

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 2

The Jewish Perspective

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Main Idea

Understanding the Jewish perspective of the TNK

Exercise

Understanding our context

Picture parents walking with their toddlers through a park on the way to a friend's house. The parents are focused on getting to their destination on time while the toddlers are distracted by tiny rocks and dandelions. Describe their different perspectives.

The Jewish perspectives of the TNK are different than the Christian perspective.

Core questions

1. What is the Jewish perspective of the TNK?

Bible as Ancient Jewish Meditation Literature

Each time period has its own unique literature. Ancient Jewish literature lacks a lot of detail that modern readers expect. It seems simple but it is very sophisticated, every detail that is given matters. Lack of details leads to ambiguities. Some ambiguities make us ask questions that were not important to the author, but some ambiguities are intentional, leading us imposing our own cultural assumptions on the stories. They present an invitation into a reading of discovery.

Ex: The promise to the woman about offspring being bitten by a snake invites us to pay attention to genealogies which run throughout the Bible: from Eve to David to Jesus. Isaiah connected this offspring to the suffering servant who would die on behalf of his people. In Revelation there is a vision about a woman and her offspring – which we now understand to be referring to Jesus and his followers – who conquer the dragon by giving up their lives. So we are forced to keep reading and interpret each part in light of the others.

We are not expected to do this quickly. We are forced to slow down and read it carefully – embarking on an interactive discovery process in a lifetime of reading and re-reading.

Psalm 1

¹ *Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who **meditates on his law day and night.**
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.*

⁴ *Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.*

⁵ *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

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⁶For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

In Psalm 1, the ideal reader is one who meditates on the literature day and night. Meditate = to mutter or speak quietly. We are supposed to read, ask questions, talk about it with friends, make connections, let the Bible interpret itself. Ultimately, the Bible will read us as we adopt the Bible story as our story.

For us to adopt the Bible story as our own, we need to step into the culture in which the Bible was written and learn to think in terms of that culture and interpret the Biblical text according to the knowledge base of the authors. The meaning of the Biblical text is located in the mind of an author, and we need to try to understand that mind. It is easy to misunderstand the Bible if we interpret it as if it was written in our culture.

The Bible is more than a book of history and rules, it is a work of complex literature with poetry and narrative. It is a masterpiece of art. We will best understand the Bible if we learn the literary concepts that were used in creating the Bible. We will better understand the Biblical message that the Biblical authors were saying once we understand how they artistically created their message.

“A text-focused approach “sets out to understand not the realities behind the text, but the text itself as a pattern of meaning and effect. What does this piece of language...signify in context? What are the rules governing the transaction between the storyteller or poet and the reader? ... What image of a world does the narrative project? Why does it unfold the action in this particular order and from this particular viewpoint? ... How does the work hang together? In what relationship does each part stand to the whole? To pursue this line of questioning is to make sense of the work as an act of communication, always goal-directed on the writer’s part and always requiring interpretive activity on the addressees. The author wields certain linguistic and literary tools with an eye to certain effects on the reader, while the reader infers a coherent message from the signals, and it is the text itself that mediates between these two, embodying the author’s intent and guiding the reader’s response.” — Meir Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading, p. 15.

The human history of the Bible is its Holy Spirit history. They're not different things. Therefore, when we talk about the human author, we are also talking about the divine author at the same time. Descriptions of the Bible's origins found within the Bible consistently describe its origins as a joint partnership between humans and God's guiding presence through the Holy Spirit.

2 Tim 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed (theopneustos) and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

Theopneustos, theos (God), pneustos (spirit/breath)

2 Peter 1:19-21 ¹⁹We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. ²¹For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Both of these texts reflect on how the Scriptures are not merely the result of human purpose and activity, a human-divine partnership, neither one cancelling out the other.

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Understanding the community of Torah

Friends of God

1. After the humans turned from God, God promised that there would be a “seed of the woman” who would “crush the head of the serpent.”
One of the common threads in the Old Testament is trying to identify who that seed is.
2. After nations formed, God called Abraham out of those nations and identified him as the one through whom the promised seed would come to “bless all the nations.”
Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, later called Israel, became the namesake of the nation that would emerge from Abraham, becoming the nation of Israel.
3. The Israelites saw themselves as God’s chosen people and friends of God, and they regarded the higher expectations God had for them as a sign of their blessing (James 2:23; Exodus 33:11; Isaiah 48:1). The commandments and rituals were regarded as God’s normal expectations from those who were his friends.

Causing to move straight and true

1. The Christian community tends to call the books of Moses, the Law, and contrasts that with the Gospel of the New Testament. They contrast the Law that the Jews received with the grace that Christians receive.
2. Based on the behavior of some of the Pharisees in the New Testament, claims were made that all the Jews were legalistic and needed to keep their rules, but Christians were free from those rules and free from being legalistic.
3. However, this is a false contrast. First let’s examine what the Jews mean by the Torah, the books identified by many Christians as the “Law.” For the descendants of Abraham, the friends of God, the Torah is instructions, expectations of a friend and are not a legalistic burden but a joyous privilege.
4. Torah can refer to many things:
 - a. the five books of Moses,
 - b. a single teaching,
 - c. all of Jewish tradition,
 - d. a law or statute
 - e. or a parent’s instruction to a child.
 - f. The word torah literally means direction or instruction. The root of the word (תֹּרַה) originally likely meant to throw or shoot an arrow, so torah literally means to cause something (or someone) to move straight and true.

