

## Editorial

### A HEALTHY CASE OF MIDRASH

When I was a theology student in the early 1950s, those who taught us Bible were inclined to draw attention to the misuse of the Old Testament in the New. According to our Bible teachers, and the majority of their peers, the New Testament authors tended to give the “scriptural” texts they quoted a meaning contrary to the intent of the original writers. Not surprisingly, in that liberal Protestant milieu, one quotation in particular was singled out — the one in Matthew about a virgin conceiving and bearing a son. It was pointed out that the original Hebrew in Isaiah 7 meant that a young *woman* would conceive and bear a son, the inference being that the whole story of a virgin birth is suspect.

I don’t remember our teachers telling us that Jewish Christians like Matthew were using the Scriptures as they had been taught to do as devout Jews. James L. Kuger, for years the distinguished professor of Hebrew at Harvard (and now teaching in Jerusalem) says that ancient Jews and Christians read the Bible in the same way: they argued about what the prophecies meant but didn’t argue about whether they should look for prophetic fulfillment. So Luke describes how the unrecognized stranger on the road to Emmaus reproves the two disciples for not believing the prophets, and “then, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (24:27). The process is known in Jewish circles by the term “midrash”. As my *Encyclopedia Britannica* says, the word denotes an “explanation or exposition which, in contrast to a more literal exegesis... endeavours to reach the spirit lying below the text”.

This is what the early Christians did with portions of chapter 9 of Isaiah which seemed to anticipate the birth of Jesus. This is what they did with verses in Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72: in the former it is predicted that kings will bring tribute of gold and frankincense, and in the latter that kings will render tribute and bring gifts; the

magi who appeared in Bethlehem were interpreted through both of those texts and thus the church came to look upon them as being also kings. The practice of midrash led the early Christians to identify the crucified Jesus with the suffering servant portrayed in Isaiah 53. And it prompted them to take Proverbs 8:22ff, where Wisdom is referred to as being with God at the creation of the world, and read those verses in connection with the prologue of John's Gospel, with Colossians 1:15-20, and with the early verses of Hebrews. Charles Jennens was still following the same old practice in the 18th century when he intertwined the Old and New Testament texts that Handel used in composing his *Messiah*.

The early church was also practising Jewish-like procedures when it looked at texts that seemed to prefigure Mary. The references in the Gospels to her were regularly connected with passages found in the Old Testament. So the exercise of midrash went on vigorously with texts about Mary just as they did with texts about Jesus.

So let's pause for a moment on Judaism. We all know that portions of the Torah are read at every Sabbath service. And I have an indelible image in my mind about the way students preparing for the rabbinate focus voraciously on Torah texts, analyzing them and discussing them endlessly. All the same, rabbinic Judaism has not been based, and is not now based, directly on the Bible. The Bible is the ultimate authority, but it is interpreted through the Mishnah and the two Talmuds, all three of which came into existence in the early centuries of the Common Era. In the Mishnah we have in print the laws once passed on only by word of mouth. With the Talmuds we have sermonic interpretations of biblical passages that go on for hundreds of pages. A Christian reader who tries to go through one or other of the Talmuds will be struck by what they consider flights of fancy, as texts from different parts of the Bible are read into each other, and interpretations are given to them that may seem questionable. But the Jerusalem and the Babylonian Talmuds have immense authority; Jews read the Bible through the lenses provided by them. Anybody who has listened to

a synagogue sermon might well have heard the phrase, “as the Bible says...”, but just as likely they would have heard, “as the rabbis have said....” So Jews have used, and still use, the Talmuds as lenses through which to look at the Bible. For years in my city, Winnipeg, there was a Jewish school called Talmud-Torah, and there is presently an orthodox synagogue with that name.

The only Bible the earliest Christians had was, of course, what we now call the Old Testament, and they knew they needed a different lens for its interpretation than did their Jewish counterparts. To say the lens was Jesus Christ is to state the obvious; it was him known in a story with a specific structure and content. The weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper was a critical guide, for it put Jesus and “God” together as objects of worship — which would be used many years later by the propounders of the wording of the Nicene Creed to demonstrate that, in denying the full deity of Christ, Arius and his supporters were missing the implications of the church’s devotion. Other incidents from Jesus’ life — especially his death and resurrection, as circulated through word of mouth — provided an early lens. And soon Paul’s letters were shaping the lens.

According to Luke, before he undertook his Gospel, quite a few people had taken a stab at putting in writing an “orderly” account of Jesus’ life and teaching (Luke 1:1), of which we have no records other than Mark — scholars seem to be agreed that Matthew composed his work about the same time that Luke did his, and that John came later. In any case, the four accounts we now have in our New Testament established their precedence by the end of the first century, and provided Christians with essential interpretative clues to the Hebrew Bible.

