

Readings and Interpretations of the Book

By
Mark Ellis

It is wrong to think of Jews as a people of the Book if by that is meant a people who reads and ponders the Hebrew Bible. At least today, and no doubt for hundreds of years, this has not been the case. Just the opposite: Jews today are largely ignorant of the Bible. What they know comes largely from hearsay and the Christian culture surrounding them in the West.

It is somewhat different in the state of Israel. There the Bible is learned but mostly as a tool of national justification for the settlers that make up Israel's Jewish population. Through the Bible Israelis are supposed to fall in love with their origins.

The narrative displacement of the indigenous Palestinians finds its rationale in the Bible. The modern story of the settlement of the Promised Land follows the ancient story of Israel's entry into the land. So why worry? Displacement of Palestinians *and* Jewish innocence exist side-by-side in Israel - a narrative line that follows the Biblical text. Displacement and innocence also exists among Jews in the West without the study of the Bible. This ability comes from a historical view of anti-Semitism in Europe that culminated in the Holocaust.

Of course there are other Jews in the West and in Israel that mine the Biblical text for far worse means and methods, or so it is thought. These are the Jewish fundamentalists or messianists whose lives are catalogued methodically and labeled as the extreme, the mirror image of the Palestinian extremists who "do not want peace."

What a mistaken impression but hardly an innocent one. Where can one find the Jewish fundamentalists at the origins of the Jewish state? In the empowering narrative of Israel as innocent and redemptive in America one finds the likes of Elie Wiesel at the center rather than Meir Kahane. Christian Zionists too take a false fall for the support of settlers and Israeli expansion. In the crucial years of American foreign policy decisions that funded and allowed the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, then Israel's annexation of Jerusalem and settlement expansion in the West Bank after the 1967 war, it is more likely to find Christian mainstream liberals like Reinhold Niebuhr and Robert McAfee Brown than Christian preachers hawking their wares on Sunday television programs.

Long before Israel became the favorite child of Jewish and Christian neo-conservatives alike, it was a liberal primer for doing good in the world. After the Holocaust, the liberal compensation for the collapse of civilization in Europe and the destruction of European Jewry was found in support for the Jewish state.

Could it be otherwise? Neo-conservatives and Christian Zionists are late-comers to the party, at least in relation to political and ideological power. Why blame neo-conservatives and

fundamentalists for what was and, in some ways, still remains, a liberal enterprise.

Against a Progressive Reading of the Bible

In this regard, one needs look no further than the Jewish progressives that have argued Jewish dissent against certain Israeli policies against the Palestinians. Their dissent carries an implicit approval of the original settlers, from which they descend or, after the 1967 war, they joined. To protest against the second expansion of Israel or parts thereof - after 1967 - is noble and worthy of commendation.

Yet it begs the original and more troubling question of questions. What are European and American Jews of Peace Now, Rabbis for Human Rights, and Brit Tzedak, for example, arguing from and for? Do they also participate in the erasure of Palestine and Palestinians? Do they assert Jewish innocence in the creation of Israel by decrying the latest abuses by religious “extremists,” Jewish, Christian and Muslim?

Fundamentalists and liberals have interpretations of the Bible and both conflate the Biblical narrative, using aspects of the promise of God to the Israelites regarding land and aspects of God’s injunctions regarding justice and compassion. Neither is wrong. Neither is right. The promise of the land is the guiding force of the Biblical narrative; within that force is the argument for conquest, isolation from the indigenous peoples, and a just social order that is inclusive of Israel and sometimes of the stranger as well. The narrative is complex and decidedly not user-friendly when allowed to speak on its own. In fact, the very notion of use with regard to texts that become canonical is a foundational, not perhaps avoidable, distortion of the journey the text purportedly narrates.

This also is the failure of the Rabbinical method of text isolation and interpretive framework, the *midrash* as it is known and practiced within Rabbinic Judaism. The Biblical text is written down long after the journey of Biblical Israel is finished. In fact, the naming of Biblical Israel is a textual rather than a historical one. Still, even here, editing, redactions, deletions, additions and the glossing over the gaps that mark the text, should give pause to any commentator. When one adds the Rabbinic insistence that the Biblical text carries a meaning beyond its own narration - a surplus meaning - the entire method becomes suspect.

