

Traditional Jewish Methods of Bible Study for Christians: Reading the Bible as Jesus Read It

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Forty Years of Rediscovery

Forty years ago Nostra Aetate reminded us that Christians and Jews have a common spiritual heritage, and it encouraged mutual understanding and appreciation, especially by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions (NA 4).

Nearly ten years later the post-conciliar *Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews* reflected that it is the same God who speaks in both the old and new Covenants, and observed that Jesus used teaching methods (and undoubtedly therefore study methods) similar to those employed by the rabbis of his time. The document promoted, among other strategies for developing a better understanding of Judaism and its relationship to Christianity, ‘research...among specialists, particularly in the field of exegesis, theology, history and sociology’ (GRRJ III).

For biblical scholars and educators the more focussed study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* in 1995, a further 20 years on, approved the adoption of Jewish approaches to Scripture by asserting that ‘Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion’ (IBC IC).

Early in the new millennium the same Commission, in *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, emphasized that the Jewish Scriptures have a permanent value and authority as divine revelation (JPSSCB IA1, IB3), and pointed out that ‘...the New Testament cannot be properly understood apart from the Old Testament *and the Jewish tradition which transmits it*’ (JPSSCB Introduction: emphasis mine). This Jewish tradition includes ways of reading and studying the Bible that are different from those commonly used by Christians.

So for the past forty years we Catholics have been moving slowly towards a deeper appreciation of our rootedness in Jewish religious thought and practice, and have begun to rediscover the richness of the tradition that was dear to the heart of Jesus. For more than half of that time, and in direct response to the call of the Church, the Bat Kol¹ Institute in Jerusalem has been promoting a Jewish reading of scripture and Jewish modes of prayer for Christians. I am in debt to the staff of that institute for alerting me to the richness of Jewish ways of reading the Bible, and in particular the Torah.

Some features of Jewish approaches to Scripture

In general, traditional Jewish approaches to the study of Scripture tend to be:

¹ *Bat Kol* (lit. ‘daughter of a voice’) means the voice of God.

Ahistorical: the text is viewed as timeless; the meaning is not bound by the historical or cultural circumstances of its writing, but is valid for now.

Open: the text is not constrained by any one interpretation, but is capable of many different interpretations.

Associative: any part of scripture can be used to throw light on any other part; there is little sense of the text having a history of development.

Playful: there is joy, freedom and creativity in the way the text is handled, and in the way the text is expanded through commentary and story.

Spiritual: the text almost always has something to do with our relationship with God, and to how we are to live our lives.

This does not mean that interpretation is totally free and without limits. Interpretation is controlled by the ‘plain meaning’ of the text and by the opinions of the sages.

Some of these features are shared by western historico-critical, literary and other modes of exegesis, but in general modern western approaches tend to be more scientific, rational and intellectual. A return to more traditional Jewish approaches can help to liberate the text and bring it to life in the hands of ordinary people. The approach described in this article is applied to the Torah, but it is applicable also to the rest of the Old Testament, and to the New Testament as well.

Archaeology of the Word

One simple approach to the study of biblical text might be likened to the work of an archaeologist investigating a new archaeological site. Searching the surface of the ground for clues as to the location of likely places to dig is one of the first tasks. Fragments of broken pottery, the unusual shape of a mound or hollow, traces of a buried wall – these are the clues that lead to a decision as to where to commence excavation. Where the digging will lead is unknown at the beginning, and if at one location there are no discoveries then digging starts somewhere else. But if the preliminary reconnoitering has been done well it is more than likely that exciting rewards await the persevering excavator.

Excavation of a biblical text implies the expenditure of effort in digging below the surface of the words in search of meaning. The rewards can be immense. The surface, or literal meaning of a text (the *peshat* in Hebrew), conceals further meaning (*derash*).

Where to Dig?

Our biblical writings originated for the most part in largely oral cultures, and they are peppered with verbal clues to assist both memory and understanding. Many of the authors were also demonstrably skilled masters of the art of writing, and through choice of words, literary structure and narrative skill have left us a body of literature so powerful, and so true as an expression of the faith of their various communities, that we recognize it as the word of God.

Digging into this literature is greatly assisted by the recognition of clues or markers in the text that invite exploration. There are many such clues and eight of the most common and most easily recognized are listed in Table 1. In each case an example is given from the book of Numbers (New Revised Standard Version).

