

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 6/13/21

Q. The Fear of the Lord

The church I grew up in was like Bethel, at least in one respect: the sermon for the day was based on whatever Bible text the preacher felt like preaching on. Sometimes that meant hearing the same few passages over and over again. So when I started attending an Episcopal church, I was amazed at the wide variety of Scripture passages we heard in the service each Sunday. The Episcopal Church, like many other historic denominations (Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran), follows a lectionary, a group of set readings assigned for each week. This is a practice that goes back at least to the time of Jesus. We actually had four different Bible readings each Sunday: one from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms, one from a NT epistle, and one from a gospel. Over a three-year cycle we covered a good part of the Bible. But not all of it, as I noticed when I began to look at what was left out. In addition to the somewhat tedious parts like genealogies, we were also spared a lot of the harsher passages on judgment.

No such luck in the Jewish synagogue. They also follow a set cycle of weekly readings, one that covers the whole of Torah, every word, each year. One passage in particular has been troublesome both to the ancient rabbis and to modern Jews. Although Torah outlines the many blessings that follow from loving and obeying God, Deuteronomy 27-28 details a long and harrowing list of curses, punishments if Israel forsakes God. Some Jews leave the synagogue during the reading of this passage; others avoid the synagogue altogether that week. Many refuse the honor of being called up front to read from this portion of the Torah. Some synagogues omit them entirely from their reading cycle.

It is passages like these that provide the basis for the anti-Jewish slander that regards the Old Testament as teaching a harsh, wrathful, judgmental God, as opposed to the loving, forgiving God of Jesus. We have seen what a gross distortion of biblical teaching this is. The teachings of Jesus that we looked at in the Sermon on the Mount actually echo these passages of judgment. But Christians historically have tended to apply the blessings in the OT to the church while continuing to see the curses as directed at Israel. So we sing a song, “We’re blessed in the city, blessed in the fields, blessed when we come and when we go,” based on the first part of Deuteronomy 28, which conveniently ignores the strong warnings in the rest of the chapter, including a parallel passage about being cursed in the city, cursed in the fields, cursed when you come and go. Can the Church really sing this song so arrogantly as if we have been more faithful to God than Israel was? Can we just pick and choose the few Bible passages that we like, the ones that make us feel comfortable?

Yet despite their disparagement of Judaism, Christian preachers have been fond of wrathful, judgmental sermons threatening hellfire for all those who don’t believe their particular version of the gospel. Perhaps the most famous of these is “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” by Jonathan Edwards (1741), preached right here in Northampton, Mass., which develops its argument from both Old and New Testament passages. The title itself is an allusion to Hebrews 10:31—“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the

living God.” Such preaching has fallen out of fashion for the most part, so it is worth recognizing that even Jesus speaks of himself as casting people into eternal fire (Matt. 25:41), although not the people that Christian preachers usually target.

As we have seen, throughout the New Testament there are passages that speak about God’s judgment on sin, about being thrown into a place of utter darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, about a lake of fire for the destruction of evildoers. Paul regularly talks about being saved from the coming wrath of God (Rom. 1:18; 2:25; 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10), and the book of Revelation dramatically depicts that coming wrath on Babylon the Great, symbolic of all human Empires (16:19; 19:15). The well-known Civil War song “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” drew its famous phrase “the grapes of wrath” from that imagery in Revelation as it celebrates God’s judgment on the Confederacy: “Glory, glory, hallelujah” indeed. And in a passage that drives Protestant theologians nuts, Paul speaks of Christians being called before the “judgment seat of Christ” to receive recompense for what we have done, good or bad. That expectation, Paul says, is the basis for his “fear of the Lord” (2_Cor. 5:10-11; see also Rom. 2:5-10). Peter says something similar. Quoting Leviticus 19:2, he exhorts his audience to live lives of holiness, because “if you call as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their work, then live your lives here in fear” (1 Peter 1:16-17).

So fear of the Lord is very much a New Testament doctrine for Christians. Jesus makes this clear, when he warns his disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will tell you whom to fear: fear the one who after killing the body has authority to throw you into Gehenna. Yes, I tell you, fear that one” (Luke 12:4-5). We saw that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus threatens some sort of punishment for those who break the commandments, whether in this life or in the next.

But is it really desirable to serve God out of abject fear? If not, why does the Bible spend so much time talking about fearsome judgment? Why are we told, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10) and “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12)? How can we love God with all our being if we are scared to death? Is faith just an abusive relationship? Is Christianity just fire insurance? I would like to explore a bit further the whole idea of the fear of the Lord.

