

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 3/7/21

We have been talking about the meaning of arguments for the sake of heaven and saw the contrast between a genuine concern to find the truth versus an argument that is simply a power struggle. The rabbis say that the first will have lasting value and the second won't. I tried to make what I thought was a simple point with reference to the civil war: the idea that a power struggle does not win the argument. The civil war didn't change anyone's mind about the morality of slavery or about how African Americans should be treated. So we are still fighting those battles because the war didn't solve the issue. It abolished the institution of slavery but that simply led to people finding other means of enslaving and oppressing people of color. The argument was never resolved in a positive way, in a way that would last.

What I am particularly interested in thinking about is what this means for us as Christians, especially in an American church that is deeply divided. If Christians cannot figure out how to argue productively then there is no hope for our nation. If the Church simply reflects the deep divisions and power struggles that exist in the world, then there is no hope for the Church ever being a light to that world or being able to bring it good news.

To do this, Christians would have to adjust how they have been conducting arguments with other Christians. And I think this would also require a rethinking about the Bible itself. To help us think more deeply about this I want to look at how the topic we have been considering has implications for how we look at the Bible and how we think about the word of God.

5. "These and Those are the Words of the Living God"

We have seen that the rabbinic literature is essentially an anthology of discussion and debate. I would argue that the same holds true for the Bible itself. The Bible is not one book but a collection of many books. It contains multiple voices with multiple perspectives that do not always agree on everything, as we saw with the issue of divorce. Yet we affirm that "both these and those are the words of the living God," that all of the Scriptural writers are inspired and that the Bible is in some sense the word of God. What this rabbinic saying means is that divine inspiration does not mean uniformity, does not communicate in one voice but in many.

The opening chapters of the Bible teach us this way of reading the Bible if we are willing to pay attention. Here we encounter two distinct creation stories. Genesis chapter one contains a carefully structured sequence of events in which creation is portrayed as a balancing of opposites: light/dark, day/night, heavens/earth, land/water, male/female. It is an orderly hierarchical structure presided over by the divine Voice, effortlessly speaking things into being and putting everything in its proper place. Its perspective comes from above, from Heaven.

The second chapter of Genesis provides a view from below, from the earth, a story in which God comes down and gets his hands dirty: he fashions the human being like pottery from the clay of the ground and plants a garden for him to live in. To provide companionship, first God fashions animals in the same way from the same ground (v. 19), and when they are not found to be adequate partners God performs surgery on the man and (literally) “builds” a woman out of his rib. So the order of operations here is different from chapter one and the story has a completely different feel.

While chapter one depicts a God majestically transcendent over his creation, chapter two depicts a God intimately involved in its very dirt, a God who is a potter and a gardener and a surgeon and a construction worker, a God who cares about human feelings and works by trial and error to get things just right for them. In chapter one, creation is highly ordered and carefully patterned by the masterful deity who is center stage. In chapter two there is an *ad hoc* feel to what God does, a messiness to the creation, where humans and their needs are at the center of things.

To see these two accounts as contradictory, as many scholars have, betrays a modern narrow-minded arrogance and condescension towards the ancient authors, as if they really didn't know what they were doing. But whoever joined together these two stories obviously could see that all their details did not line up. However they included both stories because each one in its own way captures something essential about the creation, about God and humanity. Portraying the complexity of the truth about God, humans, and the world demanded such a multiple perspective, in part to caution us not to take all this too literally or think that we could ever arrive at a complete understanding of God. I would argue that these accounts are not so much contradictory as complementary, and they prepare the way for the type of literature that we are to encounter in the rest of the Bible.

