

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 3/14/21

Last week we talked about the parallels I see between the Bible and the rabbinic literature like the Talmud, which has been characterized as an anthology of debate. The Bible, we saw, also contains multiple voices, multiple perspectives on God and the world. I argued that the Bible is a discussion among various writers, a conversation not a lecture or sermon. I want to continue today in exploring this point and explaining its importance for how we approach the Scriptures.

In his masterwork, *Heavenly Torah*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel discusses at great length (800 pp.!) two opposing viewpoints in the rabbinic tradition about the nature of Torah, one emphasizing its thoroughly divine, heavenly nature and one recognizing its human character, that God didn't just dictate the words to Moses who reported them verbatim but rather that Moses had a hand in formulating and shaping the teaching in Torah. Scripture is not just God's words but also Moses' words. The emphasis on Torah as the literal word of God has dominated traditional Judaism, but Heschel is arguing that the alternate perspective that needs to be taken into account as well. We have seen the importance in Judaism of the idea that we are partners with God in doing God's work in this world. Heschel argues that there is a human partnership with God even in the act of revelation.

As an example, he points to the two different versions of the Sabbath commandment, one in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. Exodus 20:8 says, "Remember the Sabbath" while Deuteronomy 5:12 says, "Keep (or, guard) the Sabbath." We saw that the two versions of this commandment differ not only in wording but also in rationale: Exodus roots the Sabbath observance in the creation story while Deuteronomy connects it with the liberation from slavery in Egypt. Of course, those perspectives are not contradictory but complementary. But the difference in wording bothered the ancient rabbis. If Torah is the literal word of God, which word or words did God actually say on Mt. Sinai? They concluded that God must have said both words at the same time, an idea that found its way into the Sabbath song *Lechah Dodi*: "Keep and remember in a single utterance/The One God caused us to hear." Heschel concludes that we need both perspectives on Torah: "both these and those are the words of the living God."

So if you subscribe to the idea that Scripture is dictated by God directly, then you have to argue that miraculously God said two different things at the same time. Alternatively, you can argue that while both are the word of the living God, they are two different ways in which Moses communicated God's word to the Israelites. The Bible then has what I call an incarnational quality to it. It is both a divine word and a human word. The Church, like Jewish tradition, has always tended to emphasize the divine character of Scripture (and for Christians, the divine nature of Jesus) and been uncomfortable with its human nature. But if Jesus is in some sense the Word of God (John 1:1), he is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Scripture is also the Word made flesh, the divine Word in human words. That makes

some Christians very uncomfortable but looking at the nature of the Scriptures themselves, as we have done, I see no way around this conclusion.

To illustrate the need for embracing multiple perspectives in Scripture, Heschel goes on to quote the Talmud: “One who is blind in one eye is exempt from the pilgrimage” (*Chagigah* 2a). In context, this is talking about the requirement that all Israelite males make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the three major feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. But Heschel uses it as a metaphor for the spiritual pilgrimage, for the quest for truth. He applies it to the way we read Scripture. Just as our physical sight relies on two eyes, on two slightly different points of view being held together at the same time in order to create a complex depth of field (what is called the “parallax effect”), so also our understanding of spiritual things requires a diversity of perspectives. We need both eyes for the pilgrimage. Or switching the metaphor back, we need to be able to hear and listen to the various voices in the discussion, the divine voice and the human voices.

Rabbi Sacks says that “in Judaism there is something holy about argument. Why so? Because only God can see the totality of truth” (*Life-Changing Ideas*, p. 68). We humans only see fragments of the truth at any one time; we need the multiplicity of perspectives. You cannot get God’s perspective on things with a simple linear sequence, with tunnel vision, with only one human point of view. Heschel asks, “Is it possible to have a living Torah without the struggle of opposites, without disputes, without the many permutations of ideas and outlooks?” (*Heavenly Torah*, p. 702). If Torah, if Scripture, is to be a living word, the word of the living God, a word that still speaks to us today, then we must accept the complexity of the way it communicates to us and not try to reduce it to one single point of view. We have to approach God’s word with two eyes.

So when you come to the Bible with a fixed set of ideas about what you are going to find there, then you will only find what you already think you know and never hear the other voices that are asking you to consider different perspectives. You will never see the Bible clearly, three-dimensionally. You will be blind in one eye. Our attempts at harmonizing the various voices in Scripture into one single theological statement actually do the Bible and the Church a great disservice. Christian theology almost inevitably silences some of those biblical voices, while at least some of what we have taught is simply wrong because it has ignored those voices. ***The Bible refuses to conform to our expectations of it.***

Scripture, as we see in the creation stories, is a kind of dialectic or give and take between design and disorder, between providence and freedom, between God’s will and human will. We have seen that Torah itself is not just law code but rather embeds its legal material in stories. The laws reflect the ideal, God’s will, what ought to be, while the stories portray the real, human action, what is. We cannot understand the one without the other. (We are going to look at this point more closely in our next section.) The Bible gives us God’s laws but it also gives us stories of humanity in all its messiness without necessarily commenting on it, leaving it up to the reader to try to puzzle out what those stories mean and how they relate to the laws. And then comes the even more difficult task of asking how they relate to our lives now, thousands of years later.

This view of the biblical narratives as depicting the messiness of the human situation ought to caution us about using the stories as moral examples, as illustrations of godly behavior. I've never understood why anyone would teach the stories of Gideon or Samson to Sunday School children as if those men were "heroes." A few years ago in our men's group, we decided to read a Christian book about David, supposedly a "man after God's own heart." (1 Sam. 13:14: By the way, I think this is a Hebrew idiom that does not mean someone with a heart like God's, but rather, someone God has set his heart on, a man of God's own choosing, as the context makes clear. The verse is about God's heart, not David's. God chose David but also Saul, not to mention Gideon and Samson, but that says nothing about the moral character of any of those men.) The idea was that this would help us learn how to become such men. But as we delved into the book and began to compare what its pious author said to what was actually in the Scriptural texts, we discovered a great disconnect. Contrary to what the book kept saying, the biblical David did not look very much like an example to follow. If anything, he seemed more like an example of questionable behavior, behavior to avoid. Our study finally broke down because people were growing increasingly frustrated with the "real" David who was not at all like the imaginary one of Sunday School piety and countless sermons, not at all someone for a men's group to hold up as a role model. You need two good eyes to read the Bible.