

“Dressing Jewish in the Bible Belt (The Bible Through Jewish Eyes)”

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Many times Jews feel like a small, maybe even out of place minority in the Bible Belt. In part this is because of demographics; Jews are few in number. In part this is because of a particular dominant strain of Christian Culture; a particular strand of Christianity that emphasizes “Bible” and an exclusive, demanding interpretation of it.

Sometimes this makes us hesitant—Jews feel like they don't use or read the Bible nearly as much as some of their Christian neighbors—because we feel at a disadvantage or even ignorant.

So, for dressing Jewish in the Bible Belt—that is for appreciating our own traditions, for helping us feel more comfortable and confident about how to engage Bible related issues, I suggest a few ways of thinking; ways of thinking “Jewishly” about Bible. These are not new ideas, just reminders, maybe put in ways you have heard before.

1. The Bible is Different for Different People, Not Just Jews.

Being a minority in any culture makes one more aware of differences.

There are many different Bibles. Protestant Bibles have 7 less books than Catholic Bibles, and Catholics have 3 less than the Orthodox. And of course there are the Samaritans with only 5 and there are the Mormons who add more revelations, especially the Book of Mormon. Thus, it is not just Jews who are different, the Christian tradition itself has never agreed on just what the so-called “Bible” is. There really is no such thing and “The Bible.” There are only Bibles.

Similarly, Jews and many different Christian communities, make different choices for priorities within their sacred texts. Different Jewish communities emphasize and use Torah, Talmud, or Prophets and Writings differently. The same is true within Christian communities, where different books or parts of books are emphasized differently by different Christians. So again, Jews are not really so unique in having differing interpretations from others.

We all know that Jews have different interpretations of Hebrew Bible/Tanakh passages than Christians often do. Perhaps one simple way of putting is this: for Jews, the ‘Bible’ is not just a prelude to the New Testament, where the central events happen and the most important teachings are given. For Jews, the scrolls and

messages of the Tanakh have significance in and of themselves, not for something that comes later.

Finally, while this region might be called “The Bible Belt,” I can assure you, having taught in the region for some 15 years, that Christians here often don’t really know the content of their Bible so well. All traditions (large and also localized) have favorite texts and selected passages that are known well and thousands of others that are unknown. So, while some might be adept and citing favorite verses, often their whole ‘Bible’ is hardly known. In the U.S. culture “the Bible” has a huge iconic value—for example, our presidents put their hands on it and are sworn into office—but that does not translate into actually opening the book and knowing what’s in it. Way back in the 18th century, Voltaire is said to have said: “The Bible is more celebrated than known.” That applies today to the Bible Belt just as much as it did for Voltaire.

2. The Bible is Our Conversation Not Our Answer

We all know that Jews are great at talking, and are not afraid to disagree. We’ve all heard the old joke, that wherever there are two Jews, there are at least three opinions. We think for ourselves and argue for ideas. Our collections of sacred texts confirm these qualities of ours over and over.

The Talmud is a great collection of the grand JEWISH CONVERSATION from the first five centuries CE. It is a collection written conversations, arguments, disagreements, sometimes conclusions, often no conclusions. Sometimes where there is a conclusion, it is clear that the argument itself, or even the minority opinions are the main interest of rabbis who put all this in writing. I find it curious that so many people seem to think that the Talmud is a collection of decisions and answers. But one fun dip in the Sea of the Talmud will quickly show that it’s the argument, the conversation that it’s all about.

The Tanakh is too. The Bible in a sense was the first conversation. I never fail to be amazed at the rabbis who gathered and collected scrolls and formed what we now call Tanakh, or Bible. These were not people seeking to present one view—they were Jews after all! They were just like Talmudists! They loved the conversation! The Tanakh does not speak with a monotone voice. Like any good library, there are a variety of perspectives and arguments, sometimes within a single scroll.

