

Old becomes new

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

The other night, while doing my bathtub reading of scholarly journals, I came across two references to one subject. Taken together they almost roused me from the torpor induced by the whirlpool. Not quite. But later, when I recollected that emotionless time in tranquillity, I woke up to the import of my reading.

The subject was what to call the Old Testament. Those of us of a certain generation have always termed the Old Testament the Old Testament. We became aware that that could sound demeaning to Jews when we were asked, "What would you think if *your* scriptures were represented as containing only the old stuff, now transformed or replaced by something else?" We answered, "Teach us what to call it, and we'll call it that."

By common consent most of us began to accept the alternative term "Hebrew scriptures." I've heard—and perhaps preached—many a sermon in which the preacher, after instinctively speaking of the Old Testament, backed off and said something like "um-ah-oops-um-ah . . . the Hebrew scriptures." When citing the Torah one could always punt by calling it "Torah." One imagined all Jewish and most intellectual, in-the-know people responding, "Thanks, thanks, you politically and interreligiously sophisticated and sensitive you!"

Now, my bathtub reading told me, Jewish and Christian revisions or reversions are under way. Friend Arnold Jacob Wolf writes in *Judaism* that "Old Testament" is "an opprobrium that some Jews, like Daniel Boyarin, prefer to the now more common 'Hebrew Bible' or "'First Testament.'"

In *Theology Today* Bernd Janowski of Tübingen says he would argue on behalf of the traditional designation, "Old Testament." He says, "Throughout the history of Christianity, the term 'Old Testament' has been understood time and again to refer to a book that is 'obsolete' and 'superseded' by the New Testament. This connotation can only be avoided and overcome in view of the subject matter." Janowski cites a number of other terminological updaters who go back to "Old Testament."

What to do? We have been similarly trained to replace “B.C.” and “A.D.” with “B.C.E.,” only to run into Jewish scholars who say, in effect, “Oh, call it B.C. and A.D., since you have succeeded in getting the world to number years from the time of Christ, anyhow.”

So now if a well-intentioned person says “Old Testament,” one crowd—the culturally lagging one, if *Judaism* and *Theology Today* authors are right—will accuse the speaker of being insensitive, “obsolete.” But say “Hebrew scriptures” or “First Testament” and the avant-garde scholars will leap on you. Or you can say “Old Testament” but then spend a paragraph, as Janowski implies is necessary, to let context and subject matter justify you.

If only advance-guard, guard and rear-guard could get their temporal acts together. Then those of us who want to be both current *and* sensitive would not have to stumble around.