I separate here beauty and wonder from meaning within the text. On the Christian side, who today links the Gregorian Chant with the life of Jesus as presented in the New Testament? The beauty of the Gregorian Chant exists independent of the life of Jesus. At the same time, the life of Jesus, as presented in the context of the New Testament, cannot be seen as a historical given. The historical Jesus has eluded scholars for generations and even the distant echoes of who Jesus might have been challenge the credibility of the gospel accounts.

Again the surplus meanings ascribed to Jesus by contemporary commentators have their place. But, as with the interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, are they the place to return as a way of

moving forward? Only innocence, even in the confrontation of the injustice of the Other, can be found in the return to scripture. Yet all scriptures are too complex in their argumentation and trajectory. They were not propounded for the future as guidelines for life, personal or political.

Abraham too is a place of innocence, a return to a figure whose very existence is not provable. The connection of Judaism, Christianity and Islam to Abraham, even in their origins, is suspect. How they can be connected today is even more debatable. Is this another way of distinguishing the liberal from the fundamentalists, the way of inclusion from the way of exclusion? Read this way the story of Abraham leads to particularities that are in essential harmony, despite the record of those who claim descent from this patriarch.

Read this way the monotheistic religions are innocent; only the followers of these religions are guilty. So the Catholic Church is *not* guilty of anti-Semitism, only Catholics are. Islam is a religion of peace, only some of its followers are prone to violence. Judaism is the prophetic religion par excellence, only many Jews do not follow this line of thought and action.

The assertion of innocence grows. The Bible *read correctly* - as opposed to the way it is often read - leads to peace and compassion. Fundamentalists read the Bible incorrectly. Therefore the struggle to reclaim the Bible and Abraham from their mis-readings.

What if the Bible is not to be returned to or even read for values? What if Abraham is simply who he is in the text and declared off-limits to our interpretations for interfaith sobriety? This also means a refusal to clean up the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Koran - to polish again the edges that are already polished in the text.

What if we were to simply take our identities with regard to the texts of these traditions, whether they be acceptance, reinterpretation or rebellion, and leave them aside when considering the politics of Italy, the United States or the Middle East? What if we refuse to use the Book, whatever that Book is in our tradition? What if we allow the destiny found within the pages of various canons to be mulled over and interpreted however one likes but insist instead on one standard of justice and compassion to be applied to all and everywhere?

Surely, diversity would remain and the canonical texts would continue to inform the debate about the ways of the world. The assertion of innocence would remain, perhaps even grow, as would the use of these texts by economic, state and military power. Let communities debate the scriptures, even if they are unread or misread.

Is there anything that rings more false, more hollow, than the Alexandria Process where clerics from the monotheistic religions in the Middle East propose the beauty of their Books, their desire for justice and reconciliation as issuing from their traditions, as the carnage that continues and escalates? Another example is the leader of the Jewish Reform movement chastising the fundamentalists of any stripe for proposing that God is on their side. It rings hollow because the Reform movement, like the other denominations within Judaism, is virtually silent on the

question of the expansion of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians, at least in any way that meaningfully addresses the situation?

All of these pronouncements increase the sense that the religious is the essential component of hypocrisy in our world. The complaint that the political uses religion to enforce its own hypocrisy should be heard but this does not address the complicity of the religion in this use.

The Book without Constantinian Religion

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin, the great Jewish philosopher, wrote of the tendency of tradition to conform to power, but he might have also suggested that tradition conforms to power precisely because religion conforms its scriptures through tradition. The Bible is thus conformed through tradition and tradition conforms to power. The power Benjamin writes about is embodied in the state, but before the state can be conformed to an initial step is the evisceration of the Bible within religion. Thus a double conforming is at work, a conforming that is needed by religion and the state. Wouldn't both be subverted by the Bible?