1. Fear and Punishment

The Bible speaks regularly of the importance of fearing God, although usually preachers and commentators are quick to say that this really means reverence and awe. But the word used in both Hebrew and Greek is the normal word for being afraid, although it does have a wider range of meanings that includes everything from being terrified to being in awe. The same word is used to denote both a debilitating, paralyzing terror and a positive respect and reverence for someone. It can refer to the act of worship itself as well as to a person of great piety, a true believer, one who worships in the proper way. “Fear of the Lord” is actually the Hebrew equivalent of what we call “religion.” One either fears and serves the one true God, the God of Israel, or one fears and serves false gods, idols (2 Kings 17:32-41 KJV). In the NT, Gentiles who attached themselves to the Synagogue and adopted at least some Jewish religious practices are called “God-fearers.” Cornelius was one of those (Acts 10:2, 22).

Some passages play on the double meaning of the word. Psalm 33 speaks of our reaction of awe to God's power in creation but also the fearfulness of God's power over the military might of nations. And in a passage that has current relevance, Isaiah says, "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread (Is. 8:12-13). There is a proper fear of God that contrasts the fears of other people, other conspiracy theorists. But here it is clearly fear in the sense of fright, not just reverence or awe. Don't be afraid of what the world fears, but rather fear God. There is a type of fear that focuses on the evils that humans are doing in the world, which leads us to make bad decisions. The prophet exhorts Israel to focus their fear on God and His greater power, power that may bring blessing or destruction.

So the catalog of curses in Deuteronomy 28 appeals to that same fear of the Lord, fear of punishment for wrongdoing. If you do not obey God and walk in his ways, God will bring disaster and misery on you (v. 15). Its message is couched in language that seems outlandish, over the top: people will be reduced to eating their children, and a mother who has just given birth will hide the placenta for herself so that her family will not eat it first (vv. 53-57). No wonder people don't want to read this in the synagogue (or in church).

But there are some important contextual matters that should help us understand the purpose of this passage. First, such language was actually part of a standard political literary form in the Ancient Near East. Archaeologists have discovered hundreds of ancient treaties or covenants between nations that date to the second millennium BC, that is, to the time of the Exodus. Nations surrounding Israel regularly made covenants which all tended to have the same format or literary structure. It was a kind of legal boilerplate. When Torah speaks of the covenant between God and Israel, it follows closely the structure of those international treaties between a powerful ruler and a subject nation. The typical covenant had a number of different parts that included a review of the historical relationship between the peoples, the specific requirements of the treaty, and a section of blessings and curses that would result from keeping or breaking the covenant. The list of curses was usually extensive and detailed, as in our passage from Deuteronomy. They were meant to get people to take this relationship seriously by using the kind of overstated, hyperbolic language that we have seen even Jesus using to make his point.

The whole book of Deuteronomy takes the shape of this ancient covenant format, because Deuteronomy is essentially a reaffirmation or recommitment ceremony on the part of Israel to its covenant with God. In the chapter before the list of blessings and curses, we see the people actually participating in such a ceremony, and affirming their willingness to accept both the blessings and the curses of that covenant (Deut. 27). So the horrifying language in chapter 28 is actually part of something that was well understood in the culture of the day. It was something everyone agreed to.

Second, the language of judgment is a standard part of Israel's prophetic literature, which is also based on the concept of the covenant. Indeed, the prophet Amos indicates that it is precisely this special covenant relationship that Israel has had with the Lord that singles them out for judgment. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2, NRSV). In Hosea, that

intimate relationship is likened to a marriage where one partner has been unfaithful. God's anger at Israel's sin comes from the pain and hurt of their betrayal of God's love. The prophetic message is clear: you think that your special relationship with God will protect you from harm but in fact it exposes you to it in a unique way. If God didn't care so much about you, God would not be so upset at your faithlessness. Somehow, when Christians talk about how wonderful it is to have a personal relationship with God, they never mention this biblical aspect of that relationship.

But as Hosea makes clear, the message of judgment is a painful one for God. Jeremiah illustrates this as well: he is known as the weeping prophet because he issues his warnings of judgment reluctantly, painfully, with tears in his eyes. Too often, preachers of hellfire and brimstone have conveyed just the opposite sense, one of smug satisfaction and even joy at the condemnation of sinners. Such sermons are not biblical.

In Deuteronomy, neither God nor Moses wants these curses to actually take place. As in the book of Jonah illustrates, that prophetic message of judgment is always issued with the hope of repentance. The larger context of Deuteronomy makes this clear. As we have seen, one of the key words in Deuteronomy is "return," the Hebrew word that refers to what we call repentance. Moses immediately goes on in chapter 30 to make this clear. Judgment is never God's final word: when judgment comes, he says, "Return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today. Then the Lord your God will restore you. . . I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:2-3, 19).

