

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 10/4/20

II. Review of Major Themes

A. The Rabbis

When we speak of “the rabbis” in general, we are talking about Jewish Bible scholars whose teachings, some dating from before the time of Christ, have been gathered in a number of different collections. The most important and longest of these is the Talmud. Rabbis in Palestine produced a Talmud in around 400 AD, and a century later a much more extensive one was produced in Babylon, which became the basis for rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud is not a work of systematic theology but rather a compilation of numerous voices in discussion and debate about the Scriptures and their application. Rabbis have written many extensive commentaries on the Talmud since, and some are considered more authoritative than others. For over two thousand years, the rabbis have been studying the Scriptures and arguing what they mean and how best to apply them.

I have found reading the rabbis to be refreshing, challenging, and inspirational. They have a deep concern for the Scriptures as God’s Word, and each word, down to the smallest letter, matters to them. They have a rich knowledge of the biblical languages and of verbal connections between passages. While there is much rabbinic literature devoted to minute details of legal interpretation, there are also plenty of rabbis who concern themselves with what Jesus called the “weightier matters of the law,” the big picture presented in Torah and the rest of the Scriptures. Reading the rabbis has made me much more aware of the Jewishness of Jesus, how deeply rooted he was in Torah and the Prophets. And they have caused me to rethink some of our own religious traditions and understanding of Scripture. Reading the rabbis has given me new perspectives on God, the world, and humanity, as well as on my own faith.

A modern rabbi who I have found to be particularly insightful is Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and I have listed a number of his books in the course bibliography. A recent book of essays that discuss the writings of Rabbi Sacks is entitled *Radical Responsibility*, which aptly describes his teaching. More than anything else, it is that theme that attracts me to the rabbis and to Rabbi Sacks in particular: their emphasis on our God-given responsibilities for taking care of this world, rather than worrying about the next.

Reading the rabbis, both ancient and modern, provides for us Christians a necessary counterbalance to the private, personal, inward spirituality of American Protestantism. “Judaism is not a faith transacted in the privacy of the believer’s soul. It is a social faith. It is about networks of relationship. It is about families, communities, and ultimately a nation, in which each of us, great and small, has a role to play” (Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 130). I am arguing in this course that this is a fundamental biblical truth taught first in Torah and worked out in the rest of the Scriptures. That truth is embraced, not abandoned, by the NT. “Read Torah and you will immediately note that it is not a formula for the salvation of the soul or the acquisition of inner peace. It is about [social] welfare and the treatment of

employees,...justice and the impartial application of the law, charity and the alleviation of poverty. **It is about the construction of a society**” (Sacks, *Numbers*, p. 61). Jesus called that society the Kingdom of God and insisted that following him meant learning how to live as members of that counter-cultural community. If we ignore these fundamental elements of Torah, we will also miss their importance in the New Testament.

A disclaimer: I am not suggesting that what I am presenting is *the* “Jewish” perspective on Torah. There is no such thing. The rabbis have been arguing for over 2,000 years about both major and minor issues, as have Christians. Despite the differences among various Christian denominations, we do find certain common core beliefs and the same is true in Judaism. Some of what I present here might be considered “mainstream” Jewish thinking, but some of the insights belong to specific rabbis who I have found to be helpful both in reading Torah and understanding the NT. Like Christianity, Judaism contains a multitude of voices, some of whom are given greater authority than others. But all are part of the ongoing questioning and discussion and debate that seeks to connect our lives with the Scriptures. We need to include those voices in our own discussions.

B. Torah: Radical Responsibility

Torah, the five books of Moses, is the foundation stone for the rest of the Bible. When Jesus is asked about eternal life, he points people to Torah, the law of Moses (Matt. 19:16-17; Mark 10:17-19; Luke 10:25-28; 18:18). He tells people that all you need to know about salvation is in Moses and the Prophets and implies that he has nothing more to teach them (Luke 16:28-31). He says he has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them, to live out their teaching, and goes on to praise the commandments (Matt. 5:17-20). You can’t understand what Jesus is up to without going back to Torah.

