

Lion and Lamb Apologetics' Getting 'Unhitched' from the Old Testament? Andy Stanley Aims at Heresy

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Eventually, we learn to take an individual at his word. Andy Stanley is a master communicator, and he communicates very well and very often. His preaching and teaching often bring controversy, and he quite regularly makes arguments that subvert the authority of Scripture and cast doubt upon biblical Christianity. He returns regularly to certain themes and arguments -- so regularly that we certainly get the point. He evidently wants us to understand that he means what he says.

Earlier this year, Stanley brought controversy when he argued in a sermon that the Christian faith must be "unhitched" from the Old Testament. He claimed that "Peter, James, Paul elected to unhitch the Christian faith from their Jewish scriptures, and my friends, we must as well."

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Later, explaining his statement, Stanley told *Relevant* magazine, “Well, I never suggested we ‘unhitch’ from a passage of Scripture or a specific biblical imperative Again, I was preaching through Acts 15 where Peter, James, and Paul recommended the first-century church unhitch (my word, I’m open to an alternative) the law of Moses from the Gospel being preached to the Gentiles in Antioch.”

Indeed, in the sermon Stanley did not argue that any specific Old Testament command should be nullified. Instead, he went even further and told his listeners that the Old Testament should not be seen as “the go-to source regarding any behavior in the church.” In his view, the first century leadership of the church “unhitched the church from the worldview, value system, and regulations of the Jewish Scriptures.”

Again, controversy rightly erupted after those comments, spoken earlier this year. But in recent days Andy Stanley has returned to the same theme, this time in a conversation with Jonathan Merritt on his podcast, *Seekers and Speakers*.

In this conversation, Stanley speaks of outgrowing a childhood belief about the Bible and coming to understand what he presents as a far more complex reality. How complex? Well, Stanley argues that we must know that biblical references to the Scripture “did not mean the Bible.”

Note his words carefully:

“This is something I’m trying desperately to help people understand and every time I try to explain it I get misunderstood so here I go again. There was no “The Bible” until the fourth century. When we think about the Bible we think about a book that contains the Jewish Scripture and the Christian writings and such a thing did not exist until after Christianity became legal and scholars could come out of the shadows and actually put such a thing together.”

There is more:

“So the early church no one ever said in the early church, ‘the Bible says, the Bible teaches, the Bible says the Bible teaches,’ because there was no ‘The Bible.’ But the point of your question, there was Scripture but every time we see the phrase ‘the Scripture’ or ‘Scripture’ in the New Testament, as you know we have to stop and ask the question, what was this particular group of people referring to because there was no ‘The Bible’ and there was no book that contained all the Jewish Scripture because it was contained in synagogues and as you know virtually no one could read and write.”

Well, wait just a minute. It is true that Jesus and the Apostles did not have the Old Testament and the New Testament bound together in a book (codex) form. It is, of course,

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also plainly true that the New Testament did not exist until it was given, book by book, by the Holy Spirit to the church in the first century. But it is not true that references to “the Scriptures” or “the Scripture” by Jesus and the Apostles are any mystery to us. They are plainly referring to what we know as the Old Testament. There are references to “Moses and the Prophets” (Luke 16:29) and to the “Law and the Prophets”(Luke 16:16), but faithful Jews in the first century would emphatically have known exactly what *the Scriptures* are.

As a matter of fact, Mark Hamilton has documented the fact that the Greek phrase, *ta biblia*, “the books” was “an expression Hellenistic Jews used to describe their sacred books several centuries before the time of Jesus.”

