

Responsible Christian Exegesis of Hebrew Scripture

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How we read Holy Scripture has been important as long as there has been a text to read.

One of the earliest examples of what might be called “Christian exegesis” is found in the Gospel of Luke, written at least two generations after Jesus’ death. The scene depicts a conversation between Jesus and an expert in the Torah (Luke 10.25-29; compare Mt 22.34-40, Mk 12.28-34). Here is my translation:

And, look, a certain expert in the Torah stood up to test him and said: “Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?” And he said to him: “What is written in the Torah? How do you read?” He answered: “You shall love the Holy One your God with your entire heart and with all your soul and all your strength and your whole mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” He said to him: “You answered correctly. Do this and live.” He wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus: “And who is my neighbor?”



Luke presents Jesus as confronted by a member of his community who knows the most important part of Scripture for his day, the Torah. He is an expert in reading and interpreting what he reads in the Torah. Luke paints the incident as a confrontation. This person stood up to test Jesus, as if laying a trap. Contrary to what we might expect, he asks Jesus a question not about interpretation, but rather about action. He asks: “What must I *do*?”

Jesus excelled at clever interaction with members of his own faith community and turns the question right back into his questioner’s field of expertise. He asks, “What is written in the Torah? How do you read?” In other words, if you want to know what to do, pay attention not only to *what* you read, but to *how* you read.

Exegesis and Responsibility

Exegesis, a Greek word meaning “interpretation” or “explanation,” is the study of the biblical text. Exegetes intend to provide a solid foundation for reading the Bible. Exegesis is a technical word, and many exegetes are specialists who concentrate on this technical work. Yet all of us who are interested in the Bible—who read it, who study it, who listen to it being taught and preached—are in an informal way exegetes of the text. Exegesis, reading the text, is of crucial importance because it is directly connected to our actions. When we ask how to read we are also and always asking what to do.

Those of us who are Christians do Christian exegesis, meaning that we read the Bible from the perspective that in Jesus the God of Israel became incarnate so that Gentiles might become a beloved community, taken into covenant by the God who is revealed in Israel’s Scripture. That part of the Bible, which in Christianity has traditionally been called the Old Testament, we also call *Hebrew Scripture* out of respect for the faith that recognizes this book as its Bible. (Jews also call it *Miqra*.) Christian exegetes are aware that in reading this part of the Bible we are in sacred literature that was not in the first place created for our benefit and that is still the entire Bible for Judaism, a faith with adherents around the world. Although the term *Hebrew Scripture* has its own shortcomings, it does not imply that these writings are in any way surpassed or superseded, as the term *Old Testament* might.

Christian exegetes must read Hebrew Scripture responsibly. We may begin by assuming that, like the Torah expert in Luke 10, Christian exegetes are responsible to both



God and our neighbor. We are responsible to God as we read, insofar as we consider the Bible to be the sacred literature that speaks to us of God's dealings with us and with all creation. We are responsible to God insofar as we believe that God addresses contemporary believers somehow through the words of these texts. Before reading from the Bible on Sunday morning, many Christian preachers may invite their congregations to listen to these words as *a* or *the* word of God.

Exegetes are also responsible to our neighbors in our work. First, we are responsible to the neighbors of the past, those who in faith spoke and eventually wrote these texts, the community that went before, the "great . . . cloud of witnesses" of Heb 12:1. Exegetes are responsible to all who have devoted themselves to reading these texts so that it might benefit them, strengthen their faith, and guide their actions. Next, exegetes are responsible to our neighbors today. They include those who are potentially hurt and alienated by a certain way of reading the Bible; neighbors who belong to another community of faith; and neighbors within our own community who read, study, and listen so they may hear as fully as possible from these texts about God and God's will for their lives.

Responsibility after the Holocaust

What, then, constitutes responsible Christian exegesis of Hebrew Scripture? First and foremost, responsibility to the neighbor requires that Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Scripture proceeds from an awareness that we read the Bible today in a post-Holocaust world. We are aware that previous Christian ways of reading at the very least contributed to a political climate that made the Holocaust (or Shoah) possible. The Holocaust has forever changed the way in which the Hebrew Bible is read theologically by Jews and Christians alike.

Second, responsible Christian exegesis acknowledges that Judaism has its own legitimate claim on these sacred texts, comprising a community of direct descendants of the people who produced the Hebrew Scriptures, who have their own centuries-long tradition of interpretation. Third, responsible Christian exegesis recognizes that there is a connection between the idea that the Hebrew Bible is somehow incomplete or unfulfilled without the "New" Testament and active Christian persecution of the Jews and defamation of Judaism throughout the centuries. Christian exegesis must repent of past actions of discrimination and persecution against Jews, and insist on



reading both Testaments from a perspective of honor and respect for Jewish sisters and brothers and their faith convictions. Finally, responsible Christian exegesis understands the Christian faith community to be in great need of direction for its way of life—for its relation to God and neighbor. It looks to directives in the Hebrew Scriptures to complete and deepen the instructions given to the early followers of Jesus, and at times even to correct these later directives, especially as found in the epistles of the New Testament. This responsibility means attempting at every turn to dissolve the tension between gospel and Torah found in much traditional Christian exegesis, insofar as gospel is identified with Christianity and Torah with Judaism. In all these ways, Christian interpreters exercise responsibility to the neighbor.

What about responsibility to God? Responsible Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Bible takes seriously the conviction that Christians believe in one God who is revealed in two parts of the Bible, in Christian terminology the Old and the New Testament. It affirms that the good news, the gospel, of God's presence with the world permeates the entire Bible, and did not begin with the arrival of Jesus Christ. Moreover, responsible Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures recognizes that the witness of the Hebrew Bible to the God of Israel does not need the witness of the New Testament to speak fully of God and God's presence in the world. Conversely, however, this kind of exegesis understands that the witness of the New Testament is incomplete and can be easily misunderstood without the foundational testimony of the Hebrew Scripture.

