

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 10/10/21

Introductory Remarks

Recently I was talking with Sis. Jacqueline Maloney at Bethel and she was telling me that the senior housing she lives in is about half Jewish, and that she often attends services with them. They expressed surprise that she was so interested in Judaism and knew something about it. She told them, “Of course I do. Jesus was a Jew, and he observed all those religious festivals as well.” She told me she was happy we had covered this in Bible Study.

I took away two things from that conversation. First, the central importance of understanding Jesus as a faithful, practicing Jew who did not come to overthrow the Law but to fulfill it. We have made Jesus into our own image as a Gentile Christian, but he was neither. For decades I have been trying to help people understand who Jesus was: a first-century Jew who celebrated all those religious festivals that we know so little about.

Last month, during the Jewish High Holy Days, some of us went for Friday night Shabbat service at Temple Israel, and as part of that service the rabbi blew the *shofar*, the ram’s horn, announcing the arrival of the new year, Rosh Hashanah. Blowing the horn not only announces the new year: it is a calling of the people to repentance and a new life, which is the central theme of the High Holy Days. The sound of that horn is supposed to remain in your ears as a reminder all year.

It struck me that two thousand years ago, Jesus would have attended services where he heard the ram’s horn being blown for exactly the same reason. At Temple Israel we Bethelites were able to experience for the first time a piece of Jesus’ religious life that we simply never think about. And this was not just some religious ritual that was peripheral to who Jesus really was. Jesus made that Jewish call to repentance and a new way of life the center of his teaching and his ministry, the heart of his gospel message (Mark 1:14-15). Recognizing the essential Jewishness of Jesus and his mission is crucial as a foundation for understanding the New Testament.

The second thing I took away from my conversation with Sister Jacqueline is that more often than not, for the past two thousand years Christians have lived in isolation from or open hostility towards the Jewish people. The word “ghetto” was first used in Venice in 1516 to describe a segregated area of the city where Jews were required to live. The practice of isolating Jews from the rest of the so-called “Christian” population became widespread in Europe and continued well into the 20th century.

I hope that helping people have a better understanding of Judaism, both ancient and modern, and of our deep connection to it through Jesus, will begin to overcome that separation and open doors to new cooperative relationships such as the one Bethel has with Temple Israel. I am more convinced than ever of the importance of this project and of what we are doing in this class.

As an aside, I really have enjoyed our collaboration with Temple Israel recently, and one of the small things that particularly delights me is that some of their members talk

about us as Congregation Beth El, pronouncing it like the original Hebrew phrase with the accent on the last syllable. I just got an email this week from one of their members who actually wrote it that way, separating the two words, as if we were a Jewish synagogue, “Kehillah Beth El!” Our church has a Jewish name and a Jewish Savior. We are planning a joint TI/Beth El workday at Habitat for Humanity sometime in the near future.

I want to look back briefly at where we have come from in this class because we have covered a lot of material. This whole massive project really started for me almost ten years ago with a conversation I had with Pastor Hammond about the book of Hebrews. I made the offhand comment that I didn’t like Hebrews very much and he asked why. It sent me back to a part of Scripture I had been ignoring, where I discovered that what I disliked about Hebrews was how it had been used to attack Jews and Judaism, how it has been part of 2,000 years of anti-Semitic bigotry and hatred. So I looked again at a book I had been avoiding and asked the question I have been asking in all my classes: can we read the New Testament (and the Bible as a whole) in such a way that it is not anti-Jewish?

One of the ways I tried to do that was by reading biblical commentators who were Jewish, and those commentaries led me to the rabbis. For me that has provided the basis for thinking about the Scriptures in new ways, in ways that enrich and enlarge our understanding of the stories about Jesus and the letters of Paul. And it has led me to looking at parts of Scripture that I had never thought very deeply about before, like the book of Leviticus.

When I look back at my notes, I am surprised to see that that class on Hebrews began in the fall of 2013! We spent the whole year looking at Christian anti-Judaism and how it has affected our reading of Scripture. In January of 2019 we picked up the theme of Christian anti-Judaism again and looked more broadly at the whole NT. And then that fall we moved into this extended discussion of our Jewish roots.

For the past two years now we have been looking at some of the most important teachings of the Scriptures with the help of Jewish rabbis, both ancient and modern, who have provided us with a fresh perspective on those teachings. We have largely focused on Torah, the first five books of the OT, because they are foundational for everything else. Sadly, Christian anti-Judaism has caused the Church largely to ignore Torah, or “spiritualize” it, or even be hostile towards it, and thus we have misunderstood the New Testament as well. I have argued that the New Testament cannot stand on its own; it is built on the Old and takes for granted many of its teachings. We have cut ourselves off from our Jewish roots and the life-giving nourishment they provide (Rom. 11:17).

We have explored many passages that rarely if ever get talked about in the church, and we have wrestled with some of their implications for our lives. So in this class we have explored topics like animal sacrifices and atonement for sin, holiness, the kosher laws, the Sabbath, ritual purity, creation care and economic justice. We have seen how these help us rethink our reading of the New Testament, especially the gospels. We have also seen that these are more than just ancient laws: they still have much to teach us today. They are, as Paul says, “instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

So I have pushed us to reconsider and wrestle with parts of the Bible we generally avoid as a way of gaining a broader understanding of God's ways and our purpose in the world. When we left off in June, we were in the middle of looking at one of those topics: the fear of the Lord. Next week we will begin with that.