Let me illustrate the importance of the conversation not the conclusion by looking at just one example (there are thousands!). In Proverbs 26.4 we find the proverb, “Don’t answer a fool foolishly or you will be a fool yourself.” We all can understand this and we see the wisdom of not stooping to the fool’s level. Now, if we read Proverbs and take this and all other proverbs found here as God’s last word or answers, then we are in trouble, because the very next proverb, Proverbs 26.5 give the exact opposite advice, “Answer a fool foolishly or he will think he’s wise.” These two proverbs cannot BOTH be obeyed, at least not at the same time. But there is no text to tell us which one should be obeyed when. There is no simple answer.

I put it this way in my *Introduction to Hebrew Bible*,

These two proverbs give exactly opposite advice. If they existed independently one might be tempted to take each as a “rule” or “general law” that tells him/her what to do. But here, side-by-side in the collection, taking them both as a “rule” becomes impossible. Instead the reader is compelled by their collection to reflect, to think, to consider, “When is it wise to answer a fool and when is it not? To put the matter more starkly and dramatically, I sometimes say, “one proverb is a law; two proverbs are a subversion of law.” Here in 26.4-5 the author does not tell the reader what he/she should do. Just the opposite is true: the author creates a dilemma and does not give the answer. Instead, the reader is compelled to think for herself. To reflect, to discern, to consider in her own life what circumstances require a fool to be answered and which do not. Lady Wisdom in this case doesn’t tell the reader what to do, instead she invites, even forces the reader to decide what is wise and what is foolish. Now this collection of proverbs does not put many directly contradictory proverbs together like it does here in 26.4-5, but it does contain many different perspectives on single topics that create tensions. The result is an ideology of critical thinking and discernment that infuses the entire collective scroll and calls the reader to think carefully, not to obey blindly. The book of Proverbs is not so much about memorizing proverbs—a proverb is worthless to a person who doesn’t think, says 26.7. Proverbs is about thinking about proverbs; seeking to discern and decide their relevance and application for life. Using some modern categories of education, I might put it this way: Proverbs as a whole is more about encouraging careful critical thinking, than about providing the definition or the content of wisdom.

This interest in looking at things from various sides and discussing and debating has been an important part of Jewish tradition at since we started keeping written records. Proverbs disagree, other scrolls from Tanakh do too. E.g. Job disagrees with Deuteronomy regarding reward for righteousness. To try to make all the books agree, or sound alike, is like trying to make Luciano Pavarotti sound like Bob Dylan. It can’t be done well, and it’s so much better to appreciate and enjoy them each for their own voice.

Rabbis of course disagree all the time about how to interpret and understand, about matters major and minor, and also about how to act, that is, what the halakah should be. But in one place the Talmud has an interesting way of dealing with the disagreements. In Eruvin 13b we find a dispute between the famous schools of Hillel and Shammai. The story is told that a voice from heaven declared that, “The words of both schools [Hillel and Shammai] are words of the living God, but the halakah follows the ruling of the school of Hillel.” For these rabbis, both sides of the dispute could be right—both were God’s word. Now, at the end of the day, a person must decide what to do and can only do one thing (answer a fool or don’t? you can’t do both), and so the rabbis chose to act according to the rules of Hillel. Of course, we must add, that sometimes in the Talmud the halakah follows Shammai!

This love for the conversation comes through in Jewish acceptance and celebration of multiple interpretations of biblical passages. One midrash (Midrash Rabbah on Numbers 7.19) suggests playfully that there are 70 “faces of Torah,” or 70 ways of interpreting each verse. If we have the answers, and if we have the one right interpretation, the conversation would stop, or simply repeat the old words, which too is really stopping.

Solomon Zeitlin gives us a wonderful story about this in his delightful book, *Because God Loves Stories* (p.273).

There was once a young Hasid who devoted his life to studying the religious texts of our people. One night, without any apparent reason this pious young man closes his Talmud and runs out of his house into the middle of the town square, crying out, “What is the meaning of life? I cannot go any further, I cannot study one additional verse of Torah without knowing the meaning of life.”