The fact that the Old Testament Scriptures were at the time in scroll form in synagogues rather than book form is plain, but the fact is that the Jewish authorities made their arguments on the basis of appeal to the Scriptures, and so did Jesus and the Apostles. Both Jesus and the Apostles did make their arguments “according to the Scriptures” (see, for example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Consider Jesus preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth:

“And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:17-21)

Jesus was powerfully arguing “the Bible says” in a way that his hearers in the synagogue clearly understood, and that pattern is found throughout the New Testament. Geerhardus Vos underlines this fact when he states, with reference to the Kingdom of God: “The first thing to be noticed in Jesus’ utterances on our theme is that they clearly presuppose a consciousness on his part of standing with his work on the basis of the revelation of God in the Old Testament.” In John 5:46-47 Jesus rebuked those who did not believe in him with these words: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

Similarly, the Apostles made their arguments for the gospel of Christ with reference to the Old Testament and its testimony to Christ and the saving purpose of God. At no point

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in the New Testament is the Old Testament dismissed. Rather, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:17-19)

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The pattern is promise and fulfillment, not rejection and repudiation. This is true even in the case of Acts 15, with the apostles citing the authority of Amos 9:11-12 and even citing the binding authority of Genesis 9:4 on the Gentile believers. Again, the pattern is promise and fulfillment. Andy Stanley argues that the Old Testament should not be cited as “the go-to source regarding any behavior in the church,” but the moral law of the Old Testament remains honored by the church and repeated (even intensified) in the New Testament.

Peter, James, and Paul did not “unhitch the Christian faith from their Jewish Scriptures,” nor can we.

We are looking here at the ancient heresy of Marcion, who argued that the Old Testament must be repudiated by the church. Marcion, who lived about the years 85-160, taught that the Old Testament revealed a Creator deity who is not even the same God who sent Jesus. Unsurprisingly, he also held to a heretical Christology. The Old Testament deity was repugnant to Marcion, who argued that Christianity just make a clean break from Judaism. The Old Testament, he taught, reveals a vindictive law-giving creator deity who bears no resemblance to the merciful redeeming God revealed in Jesus Christ. As Irenaeus, one of the most significant church fathers argued, “Marcion himself divides God in two, saying that one is good, the other judicial, and in so doing takes God away from both.”

Marcion was embarrassed by the Old Testament, and so are many modern people. Andy Stanley, at the very least, seems to fear that embarrassment in others, even if he does not identify with it himself.

He spoke this way with Jonathan Merritt: “I’m convinced that we make a better case for Jesus if we leave the Old Testament or the old covenant out of the argument.” We can make a better case for Jesus than the case Jesus made for himself?

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But the embarrassment comes through clearly in Andy Stanley's comments in the interview. He spoke of people who have "lost their faith" because they read the Old Testament, and then said this:

"It's the same God. But he was doing two different things. All that differentiating between those things is so important. Again, in this sermon, I said, 'Hey, it's time that we face the facts and unhitch our faith and our practice from some of these Old Testament values that we can appreciate in their original context, but we really don't have any business dragging them into a modern context.'"

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To be clear, Andy Stanley does not endorse the full heresy of Marcionism, which was universally condemned by the early church. He actually appears to *aim* for the heresy of Marcionism, and his hearers are certainly aimed in that direction. He clearly says that God is the same God in both testaments, but says that he reveals himself in two completely different ways. Just like Marcion, he argues that the church must "unhitch" from the Old Testament. He actually says: "I am convinced for the sake of this generation and the next generation, we have to rethink our apologetic as Christians, and the less we depend on the Old Testament to prop up our New Testament faith the better because of where we are in [the] culture."

The church cannot "unhitch" from the Old Testament without unhitching from the gospel Jesus preached. Speaking of the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus said "it is they that bear witness about me." (John 5:39)

Alarmingly, in the podcast Stanley questions whether Jesus actually meant his own references to Old Testament narratives to be taken as historical. He said: "Then a person has to decide, okay, well actually Jesus references the Garden of Eden, or he references in the beginning when God created the first two people, he references Jonah. Then you have to decide when the Son of God references these people and these incidences and these prophets, what did he mean? I am comfortable, not everybody is, but I am comfortable letting the conversation go from there."

It is very instructive to remember that the most influential theological liberal of the twentieth century, Adolf von Harnack, chose Marcion as his theological hero. Why? Because, like Marcion, he wanted to reduce Christianity to what he claimed to be its essence, the benevolent fatherhood of God. All the doctrines of orthodox Christianity, including the doctrines concerning the divinity of Christ, were dismissed as either Jewish or Greco-Roman encrustations.