Paul also insists that the Law is “holy, just, and good” (Rom. 7:12) and that as part of God’s inspired Scriptures it is useful for teaching and instruction in God’s righteous justice (2 Tim. 3:16). In fact *torah* does not mean “law,” but rather “teaching” or “instruction.” For Christians Torah is the essential foundation for our understanding of God and how God wants us to live in this world.

Torah introduces something completely new to the world. For the first time, religion is connected to morality. The God of the Bible is a different type of God, one who cares about justice, compassion, the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of life. To say, “God loves” (Deut. 4:37; 7:8, 13) was a radical departure from ancient pagan religious myths. To say that God loves an insignificant nomadic people like Israel may be misunderstood as merely an exaggerated expression of national pride; to say that God loves the foreigner and the immigrant (Deut. 10:18) is breathtaking, is world-changing. Israel’s God is not like other gods. Because the unique God of Torah is the God of Jesus, and is the starting point for what he teaches and does, we need to return to Torah.

1. A Revolutionary Story

Throughout the centuries, Christians have tended to use the Bible for constructing elaborate systems of thought—creeds, doctrine, theology, while the rabbis were equally busy constructing elaborate systems of behavior, what they call *halakhah*, the way you

should walk. When Christians want to evaluate other Christians, they ask what they believe. Jews look at how other Jews act. Biblically, that is a more accurate measure of one's relationship to God.

But the Bible itself is neither an orderly exposition of religious ideas (what to think) nor a collection of ethical teachings (how to act). Rather, the primary literary mode of the Bible is narrative, story. Even though we commonly translate *torah* as "law," in fact the Bible does something unique with its laws: they are embedded in a narrative, the story of Israel. You cannot understand those laws in isolation from that narrative.

The central story we find in Torah, the Exodus, is about God, politics and people, the misuse of power and economic slavery, human rights and minority rights, civil disobedience, and what freedom really means. It is a revolutionary story about God's redemption of his people, freeing an undistinguished group of enslaved people from the power of the greatest and longest-lived empire of all time. For most of history the gods have been seen to be on the side of the ruling powers, and Christians in America still misuse Romans 13 to that effect. Yet the shocking truth in Torah is that the one true God intervened in history to liberate oppressed immigrants from the tyrannical power of the state.

In Torah, redemption is not about being saved from my sins but about being saved from the sins of others. Salvation is not a future heavenly hope but a present-day earthly reality. As Rabbi Sacks says, it is about the construction of a society, an alternative society that is radically different from the pagan empires of the world, be they Egypt, Babylon, Rome, or America. You cannot understand Jesus if you omit this story from the gospel. Torah condemns the permanent economic hierarchies that characterize empires like Egypt, the structures that provide freedom and wealth for the few and poverty and oppression for the rest. One of its greatest concerns is to lay the foundation for a society in which desperate poverty and degrading treatment of the less fortunate are unknown. Rabbi Sacks argues that Israel had to experience slavery in Egypt so that they would know in their gut what it feels like and be able to construct a different type of society. The message of the Law, hammered home again by the prophets, and central to the teaching of Jesus, is that deep-seated economic inequity and oppression offends against the fundamental values of righteousness and justice, the "way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19). This is who God is, says Torah, and this is what it means to follow Him. For Christians to ignore this or spiritualize it all or redefine redemption and godliness in completely different terms is irresponsible and unbiblical.

We all take our identity from the stories we tell about ourselves and our people. Every Passover celebration, Jews retell the Exodus story as a way of understanding and holding on to who they are as a people and what God has done for them. Americans tell a heavily edited version of their story every Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and other national holidays. Christians also tell their story at Christmas, Easter, and the Lord's Supper and other times. So it is important to get the story right to understand who we are. By and large Christians have left out Israel's story from their own story, and in my classes I am trying to rectify that mistake.