

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 3/6/22

This week I began reading a book called *The Politics of Jesus* by Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., a seminary professor and ordained AME elder. What we have been talking about is precisely the issue he begins his discussion with in the book. “I was raised on the bland Jesus of Sunday school, the meek, mild Jesus who told us that we need not worry about our troubles, just bring them to him. He was a gentle, serene, nonthreatening Jesus whose only concern was getting believers into heaven.” He says that his parents, like most black Christians when he was growing up, “knew only a long-suffering Jesus who was concerned with the things of heaven, with little thought for the matters of this world, matters like social injustice, racial and gender inequities, or the systematic oppression of the poor.” He tells of his growing dissatisfaction with this Jesus. “I only knew that there must be a Jesus who loves us so fully that he wants the same liberation from fear and oppression and exploitation for us on earth as he promised awaits us in heaven. I just couldn’t reconcile this growing realization with the fact that nowhere in the Church did I hear this Jesus preached about, a Jesus who cared not only about our souls but about our earthly circumstances too. Finally, in my early teens I left the Church altogether, vowing never to return.”

Of course he does eventually return, but with a radically different view of Jesus, which he presents in the rest of the book. And in his discussion he starts where we have started in this course. “To fully appreciate the politics of Jesus we must begin with the most basic factor in his worldview and social identity: his Jewishness.” Obery insists we must understand Jesus as an “observant Jew” whose teaching was “consistent with the tenets of traditional Judaism.” He says that the foundational story of both Judaism and the entire Judeo-Christian faith tradition, the story that shaped Jesus’ life and ministry is “a *political* event—the liberation event that was the Exodus.” All of this is an elaboration of what Howard Thurman argued in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which Obery credits as a major influence on his thinking.

I have been developing an argument along these same lines, that Christianity has been too focused on life after death and has not appreciated the Old Testament’s focus on this life. Last week I raised the troublesome question about whether our faithfulness to God comes primarily because of hope for an eternal reward and fear of eternal punishment, neither of which motivated the faithfulness of the OT saints. The whole question that sets the framework for the discussion in the book of Job is closely connected to this: does Job serve God only because God has been good to him? Would Job continue to be faithful if all of that was taken away? Is God simply our big sugar daddy in the sky?

I think this over-emphasis on life after death in Christianity comes from our failure to be properly grounded in the Scriptures of Israel. When I was growing up, the Sunday School class that my parents attended at our church was called “The Bereans.” Who were the Bereans? Berea was a city in Macedonia, northern Greece, and Paul preached in a synagogue there. The synagogue members listened attentively and then we are told that

they “searched the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11). The word “Scriptures” here of course refers to what we call the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets that Jesus pointed people to when they asked about eternal life. Paul’s sermons were evaluated on the basis of their faithfulness to Israel’s Scriptures. Paul later defends himself before the Roman governor from charges that he is stirring up trouble among Jews by saying, “I serve/worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything which is in accordance with the Law and written in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14). Paul’s letters are full of quotations and references to the Scriptures as are the rest of the NT writings. In this class you have seen me evaluating what Paul and other NT writers say on the basis of Israel’s Scriptures. That is where you have to begin.

In many ways, the New Testament is really more of a series of Christian footnotes to the Old Testament. The NT confirms and builds on the perspective of the OT and moves the story forward. But the NT cannot stand on its own and was never meant to. The problem for many Christians is that they read the NT as if it were the whole Bible (and in fact most people only select a few passages or favorite verses out of the NT to shape their thinking and ignore the rest). The NT should be our end point, not beginning.

As John Goldingay argues, “*Only when people have learned to take the Old Testament really seriously can they be entrusted with the story of Jesus. The church has reversed that argument and turned Christian faith into a faith that is itself truncated*” (Old Testament Theology, Vol. 1, p. 21). Truncated, in the sense of being abbreviated, partial, diminished, watered down by our refusal to take seriously the teaching in the rest of Scripture. We have simply waved our magic “faith-not-works” wand to effortlessly do away with all that Jewish “legalism,” and so we have failed to appreciate how all the Scriptures are instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). We have failed to follow the example of the Bereans and evaluate even the writings of Paul on the basis of Israel’s Scriptures. Instead we have used a mis-reading of Paul to undermine and ignore Torah.