[By the way, I am sure that Andy Stanley means no anti-Semitism in referring to the Old Testament as the "Jewish Scriptures, but this use does have the implied effect of

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identifying these Scriptures only with the Jewish people, and not with Christianity. But the Christian identification of the Old Testament as the “Jewish Scriptures” has a dangerous pedigree. In any regard, Adolf von Harnack must also be remembered as seeking to champion Marcion within German Protestantism just as anti-Semitism was rising once again with deadly power in Germany. As Alister McGrath notes, “Sadly, Marcionism is a heresy that seems to be revived with every resurgence of anti-Semitism.”]

The issues actually reach deeper. In recent years, Andy Stanley has encouraged getting over “the Bible tells me so.” He actually claimed in 2016 that the church veered into “trouble” when it began to make its arguments on the basis of the Bible. He cited “deconversion” stories in which people told him that they lost their Christian faith when they lost confidence in the Bible. He said: “If the Bible is the foundation of your faith, here’s the problem: it’s all or nothing. Christianity becomes a fragile house of cards religion.”

In the podcast interview, he gives us another glimpse of what he means:

“Now, for you and me, it is much easier for us to embrace all of those things as historical primarily because of how we were raised, but I totally get when a 25-year-old or a 35-year-old comes to faith in Jesus and then starts reading the Old Testament. They’re kind of looking like, ‘Really?’ Well, you know, that’s difficult, but that doesn’t undermine my faith, and I would never press somebody to say, ‘Well if you can’t accept all of it as historically true, then you can’t really be a Christian.’ I think that’s a little bit absurd.”

But another key question is whether one can be a faithful Christian while denying the truthfulness of Scripture. Jesus himself makes the point that without the Old Testament as the Word of God, we really do not know who he is. Then what does it mean to be a Christian?

As we sing, Jesus Christ is the church’s one foundation, but we cannot know him apart from the Bible.

In this latest interview, Andy Stanley also suggests that “Christianity ultimately and eventually created the Bible.” That is consistent with Roman Catholic theology, but not with evangelical Christianity. In the interview Stanley affirmed again that affirmation of the virgin birth is not necessary. He had earlier stated, “If someone can predict their own death and resurrection, I’m not all that concerned about how they got into the world.”

But the New Testament is very concerned about how Jesus got into the world, and if he was not [conceived by the Holy Spirit](#), then he was conceived in some other way. Here we

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need to remember that the etymology of heresy is rooted in choice. A heretic denies a belief central and essential to Christianity. But heresy also takes the form of choice. You can choose to believe in the virgin birth or not, Stanley argues; he is not all that concerned about it.

Several years ago, I argued that Andy Stanley represents a new face of theological liberalism. In our day, he is playing the role that was played by Harry Emerson Fosdick in the early twentieth century. Stanley may not intend to play that role—he sees himself as an apologist.

So did Fosdick. He sought to rescue Christianity from itself, from its doctrines and truth claims. He cited his own “deconversion” stories as justification for remaking Christianity.

He also sought to “unhitch” Christianity from the Old Testament. In his famous 1923-1924 Beecher Lectures on Preaching at Yale, Fosdick called for a new, modern understanding of the Bible. This would require jettisoning what were for him and many others the embarrassing parts of the Old Testament. He described the effort to retain much of the Old Testament as “intellectually ruinous and morally debilitating.” To the young preachers of that day, Fosdick argued: “The Old Testament exhibits many attitudes indulged in by men and ascribed to God which represent early stages in a great development, and it is alike intellectually ruinous and morally debilitating to endeavor to harmonize those early ideals with the revelations of the great prophets and the Gospels.”

Here we go again.

- ☞ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), p. 27.
- ☞ Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 131.
- ☞ Irenaeus quote from Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 36-37.
- ☞ Mark Hamilton, “[From Hebrew Bible to Christian Bible: Jews, Christians, and the Word of God](#),” (PBS FrontLine, April 1998).
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/scriptures.html>

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