

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 12/19/21

V. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A. Where Are the Hittites?

Anne Rice, the author of a best-selling series of books about vampires, was a lapsed Catholic who came back to the church and wrote a couple of imaginative novels about the life of Jesus. She explains how she reconnected with her faith. In the process of doing historical research into ancient civilizations like Egypt and Babylon, she was brought up short by one stubborn fact. “I stumbled upon a mystery without a solution, a mystery so immense that I gave up trying to find an explanation because the whole mystery defied belief. The mystery was the survival of the Jews....I couldn’t understand how these people had endured as the great people who they were. It was this mystery that drew me back to God” (“Author’s Note,” *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*).

That mystery has been noted by many other non-Jewish writers throughout history. Mark Twain, an outspoken religious skeptic, wrote about the astonishing persistence of the Jews as a vibrant, successful people throughout history while other great nations—Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome—all are gone. He ends his essay by saying: “All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?” (“Concerning the Jews,” *Harpers Magazine*, March 1898). The French Christian philosopher Pascal (1660) speaks of the uniqueness of what he calls this “peculiar people” who have endured for such a long time. “For whereas the peoples of Greece and Italy, of Sparta, Athens, and Rome, and others who came long after have perished so long ago, these still exist despite the efforts of so many powerful kings who have tried a hundred times to destroy them....They have nevertheless been preserved, and this preservation has been foretold” (*Pensees*, #619). And Walker Percy, an American Catholic writer in the 20th century, asks: “Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite, even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people? When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable” (*The Message in the Bottle*, p. 6).

How is it possible that this small group of seeming nobodys has survived for over three thousand years despite the best efforts of other much more powerful peoples to wipe them out? Those efforts are part of their story from the beginning. Exodus starts with an attempted genocide of the Hebrews by the Pharaoh. The book of Esther narrates another such attempt by the Persians. Ten of the twelve original tribes of Israel were savagely overrun and permanently disbanded by the Assyrian Empire (722 BCE). Then the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and led the Judean leadership into exile (586 BCE). The Greeks outlawed the practice of Judaism under penalty of death (168 BCE), an event remembered at Hanukkah. The Romans destroyed the rebuilt temple (70 CE) and banned all Jews from Jerusalem (135 CE). And so on, throughout history, which

has included Christian-led Crusades and Inquisitions against the Jews, brutal persecution and slaughter in the name of Jesus. Yet not even the insanely methodical Nazis were able to fully carry out their “final solution” to the existence of the Jews. As Walker Percy said, remarkable.

The earliest historical reference to Israel that has been found outside the Bible is from an Egyptian commemorative stone from around 1200 BCE proclaiming victory over the Pharaoh Merneptah enemies. One of its boasts reads: “Israel is laid waste; her seed is no more.” But as Mark Twain once said, “The report of my death was an exaggeration.” The Pharaoh’s proclamation of Israel’s demise was premature. Indeed, the Jews have not only survived those repeated attempts to lay them waste, but they have thrived. When an earlier Pharaoh attempted to hinder the growth and power of the Hebrews in Egypt by subjecting them to hard labor, he noticed something astonishing: “The more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread” (Ex. 1:12). Rabbi Sacks sees this as an apt description of the Jewish experience. “Jewish history is not merely a story of Jews enduring catastrophes that might have spelled the end to less tenacious groups. It is that after every disaster, Jews renewed themselves. They discovered some hitherto hidden reservoir of spirit that fuelled new forms of collective self-expression as the carriers of God’s message to the world” (*Studies in Spirituality*, p. 64).

It is not merely the survival of the Jews that is remarkable. It is also their unparalleled influence on our world. They have made theological and moral and intellectual and artistic contributions to human civilization in great disproportion to their size. Thomas Cahill, a Catholic historian, wrote a book entitled *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (1998). Cahill argues: “We can hardly get up in the morning or cross the street without being Jewish. We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes. Most of our best words, in fact—new, adventure, surprise; unique, individual, person, vocation; time, history, future; freedom, progress, spirit; faith, hope, justice—are the gifts of the Jews.” That is an astonishing claim, but one that Cahill clearly establishes in this very readable book.

Other more scholarly works only confirm and elaborate on his basic points. Another Roman Catholic historian Paul Johnson wrote: “To the Jews we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of the human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind” (quoted in Sacks, *Judaism’s Life-Changing Ideas*, p. xx). One thing I would add to this list the idea that holiness and its religious expression is about much more than simply performing rituals to appease the gods. Torah, as we have seen, insists that holiness embraces all of life, that one’s relationship to God should result in a life of compassionate justice. We take this idea for granted, that religion is primarily about morality, but it is an idea found first in Torah.