Goldingay points to some significant differences between the Old and New Testaments, ones that I have been emphasizing in this course: the Old “*is more interested in creation, in the world of the nations and politics; it is more accepting of death and of the ambiguities of human life; it lacks a ‘positive’ picture of life after death or a stress on the Messiah; it understands human sinfulness differently; it stresses reverence for God; it sees us as free to complain at God and to express doubt; it emphasizes enjoyment of everyday family life and food and drink; it values sacramental worship; and it enjoins detailed outward obedience to divine commands. My attitude to such differences is to see them not as points where the New Testament surpasses the Old, but as points where Christians are especially likely to have something to learn.*” That has been the whole point of this class, and of my teaching for the past 30 years. Because the Church has not been firmly rooted in the Old Testament, its understanding of the New Testament and of God’s purposes in the world has been shallow and incomplete.

Only when you have learned to take the Old Testament really seriously can you move into the story of Jesus, because Jesus and all his early followers took it really seriously. That is one of the implications of the opening verses of the book of Matthew—another genealogy that everyone skips. Until you understand what those verses are about, you cannot proceed with the rest of the story. Why is the story of Abraham and his family

important as a starting point for the story of Jesus? Why, from all the people in the Scriptures does Matthew single out for inclusion in Jesus' family tree the stories of Tamar the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite and Uriah the Hittite? Or why does Mark begin his story of Jesus with quotes from Isaiah and Malachi? And why does John start off, "In the beginning"? As I have argued, new Christians should not be given the book of John to read, and certainly not Romans. That would be like starting to read a Shakespeare play with Act 4. They should be directed to Genesis, which is foundational for everything else.

Only when you have taken Torah seriously as God's word can you move on to later matters. Until you have wrestled with Genesis 1:1's "in the beginning," you cannot get your mind around John 1:1's "in the beginning." Unless you have thought deeply about humans being created in God's image, you cannot consider what it means that Jesus is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) or why it is so important to love your neighbor. Unless you fully grasp the fundamental importance of the Sabbath in Torah, you will not understand Jesus' affirmation of the Sabbath as a gift to humanity nor what the "Sabbath rest" means in Hebrews. Unless you are clear about the meaning and purpose of Abraham's call, you will not know what it means for Gentiles to have the faith of Abraham (Rom. 4:16) or the blessings that come through that faith to all people (Gal. 3:7-9) or how being part of Abraham's family is connected to our baptism (Gal. 3:26-29). Unless you appreciate the corporate nature of God's call to Israel, you will not see the importance of God's call to the church and what it means to be a community whose values are radically different from the world's.

To understand Jesus and his teaching, you need to listen first to Moses and the Prophets, as Jesus insisted (Matt. 5:17; 22:40; Luke 16:29-31). To understand what "eternal life" really means, you have to follow Jesus' instructions to look to the law of Moses (Matt. 19:16-17; Mark 10:17-19; Luke 10:25-26; 18:18-20), where oddly enough there is nothing about "life after death." Until you embrace the "weightier matters of the Law" (Matt. 23:23), you won't know how to be a disciple of Jesus. To understand redemption you need to turn first to the book of Exodus. To understand sacrifice you need to explore the book of Leviticus. To understand the covenant you need to dig into Deuteronomy. Before you start reading about the Law in Paul you need to actually read and study Torah, which Paul says is "holy and just and good" (Rom 7:12; see Acts 24:14; Phil. 3:5-6). To understand the new covenant in Hebrews you need to work through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And to make any sense of the book of Revelation, you need a thorough grounding in the whole of Tanakh.

That sounds like a lot, and it is, but it is vitally important for our faith. The first Christians were all Jews and their understanding of God and God's purposes in the world was shaped by Torah. They saw Jesus as fulfilling those Scriptures, continuing what God had started with Abraham, not overturning it for something completely different. Their spiritual lives were based on what we call the Old Testament, and their sense of calling and mission in the world came from that Bible. When Gentiles started coming to Christian assemblies, they would immediately have begun a process of study and education in those Scriptures (like the Bereans). In fact, it seems clear from Acts that many of those Gentiles had already been attending synagogues and had begun to be educated in the Jewish

Scriptures. We see an Ethiopian court official wrestling with a passage from Isaiah as he travels home from worshipping in Jerusalem (Acts 8). Paul can write letters like the book of Romans to Gentiles and assume that they can follow his deeply complicated arguments from Torah and the Prophets and the Psalms. And remember, no one in Paul's day had their own personal copy of the Scriptures. When Paul's letters were read aloud in Christian groups, they would have had to know those Scriptures and the context of Paul's quotations by heart in order to understand what he was saying. So the life and growth of the Church was directly dependent on its foundation in the Old Testament. New people seeking to understand the Jesus movement would have been directed to Torah and, like the Bereans, they looked to Israel's Scriptures to see if what the Christians preachers were saying was accurate.