Rabbi Heschel cites a fascinating midrash to make this point. "They asked *Wisdom*: What should be the punishment of a sinner? And Wisdom said: *Misfortune pursues sinners* (Prov. 13:21). They asked *prophecy*: What should be the punishment of a sinner? And prophecy said: *The soul that sins shall die* (Ezek. 18:4, 20). They asked *the Holy One*, blessed be He: What should be the punishment of a sinner? And He said: *Let him repent and he will be atoned for*" (*God in Search of Man*, pp. 261-262; italics in the original). Here the ancient rabbis recognize that although Scripture contains a variety of voices and messages, the last word belongs to God, a word of forgiveness and reconciliation.

God's final word is always one of loving commitment to the covenant. Even if Israel breaks it, God will never abandon Israel completely or cease calling them to return (Lev. 26:44). Paul affirms this same fundamental theological principle: "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). In that passage, Paul's whole point is that God continues to love Israel and intends to show them mercy despite their past disobedience. God's wrath is never God's last word for his covenant people.

But the words of judgment are there and like most modern Christians, the rabbis were uncomfortable with these passages. Rabbinic tradition teaches that one who observes God's commandments out of fear of punishment or love of reward is someone who does not worship for the right reasons. Although the rabbis speak regularly of the rewards that come to those who are faithful, especially in study of Torah, they also recognize that such motivation in and of itself does not lead to a mature spiritual life. *Pirkei Avot*, the ancient collection of rabbinic wisdom saying, begins with an interesting quote from Antigonos of

Sokho (3rd century BC): “Do not be like servants who serve their master on condition of receiving reward, but be like servants who serve their master not on condition of receiving a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you” (*m. Avot* 1:3).

Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, labels worship out of desire for blessings or fear of punishment as “unworthy” and says that “this is not at the level of the prophets or the wise....The only ones who serve God in this way are the uneducated...and children, who are trained to serve from fear until their knowledge grows and they come to serve out of love” (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:1). For the rabbis, loving, worshipful reverence for God is a higher attitude than such fear.

But the Bible appeals to both, knowing perhaps that at times our baser elements need this fear to keep us in line. We are often more like young children who only respond to the fear of punishment. To become mature they need to learn the reasons for and respect for proper behavior. They need to learn to value it for itself as intrinsically good. Rabbi Norman Lamm comments: “Fear of punishment sees sin as dangerous; reverence sees it as disgusting” (*Exodus*, p. 24).

But for most people, the fear of unpleasant consequences is a stronger motivator, especially when we need to change deeply ingrained bad habits. Paul speaks of God’s judgment on wayward Christians now as a kind of discipline so that they will learn to behave and not be condemned ultimately (1 Cor. 11:30-32). Hebrews sees such discipline as a positive sign of God’s parental love for His children that produces a life of holiness (Heb. 12:5-11). Self-less service to God is the goal, but to reach that goal humans need incentives. The Bible definitely believes in using both the carrot and the stick.

So the fear of the Lord does include the fear of punishment, of judgment. We have seen that this is not simply an Old Testament idea, but one affirmed in the New Testament as well. And it is more than simply a fear of final judgment, a fear of “going to hell.” As we have seen, judgment in both the Old and New Testaments also comes in this life, through divine actions or those of human agents such as Assyria and Babylon or local courts. Sin has consequences, and the biblical warnings of judgment are there to encourage us to avoid having to suffer those consequences.

On one level, we like this idea of punishment, of judgment for sin. We want sinners to be punished because of our sense of justice, because we don’t want people to get away with wrongdoing. We just don’t like the idea of punishment for sins when it is applied to ourselves. We want justice to be inflicted on others but we want mercy for ourselves. So Christians have developed a strong sense of personal protection from judgment that ignores or cancels out this whole aspect of biblical teaching. The prophets’ message of judgment was directed primarily to Israel, to God’s people. And Jesus’ strong words of judgment also were primarily directed against good religious folk, ones who regularly attended services and thought of themselves as devout faithful followers of God. The Bible makes it clear that God’s people may well face various forms of judgment here and now, and for some, that judgment may be quite devastating. The idea that God is going to rapture us out of the world when serious trouble comes is simply unbiblical.

The church needs to hear the message of judgment. The church needs to hear about the wrath of God not just for individuals but also coming on a community, a nation, on God’s

own people. The church needs to hear that some of her teaching and actions may have essentially made her an apostate institution, an idolatrous people, a community that has wholeheartedly embraced the pagan values of the world around it. The church needs to hear the message that God may need to dismantle and destroy all that she considers sacred so that the Lord may come again to dwell among his people. The church needs to rediscover the fear of the Lord, not directed at others, but for ourselves, for our own good, for our own discipline and growth.