of the differing configurations of MT and LXX have received far too little attention. See Marvin Sweeney, “Tanakh versus Old Testament: Concerning the Foundation for a Jewish Theology of the Bible,” in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim*, ed. Henry T.C. Sun, et al (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 353-372.

the question altogether. On the other hand, terminology like “Scripture” and “the Apostolic Witness,” may attempt to clarify the relationship somewhat, but in the end raises all kinds of questions about the scriptural nature of the second volume! In so doing, it can lead to the conclusion that the second volume is not Scripture at all, or at least less than Scripture, or a kind of second-order Scripture. For a Lutheran that is an impossibility.

III.

Finally, why maintain the traditional language? I hope that, in pointing out weaknesses in the newer proposals, I have not created the impression that I am leading up to the conclusion that we are simply stuck with the traditional terminology. I want to say something much stronger than that. I want to say that the traditional language is better, that it is richer. To be sure, the language of Old and New can be used simplistically. But what theological language is not similarly vulnerable? Good words, good titles, good phrases always contain more than was originally intended or originally perceived.

Maintaining the traditional language can summon Christian scholars to a renewed engagement with the question of the relationship between the Testaments. To be quite honest, modern Christian scholarship has become a little lazy on this issue, because we do not quite know what to say about it. A couple of years ago when members of our faculty were charged with the responsibility of formulating the questions that ELCA Senior seminarians would have to address in their approval essay, I toyed with the idea of asking them to address the problem of the relationship between the Testaments. But I realized that that would be grossly unfair, because in my view that is *the* question in biblical studies that our graduates are least equipped to handle. How do I read, interpret, preach the Old Testament as a Christian? In other words, how do I talk about the Christian Bible in an integrated, coherent manner? It is not the fault of our students. Modern Christian scholars can speak very easily about the Old Testament by itself and about the New Testament by itself. But ask modern biblical scholars to speak about the whole, and we become quite nervous. We get nervous because, to a large extent, we are constrained by the nature of our disciplines. We work in disciplines in which the parameters of the scholarly conversation are often limited. But I am becoming more and more convinced that Christian denominational seminaries are the logical place to pursue with rigor the broad question of the Christian Bible as a whole; that our seminaries are the logical place to recover a lively theological interplay between the Testaments. Seminary is a place where we ought to be able to explore the deeply relational character of the titles Old Testament and New Testament. We in fact are doing this all of the time whether we realize it or not; it is inescapable. But the challenge is to become conscious of what we are doing, and having done so, to do it better.

I suggest that a good place to start is by reclaiming the power in a word like “old.” It is certainly true that when the adjectives “old” and “new” square off against one another, “old” often gets the short end of the stick. New stuff is cutting edge, it is fresh, it is vibrant, youthful. Old stuff is antiquated, obsolete, mortal. New is forward, old is backward. Christianity historically has been powerfully affected by this negative/positive dichotomy between old and new. Rosenzweig the German Jew could even use the dichotomy to point to a basic distinction between Judaism and Christianity, to a distinction that is very deep in our respective psyches: “The type of the aged

Jew is as characteristic for us as the youthful type is for the Christian nations.”⁸ But what is the new that has lost contact with the old? What is the new that can only understand itself as standing over against the old? What is the new that has no respect for the old? It is rootless. It understands neither the character of the old nor that of the new. When we are children, probably the best thing that can happen to us is to make a new friend. The excitement that surrounds that discovery is one of childhood’s greatest pleasures. But when we think of life as a whole, and particularly if God grants us longevity, what greater blessing is there than to be able to point to another human being and say that he or she is my old friend? When we use “old” in that sense, the word implies not just history, but a special kind of history, a history that concerns us at a deep existential level. The adjective in this phrase communicates something of great power, which no other adjective can approach. It transfigures the noun that it modifies. I suggest that it can function similarly in the phrase Old Testament. It can call attention to the unique, irreplaceable, and enduring character of this Testament. So understood, we can move away from a standard and simplistic mode of relating old and new in merely a sequential sense.

I also want to argue that a renewed focus on the deeply relational character of the titles Old Testament and New Testament will, in the final analysis, serve to advance Christian-Jewish dialogue rather than hinder it. One sometimes gets the impression from the Christian participants in Christian-Jewish dialogue that we need to bracket the things that make us Christian in the first place, like the New Testament for example. But I am fully persuaded by the remarks of my friend Martin Kessler who has argued as follows:

A full and fruitful dialogue with Judaism can only come about when the church comes prepared with a well thought-out...biblical theology, just as we would expect our Jewish colleagues to bring to the table a ‘theology’ which faithfully represents the essence of the Jewish tradition. This would lead to an honest, unapologetic dialogue where neither side is supposed to sell out or ‘water down’ their positions (like Christians expected to set aside the New Testament). On the other hand, if Christians persist in bringing (only) the Old Testament, Jews are entitled to be suspicious that we are not showing all our cards.⁹

As Christian interpreters of the Old Testament, our work is incomplete, it is truncated, unless we are willing to read the Old Testament in the broader context of the Christian Bible as a whole. The irony of the current situation is that it is precisely our Jewish dialogue partners who expect us to do this very thing. Maintaining the language of Old Testament and New Testament can urge us to seek ever more creative ways of relating the Testaments, ways which do not denigrate the Jewish interpretive tradition, but ways which also accept and welcome the theological challenge inherent in our two-volume Bible.

To conclude. Old Testament is a hot term. It carries in its wake the baggage of history. Fully cognizant of this baggage, I nevertheless embrace the term as the bequest of the church catholic,

⁸Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, p. 408.

⁹Martin Kessler, review of James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), in *Seminary Ridge Review* 3/1 (2000) 101.

the title of the first volume of the book that is the church's heartbeat, the Christian Bible. I look forward in anticipation toward the future of biblical studies in this place with my colleagues Richard Nelson and Richard Carlson, and I thank God, the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg's staff and Board of Directors, my faculty colleagues, and my family for the opportunity to teach the Old and venerable Testament.