Other Hasidim come running to his aid from their homes, from their studies. They try to calm him down, to convince him to return to his Talmud, but to no avail. Finally, the local Hasidim recommend that he take a trip to the residence of the rebbe, a few towns away.

The young Hasid leaves immediately for the rebbe’s home. When he finally gets in to see the rebbe, he whispers nervously, “Rebbe—what is the meaning of life? I must know, I cannot go on any longer, I cannot study another page, until I know: What is the meaning of life?”

The rebbe rises from his seat, walks over to the young man, looks him over very carefully—and suddenly slaps him.

“Why, Rebbe? Why did you slap me? What have I done? All I did was ask ‘What is the meaning of life?’”

“You fool,” answered the rebbe, “you have such a good question—why exchange it for an answer. It is the answers which separate us, the questions which unite us.”

3. The Bible Is Our Enjoyment, Our Playground, Our Fun

Whatever we might say about Jews taking Tanakh/Bible seriously, it also must be said that Jews have often had a good deal of fun playing in the texts too. One need only visit a synagogue on Purim to have this point made loud and clear. The fun started long ago. Certainly the book of Esther contains no little humor and ironic fun. The rabbis too seemed to love to play with texts. Regarding the stories of Moses getting water from the rock (Exodus 17 and Numbers 20) rabbinic interpreters, players, came up with the idea of the rock being Miriam’s Well, which followed the Israelites throughout their wilderness travels. But it was no small drinking fountain! Some rabbis speak of the well supplying water for laundry, farming of all kinds of fruits, growing soft grass for people to sleep on, and was enough even for boating! (See Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 3.50ff) It seems clear that not only were the writers making a point about God’s provision, they were also having fun.

Conclusion

Jews today see themselves as part of this same conversation that has been going on since the earliest generations. Let me end with a Talmudic story about this conversation that tell of a conversation between God and Moses, and Moses visiting the classroom of Akiba, a famous second century CE rabbi.

When Moses ascended into heaven to receive the Torah, he found God sitting and adorning certain letters calligraphically, adding crownlets to the letters. Moses asked, "Master of the Universe, who is preventing you from giving the Torah unadorned?" God replied, "I have a certain man who will exist many generations from now. His name is Akiba ben Yosef. In the future he will interpret mounds upon mounds of Jewish law from these very jots and tittles." Moses asked, "Can you show him to me?" God replied, "Turn around." Moses found himself in Rabbi Akiba's classroom, where he went and sat in the back row. He couldn't follow a word of what they were saying and grew dizzy from it all. Finally, they arrived at a difficult point of discussion and when the students pressed Akiba, asking, "Rabbi, where is your scriptural authority for this?" He replied to them, "This torah was give to Moses at Sinai." Moses felt better so he retuned to ask God, "You have a person like this, yet you choose to give the Torah through me?" God responded, "Shut up! This is my plan!" (Menachot 29b as told in Burton Visotzky, *Reading the Book*, p.49-50).

About this delightful tale, let's make a couple observations about the Great Conversation, this grand Torah/teaching. First, it has been going on for a long time, from Moses to Akiba to today. And certainly the rabbis were having fun and playing: Imagining God decorating a manuscript like scribe, Moses dizzy from bewilderment at the teachings from his own Torah, God telling Moses to shut up . . . and more.

And finally, along with the humor comes the humble and honest recognition that through the generations the conversation, the teaching changes. Moses couldn't even follow or hear his own teachings; he feels better only when he is reassured (though he didn't ask for proof!) that it's all torah of Moses. Time changes, the Jewish conversation continues and evolves. Laws, proverbs, midrashim, Talmud, mysticism, the 2008 *Torah: A Woman's Commentary*, and hundreds more, are all in one long fascinating continuous discussion. We recognize and do not deny the shifts and changes. We write humorous and poignant stories about them! Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish writer and polymath, was vigorously opposed by traditional Jews for his major work on Torah, but today that same work is given great authority among many traditional Jews.

And the conversation goes on in many enjoyable ways, even as it goes on here in this synagogue, even this day and hour. From Moses to Macon!