Responsible Christian exegesis takes note of the entire Hebrew Bible, not just the parts that fit with certain New Testament texts, and engages in a continuous reading of the biblical text. This is a particular challenge when a church lectionary takes fragments of a book of the Hebrew Bible out of context and juxtaposes them with fragments from a New Testament writing. In light of the responsibilities discussed here, it is desirable to provide for the continuous reading of a book—or of a complete unit within a book—of the Hebrew Bible and to do the same with Second Testament writings (though not in isolation from the Hebrew text). Such procedures allow us to engage First and Second Testament texts in conversation with each other and thus to arrive at a Christian interpretation that takes a full account of the diverse voices of Scripture.

In many ways, irresponsible Christian exegesis represents the opposite of what has just been described. Irresponsible Christian exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures ignores



the events of the Holocaust/Shoah and how Christian anti-Judaism contributed to make those events possible. It ignores, as far as possible, the existence of contemporary Judaism and the contributions that Jewish tradition has made to interpretation of the biblical text. Irresponsible Christian exegesis continues to view Christianity as superior to Judaism and as the sole true inheritor of the promises made to ancient Israel. It judges the Hebrew Scriptures to be unfulfilled and incomplete without the witness of the “New” Testament and considers the community that produced these sacred texts ultimately to be a failure.

This type of exegesis understands the New Testament to be the final arbiter of the value of biblical texts in revealing God and speaking of the Christian life to the believer. It understands texts of Hebrew Scripture to have revelatory value only insofar as they speak to the revelation of God in Christ. Thus, an irresponsible Christian exegesis never reads texts from the Hebrew Scriptures unless they are followed by, and in practice subordinated to, New Testament texts in Sunday morning preaching. New Testament texts, on the other hand, may be read and preached on their own during large parts of the so-called Christian year. Such practices imply that New Testament texts are self-sufficient to describe what is worthwhile and to speak of God to the community.

Finally and more subtly, irresponsible Christian exegesis ignores the historical context of the Hebrew Scriptures and the significance and meaning of the election of ancient Israel as God’s covenant community. It ignores the distance in time and space between the Christian reader or listener and texts from the Hebrew Scriptures and reads them only as they have application to the church and the contemporary Christian reader.

The problems with this type of Christian exegesis are multiple. It sustains barriers between two faiths and their adherents who by common sense ought to consider each other sister faiths. It blocks avenues to the richness of the biblical text as God’s self-revelation. It has created the impression among many Christians that the Bible speaks of *two* deities, one threatening and violent, of which the Hebrew Scripture speaks, and one loving and kind, to which the New Testament testifies. Such exegesis in effect not only ignores the existence and contributions of contemporary Judaism, but erases the historical roots of the Jews. In this way, it belongs on a continuum of indif-



ference and hostility toward Jews, a continuum with a long history of persecution of Jews that culminated in Christian complicity in the Holocaust/Shoah.

Irresponsible Christian exegesis of Hebrew Scripture not only belies the self-understanding and identity of believing Jews but also prevents Christians from a full sense of their own identity as believers in the God of the Bible. In the end, this kind of exegesis is irresponsible to God, to neighbors both past and present, and to the self as well.

Examples of Reading

The roots of the sort of irresponsible Christian interpretation of Hebrew Scripture discussed here are very deep. The fifth-century bishop Augustine of Hippo, for example, was one of the first theologians to put anti-Jewish interpretation of the Bible on the Christian map with his reference to Jews as a “cursed people” (*Faust.*, 12.11). But it is not difficult to find examples of irresponsible Christian exegesis of Hebrew Scriptures today, not only in many Christian churches in the United States, but also in scholarship. Introductory textbooks on the Old Testament rarely make a consideration of the Holocaust/Shoah a primary point of departure, or even consider it at all. Recognition of the Holocaust’s importance is thus often confined to “specialized” literature. While today one rarely encounters such crass hostility toward the Jewish neighbor as found in Augustine, it is not so unusual to hear a sermon on an Old or New Testament text in which the existence of the Jews and their faith is completely ignored, making the Jews as invisible as if Hitler had been successful with his program of extermination. In Christian scholarship, too, one not infrequently meets generalizations about Israel and Jews in the past tense, as if they no longer existed, and to their covenant with God as obsolete and superseded. This is often especially egregious in Christian theological and historical discussions of Jesus that set him in opposition to the benighted attitudes and practices of his contemporaries, as in some modern liberationist theologies. Christian theologians may then read the “Old Testament” as pointing to the *church* as the “New Israel,” or to the Exodus as a paradigm for the liberation of the oppressed, without acknowledging the particularity of the original covenant people. They may ignore the continuing covenant relationship that another community has with God or imply that the other community’s relationship has ended in failure so that Christians may lay claim to all the promises made to that original covenant people.



Who Is Our Neighbor?

Taking our cue from the Gospel story with which we began, with the Torah expert we may well ask: “Who is our neighbor?” When Jesus responds with the story of the Samaritan who rescued the victim of a robbery, he points to both neighborly action and the recipient of this action. The one to whom we should show the love of neighbor may not be like us, may not be of our “family.” In this regard, Luke places Jesus in a direct line with Torah’s teaching concerning love for God and neighbor, which ultimately means love for the *stranger* (see Lev. 19:34). The stranger need not be distant or an outsider; the stranger may be one close by—but different. Responsible Christian exegesis will read the Hebrew Scriptures especially with an eye toward the Jewish neighbor. If Christians do not read in ways that directly connect them in compassionate action to this particular neighbor, how can they aspire to read in ways that lead to the love of any neighbor?