The category mistake can be found here. Moses can exist in the religious framework of Judaism only if the tradition conforms him to its own sensibility. That sensibility is to see Moses as foundational and past. Thus the Tablets are broken in his terrible anger *then* - at the idolatry Moses witnesses in the glorification of the Golden Calf. *Now* - would Moses break the Tablets upon witnessing the nation glorifying Star of David helicopter gunships and the erection of Ghetto walls around Palestinians?

Moses, as a free agent, rails against the Israelites. His accusation against the people is idolatry. Today, Moses is not free to rail against the inequities of his people, nor is God. Moses as the agent of God is long past as is the freedom of God to act in the present. The anger of God directed at the activities of Israel, indeed through their activities directed at the people itself, is unheard of in the Jewish community.

God is conformed to tradition as well, at least a tradition that can no longer question the people Israel. Thus the Constantinian Judaism of our day. Without challenge from the text of God, Jews, especially the Jewish establishment, conforms to power with alacrity.

Picture the Torah scrolls within the Ark of the Covenant in synagogues around the world. Now picture, in ancient times, the Golden Calf being substituted for the Tablets in the Ark itself, the place where the Tablets were supposed to be. Now picture a ritualized object facsimile of a Star of David helicopter gunship and Wall in the Ark of the Covenant today. Wouldn't this be the best way to symbolize the mainstream Judaism of our day, Constantinian Judaism with its worship and conformism to power?

Yet this is impossible within religion. Religion seeks to have it both ways - a conformism to power which is religiously and rhetorically denied. Paradoxically the Bible in tradition allows Judaism to do this with a straight face.

Picture Jesus in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church. The moment of consecration arrives and Jesus, concretely embodied in the bread and wine, is held aloft. At the same time roaming mobs prepare to leave church and attack ghettoized Jews. Jesus, who protected the innocent and excluded, now reoriented by religion, becomes the vehicle for destruction and exclusion. Should the wafer and chalice be then decorated with the club and the boot of violence, becoming for the people what they say and do?

Within religion's conformity Moses and Jesus are sidelined, transformed, and invested with new meaning. It is only then that they do the bidding of the state. The ultimate irony is that both opposed the state power of their day and issued a striking and unrelenting internal critique of their own community in conforming to state power. Both were challenged, disparaged, and rebelled against precisely because of this dual opposition.

The idea of reading the text within and against attitudes and values of the community is itself a tradition, or perhaps, if we add the aspect of bolstering the community, it is tradition itself. Whatever can be said for this historically - a decidedly mixed history it is - the time to argue that position is past. Reading within the community already fences in the prophetic and distorts the text itself. The journey of a disparate and contentious Israel with an easily angered and unpredictable God, that is before it becomes the narrative of the Jewish community with its ritual readings and synagogue worship, cannot be read to the assembled community with any intent of being understood. And more such a reading cannot be enacted. The community itself would be dissolved.

If the narrative were truly alive and free it would be complimented by the actions of the contemporary Jewish community. Indeed it is at some level, but taking refuge in the past while acting in the present without canonizing the contemporary narrative as well allows a freedom to disregard the honored narrative and its explosive power - especially as it is posed to attack the presumption of the present. This is true of the Christian churches and communities as well. Few would argue that Jesus, while worshiped in contemporary churches, would actually attend one. Nor would the worshipers be safe if Jesus did approach. A biting denunciation like the ones found in the Gospel accounts would no doubt ensue.

Liberation theologies seek to recreate the communities that originally formed around the formative event of the Exodus and Jesus. Clearly these are alternative communities, outside the mainstream, and the attempt to mainstream them has led to cooptation and expulsion.

The themes of liberation are taken up by the mainstream - they are, after all, in the canonical texts - but they are distorted and transformed in the process. Since the texts are considered the founding documents of and explicitly for the good of the community the critique has to be subsumed under this powerful influence. The prophets who hold these texts as radical

manifestos of liberation are thus quieted in the chorus that trumpets the common good.

How, then, does one free the Bible from the communities that are founded upon them? How does one guard against the formation of another community that makes the same claim and falls into the same trap? Can we have a liberation theology that finds its voice within the Hebrew Bible, is profoundly Jewish, and has no ties with the established Jewish community? Is the same thing possible among Christians, re-appropriating the New Testament without Christianity and the Christian community?