Preparing people for baptism led the various communities to develop a compression of the story, the inspiration for it coming from different parts of the New Testament, but especially from the narrative-based sermons in Acts. This compressed narrative took a form that referred to God the Father who made heaven and earth, to Jesus Christ his only Son, who was born of the Virgin Mary,

crucified, resurrected, ascended, and sits at the Father's right hand. And it affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit. This provided a confession of faith for new members, as well as a lens for biblical interpretation. As time went on, the compressed narrative was finalized in two forms, the shorter becoming the Apostles' Creed, and the more expanded one becoming the Nicene Creed. In the early centuries the credal confessions were known not as a lens but as the "rule of faith". For the moment, however, I will keep using the word lens. The official lens had been enlarged by the Nicene Creed, where the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ were decisively affirmed. And the unofficial lens had already been enlarged by the piety of the church, where Mary was honoured as Mother of God; the Council in 431 at Ephesus polished the lens by giving that practice official backing. The Council at Chalcedon in 451 polished the lens further by giving careful expression to the issue of the two natures of Christ. The Second Council of Nicea, held in 787, enlarged the lens by declaring that it was not idolatrous to have in church physical representations of Jesus and Mary and various saints, which affected how the second commandment (Exodus 20:4ff) should be interpreted. And so it went.

Fans of the Reformation often say that after centuries of the Bible being kept away from the laity, the latter now had direct contact with it. That's true. The emphasis on getting the Bible translated into local languages, plus the invention of printing, made it possible for ordinary folk to read a Bible of their own. It was a development of huge significance. But the Reformers still took for granted that Christians needed lenses to help them interpret the Scriptures: all the Reformers published sermons and biblical commentaries to be used as guides to Bible-reading for their followers, and they prepared catechisms and confessional statements. My friend Victor Shepherd read a draft of this editorial, and reminded me that in the Reformed tradition their confessional statements never held official standing for them as did the Formula of Concord for the Lutherans. But operationally I think even those who saw themselves as followers of Calvin used his work and that

of others as offering essential clues to the gist of the Scriptures. And by far the most popular translation of the Bible for English-speaking Protestants in the last half of the 16th century, and the first half of the 17th, was the “Geneva Bible”. It was loaded with marginal notes that were intended to make sure readers got the right interpretation of the texts. So, in spite of the cry *sola scriptura*, the early Protestants followed the customs of both Judaism and Christianity in recognizing that we need lenses to get to the full meaning of Scripture.

It was not the Reformers, but the inheritor’s of the Enlightenment, who assumed there was no need for lenses. They looked upon the dogmas of the church as distorting the vision of interpreters, preventing people from seeing the Bible for what it is. With the beginnings of “historical criticism” early in the 19th century, most of the Protestant members of the guild of New Testament scholars saw themselves as approaching the texts with an open, even neutral, mind, free of any dogmatic restraint, or dogmatic corruption. It’s true that they had given up on the dogmas of the church as interpretive frames for biblical study, but as we look back on them it doesn’t seem to us that they were neutral. They were still using interpretative frames, often those of one or other of the forms of religious humanism. That’s the way Dorothy L. Sayers put it to a correspondent who wrote her a letter suggesting that she needed to get back to the life and teachings of the truly human Jesus portrayed in the Gospels — this to the woman who had worn out a Greek Testament in the preparation of her famous radio plays on the life of Jesus! Her uncharacteristically restrained reply went like this:

The “simple Gospel” of loving-kindness, and the so-called “human Jesus” — the mild teacher with an undogmatic and merely ethical message — never existed. They are an invention of 19th century humanists, who made them up by tampering with the evidence; by picking out little bits of Scripture here and there and discarding everything that did not suit their ideas — a kind of manipulation that no one would dream of applying to any other historical documents.

Though the guild of New Testament scholars is presently far more diverse, it is because of an ongoing concern about the humanist framing of the biblical texts that a new venture has been embarked upon. Working with Brazos Press, a group of six North American theologians have enrolled scholars, who are not members of the New Testament guild, to write New Testament commentaries. The first to appear was a book on Acts, written by Jaroslav Pelikan, and published in 2005, not long before Pelikan's death. In the preface to the series the editors had this to say:

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures....[The series] advances on the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body – faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds....

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression....The rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect....This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

Those of our scholarly readers who have been engaged with the post-modern suspicion of meta-narratives may not be impressed with this project, but they won't be shocked by it; they know that everybody approaches the biblical text with an angle of vision. But I'm going to ignore the scholars for a moment and put a question to the readers who stand in pulpits each Sunday, or occupy pews. Apart from the fact that the Nicene Creed is virtually never used in

---

<sup>1</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005) pp. 13,14.

United Church congregations, when you read the previous quotation, did you feel that the people behind this project were putting up a barrier between us and the Bible? If so, I might remind you of what the popular United Church booklet, *The Lordship of Jesus* (1974), claimed that we needed to do: it said we must have awareness of bias, of gender, racial or economic privilege, and of social location in order to achieve the right interpretation of the Bible. In effect, they were talking about a mirror we need to keep glancing into at the same time as we are looking at the Scriptures.

If I suggest that the Brazos people are right, I am not proposing that the Nicene lens should be used instead of the mirror. Not at all. We need both. But the Nicene tradition would, I think, give us a large window (changing the metaphor) to see things in the Bible that can otherwise be closed off to us. Those of us who have taken courses in church history have smiled over stories about Marcion in the 2nd century, who laid out for Christians such an abbreviated canon. But in the United Church our working canon has also been amazingly short; we find so much in the Bible that we feel we have grown out of. In addition to the basic concern about a christological perspective, I think the people behind the Brazos commentaries are trying to give us tools to engage with a much greater range of the Scriptures. Our midrashic practices are in need of being reconnected with a larger and older community of Jewish and Christian discourse.

— A.M.W.