The Old Testament contains additional perspectives on creation, other tellings of the story, most notably in Job 38-41 which removes humans from center stage and focuses on the wild, untamed natural world that exists completely apart from humans and is not there for their benefit. It is a world that is mysterious and scary and frustrating to humans yet very much under God's authority. It is an important enlargement of the stories in Genesis, one that makes our understanding of those traditional passages more complex. Psalm 74, in language similar to the book of Job, tells of God taming the violent chaos of the sea monsters like Leviathan as part of the creation process. Proverbs 8 gives us yet another perspective: its creation account is narrated by Ms. Wisdom (as she has been called, since the word for “wisdom” in Hebrew is feminine), whom God birthed before creating the world and who is there with God helping him in his work and frolicking with delight as He does so. (The gospel of John will echo this passage in its own unique version of the creation story.) The Bible is in fact a dialogue of voices.

Such multiple perspectives are a regular literary feature in the Bible. The Law is given in Exodus and Leviticus, but then Deuteronomy is literally a “second law,” a slightly different version both of the wilderness narrative and the Sinai laws. It contains modifications and clarifications and developments of the three books that precede it. Chronicles begins with a long genealogy that rewinds the story back to Adam, but most of the two-part narrative retells a condensed version of the royal history in Samuel and Kings

but from a more overtly pious standpoint (2 Sam. 24:1 has God telling David to take a census, which the story later denounces as sinful. 1 Chron. 21:1 attributes David's action to Satan.)

The book of Job begins with a heavenly perspective on its events, but for the rest of the book Job and his friends do not have that perspective and it is never revealed to them. That heavenly perspective at the beginning gives readers a feeling that they know what is going on even if Job does not. But God's powerful speech at the end also calls into question that smug sense of humans having all the answers. Most of the book itself is a dialogue and debate between Job and his friends, a debate about the relationship of righteousness to suffering that reflects a larger discussion going on in other parts of Scripture. The book of Job is a paradigm of the Scriptures as a whole.

The New Testament contains 4 different gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, not one, with two distinct accounts of Jesus' birth and multiple versions of his death and resurrection. There are two different versions of the temptation of Jesus, two different versions of the Beatitudes. Even Paul's life-changing experience on the Damascus Road is recounted three different times in Acts, with interesting variations among the versions. To try to harmonize these obliterates the distinctive voice and teaching of each of the gospel writers. Early attempts at harmonization were ultimately rejected by the Church, which simply placed the four versions of Jesus' story side by side, like the two creation accounts. A single story, a single perspective on things, cannot encompass all of God's truth.

So the Bible contains a wide variety of voices and viewpoints. We have the voices of priests and prophets, of historians and poets, of lawmakers and philosophers, of pastors and visionaries. They all have distinctive ways of looking at things. The book of Joshua narrates the triumphant conquest of the Promised Land by the united tribes. The book of Judges follows with a dark depiction of grim chaos in Israel because of conflict among the tribes and their failure to fully conquer the people of the land. In our Bible, this is followed by Ruth, which takes place in the same time period as the judges but is a lovely story of faithfulness and love between an Israelite and a foreigner. The contrasts couldn't be greater. The Psalms and Proverbs tend to emphasize the earthly rewards that God gives to the righteous while Job and Ecclesiastes tell us things are not quite that simple. Indeed, the book of Job is a direct challenge to other Scriptural passages and other pious people who suggest that God always rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, that if you are faithful to God your life will be a bed of roses. For many reverent readers of the Bible looking for spiritual pabulum, the Song of Songs is shockingly erotic. And the book of Ecclesiastes has a perspective on life that seems so contrary to what most Christians think is the "biblical view" of things that they simply refuse to take it seriously or look hard at what the author says.

In the NT, Paul talks about justification by faith while James talks about justification by works. Romans 13 says that government is established by God while Revelation 13 says that government is empowered by Satan. Paul says that God's covenant promises to Israel are irrevocable while the book of Hebrews seems to suggest otherwise. In one place Paul tells women to be silent in church (1 Cor. 14:34) while a few chapters earlier he gives instructions for women praying and prophesying in church, presumably not in silence

(11:4). I could go on, but I hope I have made my point. ***The Bible is a conversation, not a lecture.***