TABLE 1 SELECTED TEXTUAL CLUES

CLUE	EXAMPLE
1. Repetition	Num 1:48-54 Note that the word 'tabernacle' is repeated seven times in these verses. The question to be asked is not so much why this is so, though this might yield some insights, but: What is the significance of 'tabernacle'? Why does the author want to draw our attention to it?
2. Numbers	Num 7:10-83 This passage is just full of numbers, the same numbers repeated in every description of the offerings brought by the various tribes. But note that each description begins '...the first day', 'On the second day...', etc until we get to 'On the twelfth day...' What might be the significance of having <i>twelve</i> sets of identical offerings?
3. Questions	Num 11:13 'Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?' Questions in the biblical text are almost always meant to be answered by the reader. What does this question mean in your own life?
4. Names	Num 22:5 The name of the seer 'Balaam' may be derived from <i>bala</i> , to swallow, and <i>am</i> , nation, so he is the 'one who swallows nations', or perhaps <i>bli am</i> , 'without a people'. How do these explanations of his name influence your interpretation of the story of Balaam and the Israelites?
5. Times	Num 9:3 Why observe the Passover on the 'fourteenth day of this (first) month, at twilight'?
6. Puzzling words, phrases, passages	Num 9:15-22 The story of the Israelites setting out when the cloud over the tabernacle rose, and camping when it settled, is puzzling. What could it really mean?
7. Structure	Num 6:24-26 Most English versions present Aaron's blessing in poetic form, as does the Hebrew. But in Hebrew the three lines are of increasing length, the first blessing having three words, the second five, and the third seven. This is not reflected in English translations. What significance can you see in each line being longer than the one before it?
8. Echoes of other passages, cross references	Num 11:31-33 The story of the quails is told also in Ex 16:12-13. Note the similarities and differences. Do these hold any significance?

Other Clues Unusual word order, or the repetition of a phrase in which the word order is different, is another clue inviting us to dig into the text at this point. The inclusion of direct quotations is an important clue to note in our study of the New Testament, where quotations from the Old Testament always invite us to go to the original and read the quoted verses in context. Doing so will almost always throw light on the New Testament text.

Tools for Digging

Questions Asking the right question is as important as selecting the right tool, e.g. pick-axe or brush, in an archaeological dig. Our questions need to be open-ended, not ones with ‘yes/no’ answers if they are to lead us on. One of the best tools is the question “What else could it mean?”

Havrutah Just as archaeology is best done in the company of others, so is excavation of the Word. One of the most powerful tools at our disposal is the company of a friend (*haver*) engaged on a like quest. Working in *havrutah*, i.e. with a partner, is the essence of the Jewish approach to Bible study.

Hebrew Language Some knowledge of Hebrew language enables a deeper appreciation of any Old Testament text. Without it we miss the play on words that so often opens up the way to further understanding. While we are digging beneath any of the clues listed above there may come the opportunity to explore more deeply a particular word or phrase in the original language. For instance, in the first example given above the Hebrew word translated ‘tabernacle’ in NRSV is *mishkan*. The root of this word is *s-k-n* (the same Hebrew letter stands for *s* and for *sh*). Other Hebrew words derived from this same root are *sakan*, to dwell, *seken*, dwelling, *saken*, neighbour, and *shekhinah*, the Divine Presence. Following this word trail can deepen our understanding of ‘tabernacle’ in the text we are studying.

Commentaries and Dictionaries A wealth of assistance is available to bible students today in the form of modern, attractively produced bible commentaries, dictionaries and other reference works from mainstream Christian sources. Less well known are the numerous Jewish Torah commentaries in English that offer the fruits of rabbinic reflection and teaching, and that can open up whole new fields of insight for Christian readers of the Bible. These commentaries fall into two main groups.

First are those that contain the text of the Torah in both Hebrew and English with, in most cases, verse by verse commentary in English. These are easily accessed in the usual way through the use of biblical references, though in many such commentaries the page numbering is reversed, following the order of the Hebrew text.

The second group comprises *Parashah* and *Haftarah* commentaries. *Parashah* are the weekly portions of the Torah set for reading on the Sabbath, so arranged that the five books of Moses are read over the span of, usually, one year. The *parashah* are accompanied by readings from the Prophets known as the *haftarah*, much in the way each Gospel reading is linked to a first reading in a Christian lectionary. To access these commentaries for a particular passage of the Torah the first step is to ascertain which *parashat* contains the passage. This is done by referring to the *parashah* schedule for the current year, then consulting the Table of Contents in a *parashah* commentary to look for relevant material. Because *parashah* commentaries tend to be selective not every passage is dealt with in every commentary.

A list of selected Jewish sources in each of these two groups is given in the appendix to this article, together with URL’s of some useful *parashah* websites. Many of these include the *parashah* and *haftarah* schedule for the current year (see Appendix: Selected Jewish Sources).

Outline of *Havrutah* Bible Study Session

Any meeting of two or more *haverim* to engage in the exploration of God's Word is an occasion of grace, and could well begin in a relaxed way with small talk and coffee. There are no hard and fast rules as to procedure, but the following is suggested. The approach is simple, yet powerful.