Drawing near

1. What then are we to make of all the animal sacrifices? Were they a way for the Israelites to appease God so that they can receive forgiveness or to be saved? Let’s consider what is meant when an Israelite gave an offering to God.
2. The Hebrew word for offerings or sacrifice is Qorbanot. The root of the word means “to draw near.” The intention of the offering or sacrifice was to draw near to God. Giving up a possession as a sacrifice, is a statement that nearness to God is more valuable than the offering that was given. Even as Christians we sacrifice our time, money, or talents for that same endeavor.
3. Forgiveness is obtained through repentance, prayer and tzedakah (charity or other good deeds). In Jewish practice, prayer has taken the place of sacrifices. While dedicating the Temple, King Solomon also indicated that prayer can be used to obtain forgiveness (I Kings 8:46-50).

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4. Sometimes the offerings that are given are a substitute for the person making the offering, and the things that are done to the offering are things that should have been done to the person offering. The offering is in some sense "punished" in place of the offerer. But it is repentance and not the offering itself that is the basis for forgiveness.
5. There was an understanding that justice and mercy were more important than sacrifices. **Micah 6:8** *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Belief is a matter of heart

1. Romans 2:28-29 says that a Jew it is not determined by the outward appearance but the inward heart and spirit. This rule can apply to Christians as well who are raised with and identify culturally as Christians but do not internalize their faith.
2. Both Jews and Christians are sinful human beings and hypocrisy is a problem for everyone. All of us are both capable of acting, pretending to be true believers when we are not, carrying out rituals that outwardly identify us as a true believers while inwardly we are not

Jewish at heart

1. Deuteronomy 6:5 tells us to *love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength*. In the Greek translation (the Septuagint) love is translated as "agape" (ἀγαπήσεις). In the modern church we are mostly told that agape is the "highest form of love, a spiritual love like the way we picture the love of God. But in Hebrew, the word in this verse that is translated as love is ahav (אֶחָד).
2. Ahav has many dimensions from the responsibility of husband to "provide for and protect" his family and neighbors to the spontaneous, pleasurable feeling of sexual love. It encompasses our body, emotions and mind, all of who we are.
3. We are told to "ahav" the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength – all our being.

The worshipping community

1. Before Christianity, there was no concept of religion the way we define it now. A person belonged to a community, participated in community events and rituals, and accepted the beliefs of the community. There was no consideration that a person's beliefs could be different from anyone else's in the community.
2. Synagogues first emerged in the exiled Jewish communities in Babylon. They were used not only for worship but for non-religious events in the community as well.
3. Synagogues were, in effect, community buildings in the same way Congregational Church buildings were in New England, hosting not only worship meetings but other non-religious community meetings.
4. In both cases, being part of a physical community implied being part of the worship community. One could not be expelled from the worship community without becoming separated from the entire physical community.

The worshipping heart of each individual

1. The Zealot revolts in AD70 and AD 135 did more than produce a discontinuity between Christians and their Jewish heritage.
2. When the Jews were expelled from Judea after the 2nd revolt, synagogue communities had to recombine within Gentile communities and hostility exploded between the Jews who followed Jesus the Jews who did not follow Jesus.

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3. Both groups claimed Jewish heritage but were strongly divided in beliefs. This division led to our modern conception of religion being a set of beliefs not tied to the other cultural practices within a community.
4. The questions now arise, “Who is truly a Jew?”, “Is Jewishness a matter of genetic inheritance?”, “Is Jewishness a set of cultural practices?”, “Is Jewishness a set of beliefs?”, “Does Jewishness have more to do with following Abraham or following Moses?”, or “Is Jewishness a matter of the heart, loving God and trusting Him?”.
5. According to the Romans 9:8 and Deuteronomy 30:6, Jewishness is a matter of the circumcision of the heart. Outward circumcision as practiced in the Old Testament was only a sign of the work that God would do in the future, which is to re-order our loves. The intent from the beginning of creation was to create a community of image-bearers who would respond in love to the love that God bestowed upon them.
6. The great test of Abraham’s faith was a test of Abraham’s loves. In John 8:39, the Jewish leaders claimed that Abraham was their father, but the Apostle Paul declared that Abraham’s offspring are not determined by genetic descent but by a love-driven faith.

The broken community

1. During the time of the apostles, the followers of Jesus often met in the synagogues with the Jewish non-followers of Jesus
2. After the destruction of the temple in 70AD, the Sadducees disappeared because their life revolved around temple worship.
3. The Pharisees saw the necessity of preserving Jewish teachings and organized what has been called the Rabbinic movement.
4. The Rabbinic movement became increasingly at odds with the Jesus movement which became increasingly Gentile and Greek speaking.
5. This tension intensified after the Bar Kokhba uprising in 135AD. The Gentile followers of Jesus also became increasingly frustrated with the lack of response of the Jews to the Gospel, and essentially abandoned their Hebrew-speaking Jews.
6. This split resulted in the church losing the Hebrew understanding of Scripture. A gap that persisted for several hundred years.
7. Only a handful of Christians made attempts at understanding Hebrew until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.