Rabbi Sacks comments: “The number of Jews in the world is smaller than a small statistical error in the Chinese census. Yet we remain bigger than our numbers” (Sacks, *Exodus*, p. 147). To my mind, the endurance of the Jews is nothing short of miraculous. It

is a mystery that points us to the God who called them into being and whom they continue to worship.

Because of the centrality of God's word, Torah, to their life, the Jews were able to maintain their identity as a people after the destruction of the Temple and their dispersion throughout the world. The moveable *mishkan*, the wilderness tent or tabernacle, became the model for God's presence with them, because Torah scrolls are portable. As we have seen, "Prayer took the place of sacrifice. The study of Torah replaced prophecy. Repentance became a substitute for the great ritual of atonement performed by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies. The synagogue—a building that could be anywhere—became a fragment of the Temple in Jerusalem" (Sacks, *Haggadah*, p. 49). What was thought to be permanent—the Temple—turned out to be temporary while what they had perceived as temporary—the *mishkan*—has been the model for Judaism for 2000 years.

What bound them together was a sense of collective identity and collective responsibility, and more than anything, a fierce commitment to the one God of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, of Isaac and Rebekkah, of Jacob and Rachel and Leah. That God was their reigning monarch and Torah became both their political constitution as a people and their moveable homeland that enabled them to make a home anywhere on earth. And so despite all odds they have endured and even flourished for over three thousand years.

John Howard Yoder, one of my favorite Bible teachers, argues that the form that Judaism developed into—a decentralized, non-hierarchical synagogue system focused on Torah and led by Bible scholars—has its roots in the situation of the Jewish exiles in Babylon some 600 years earlier. The Jewish community there was shaped by Jeremiah's exhortation to them to be God's people in that place: "Seek the welfare/*shalom* of the city to which I have exiled you for in its *shalom* will be your *shalom*" (Jer. 29:7). That is the Judaism that survived the political upheavals of the centuries that followed the exile, up until the time of Jesus. That was the form of Judaism embraced by Jesus and his disciples, as Jesus sent them out into the larger world. That form was the model for the early church until the time of Constantine in the fourth century when the church decided to abandon its Jewish roots and model itself on the Roman empire. And that is the form of Judaism that has persisted throughout the centuries into our time.

Yoder describes that Judaism as "not being in charge" (*The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, pp. 168 ff.). They sought the welfare of the world around them not by trying to be "in charge" of things, not by trying to take control of the government and impose their beliefs on people, but rather by being an alternative community, a community of *shalom* that was not simply content with their own well-being but also one that was concerned with the well-being of all peoples.

The other forms of Judaism that took up the sword and wanted to run things—the Maccabees, the Saducees, the Zealots—all died out. Even the Davidic monarchy, which is looked to as a model that will be restored at some future date, is depicted in the Bible as developing into an oppressive worldly power. By Solomon's day, the king was treating the foreigners living within his territory the way Pharaoh had treated the Hebrews: forcing them to work as slaves for his massive building projects, including the Temple (1 Kings 10:15-21). Solomon violates all of the requirements for a king set out in Torah (Deut.

17:14-20), resulting in the breakup of the empire he was trying to create. The Scriptures are quite ambivalent about the whole idea of Israel having a king, and God warns them that there will be disastrous results from their desire to be like other nations (1 Samuel 8). As we have seen, Israel was to be a nation that was the antithesis of Egypt, a counter-cultural community, a prophetic witness to the one true God of justice and love. Rabbi Sacks comments: "If there is a single sentence that sums up Jewish history, it is surely the statement of the prophet Zechariah: 'Not by power and not by might but by My spirit, says the Lord of hosts' (Zech. 4:6). Jews never had much power...Nor did they have might. Christianity and Islam built massive, monumental empires. Jews never did" (*Studies in Spirituality*, pp. xvii-xix). Israel was redeemed from Egypt in order to establish an alternative society, the complete opposite of a world-dominating empire. They were not to be like Egypt or Babylon or Rome. Their power was to come from God's spirit living in them so that their way of life became attractive to others. Rabbi Sacks expresses the contrast succinctly: "The choice humankind faces in every age is between the idea of power and the power of ideas. Judaism has always believed in the power of ideas, and it remains the only non-violent way to change the world" (*Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, p. xxii).