1. By way of preparation an open Bible with candle or flowers can be readied as a statement about the purpose of the gathering.
2. Pray for the presence and guidance of God's Spirit. 'Where two or three...'
3. Read the selected passage (set in advance and hopefully known to all before the event) aloud, as a way of placing it on the table, as it were.
4. Then in *havrutah* (dividing into pairs or small groups if many people are present) look for clues in the text and decide on one as a starting point. Dig beneath the words, asking the kinds of questions given in the examples above, to enlarge on the meaning of the text, each one offering his or her insights as a contribution to the conversation. If someone in the group is familiar with Hebrew, so much the better. Each person's offerings are accepted in a spirit of attentive listening, not a spirit of debate or contention. There are no winners or losers. The aim is to be as open as possible to the voice of the Spirit, and to make connections between the text and one's own life.
5. When the imagination of the group is exhausted go to the commentaries or other resources to have a conversation with the scholars. This part of the process serves to clarify, enlarge, modify or confirm what has already been uncovered, and it invariably triggers off more discussion.
6. The session might conclude with prayer or song, or with some form of reporting to the whole group if a large number of people have been working in pairs or small groups.

This approach can be used by professional scripture scholars, by non-specialist adults in community or parish groups, and by teachers with students. It is the basic teaching method in Jewish *yeshivas*. It can be modified for use also with children. Experience shows that this approach to reading Scripture together, learning as Jesus learned, often gives rise to extraordinarily rich faith-sharing, and a totally fresh encounter with the Word of God in the Bible.

References

Committee for Religious Relations with the Jews 1974. *Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews*, in Flannery, A (ed.) 1975 *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Dublin: Dominican Publications.

Pontifical Biblical Commission 1995. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Series: Pastoral Action No. 56. Pretoria: South African Bishops' Conference.

Pontifical Biblical Commission 2002. *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. Boston MA: Pauline Books and Media.

Vatican Council II 1965. *Nostrae Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, in Flannery, A (ed.) 1975. *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Dublin: Dominican Publications.

Appendix: Selected Jewish Sources

Text of the Torah with Commentary

Fox, E 1995. *The Five Books of Moses: a new translation with introductions, commentary and notes*. New York NY: Schocken Books Inc.

Herczeg, Y 1999. *Rashi: the Torah with Rashi's commentary translated, annotated and elucidated*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Lieber, D 2001. *Etz Hayim: Torah and commentary*. New York NY: Jewish Publication Society.

Munk, E 1995. *The Call of the Torah: an anthology of interpretation and commentary on the Five books of Moses (5 vols)*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Nachsoni, Y 1989. *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: the classical interpretations of major topics and themes in the Torah (5 vols)*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Plaut, W G 1981. *The Torah: a modern commentary*. New York NY: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press.

Sarna, N 1996. *The JPS Torah Commentary: the traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation (5 vols)*. Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society.

Scherman, N 2000. *The Chumash: the Torah: haftaros and five megillos with a commentary anthologized from the rabbinic writings*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Scherman, N & Zlotowitz, M 1994. *Insights in the Torah: the Chumash with translation and the complete classic commentary of the rav and maggid Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin (5 vols)*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Parashah and Haftarah Commentaries

Belovski, Z 1998. *Shem Mishmuel: selections on the weekly parashah and festivals*. Southfield MI: Targum Press Inc.

Ben David, A 2000. *Around the Shabbat Table: a guide to fulfilling and meaningful Shabbat table conversations*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc.

Cohen, V 2000. *The Soul of the Torah: insights of the Chasidic masters on the weekly Torah portions*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc.

Dov Rubin, Y 2002. *The Parashah Anthology: a collection of insights and commentaries on the weekly parashah*. Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers.

Frand, Y 2001. *Rabbi Frand on the Parasha: insights, stories and observations on the weekly Torah reading*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Goldstein, E 2000. *The Women's Torah Commentary: new insights from women rabbis on the 54 weekly Torah portions*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Green, A 1998. *The Language of Truth: the Torah commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.

Kamentsky, M 2003. *Parsha Parables the Fourth: stories and anecdotes that shine a new light on the weekly Torah portion and holiday*. Nanuet NY: Feldheim Publishers.

Leff, B & Epstein, Y 2000. *Torah Insights: divrei Torah on the parshiot hashavua by leading rabbis and teachers*. New York NY: Orthodox Union.

Leibowitz, N 1993. *New Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)...etc.* Jerusalem: The World Zionist Organization, Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora.

Lopiansky, A 2001. *Shabbos Delights: a collection of enlightening and stimulating comments on the parashah*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Nachshoni, Y 1989 *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: the classical interpretations of major topics and themes in the Torah*. The Artscroll Series. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Plaut, W G 1996. *The Haftarah Commentary*. New York NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press.

Rohr, P O 1992. *Kol Dodi on the Torah: comments, insights and ideas on the weekly sidrah, adapted from the shuirim of Rabbi David Feinstein*. Brooklyn NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Parashah and Haftarah Websites

Parashat HaShavuah: Bat Kol Institute www.batkol.info

Living Torah: Union for Reform Judaism <http://urj.org/torah/>

Parashat HaShavuah: Jewish Theological Seminary of America

<http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/parashah/index.shtml>

Torah Archive: Orthodox Union

www.ou.org/torah/archive.htm

Torah Sites: Hebrew Union College

www.huc.edu/de/sermon/torah.htm

(This site has links to a large number of *parashah* commentary sites.)

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