

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 3/20/22

I have been arguing that Christians need to start with a firm grounding in the Old Testament because without that we will never understand the New Testament. This is especially true as a corrective to the Christian obsession with the afterlife. The Old Testament gives us a helpful balance to the New. I made the point that God had good reasons for delaying the whole concept of a resurrection and afterlife so that the people of God would be strongly rooted in a concern for this life. I want to make the same point about the hope for a messiah.

Contrary to what most Christians think, the hope for a messiah is not central to the Old Testament, and the word itself is only used to refer to existing leaders, even pagan ones, whom God uses for a specific purpose. The OT does contain the hope for a coming ruler who will embody God's *shalom* and faithfulness but that person is never called "messiah." So the idea that everyone in Jesus' day was looking for "the Messiah" is wrong. Many Jews had no such expectation. Some, like the Sadducees, were quite comfortable with the status quo. Those who were looking for some sort of deliverance had various ideas about what that would look like and whether it would come through human agency (a messiah) or through direct divine action.

First century Jews held a wide variety of opinions about a messianic figure. We know that the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls actually anticipated the coming of two messiahs: one a priestly leader and one a kingly ruler. Over the years I have repeatedly heard in sermons and Bible studies that the Jews were all waiting for a military messiah who would overthrow the Roman government, and therefore did not recognize that Jesus was a "spiritual" messiah who had no such interest. Neither part of that statement is true. It reflects an ignorance of first century Jewish beliefs and the tendency to create negative stereotypes of "all Jews." And it comes from the Christian tendency to spiritualize biblical teaching and ignore the radical down-to-earth political nature of Jesus' teaching, which included prayer for God's kingdom to come here and now. That would in fact mean the overthrow of the Roman Empire or any other empire.

Just as I have argued that there is a danger in the belief in an afterlife, so also there is a danger in the hope for the coming of the messiah. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks contends that "for centuries, Jews were suspended between a remote miraculous past (the biblical era) and an equally remote miraculous future (the messianic age)" (*Haggadah*, p. 78). As a result, he says, the present day is devalued and people live in a state of spiritual suspended animation. I would argue that the same is often true for Christians.

Prof. Yael Ziegler makes a similar argument in her commentary on the book of Lamentations. Lamentations relentlessly recounts the horrific devastation that God has inflicted on Jerusalem and the Judeans, with only the briefest glimpse of the possibility that God might have compassion on them in the future. (Of course, those are the only two verses from Lamentations that we ever read in church.) But the author quickly returns to the present, and his complaint ends with the recognition that God has been "angry with us

beyond measure” (5:22). The brutal punishment they have received for their sins is far out of proportion to the wrongs they have done. It is a bleak vision, one that only takes on more of a sharp edge and more perplexing depth when read in the context of what Jews have suffered in recent history.

Prof. Ziegler points out that later rabbinic midrash on Lamentations tries to mitigate the dismal nature of the book by somewhat hesitantly bringing up the hope for deliverance through the messiah, which is nowhere mentioned in the book. But Prof. Ziegler says that the midrash “maintains a prudent resistance to focusing on a messianic future. Messianism is often rooted in a negative attitude towards the present, which results in an undue focus on the future” (*Lamentations*, p. 510). She says that the midrash does recognize the hope for a messiah but wants to focus primarily on the present reality and not encourage the nation to get lost in future dreams.

I think Judaism has been rightly skeptical about such speculation about the future and about spending much time focusing on this idea. A first century rabbi from the time of Jesus, R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, is remembered for a famous saying: "If you are holding a sapling in your hand and someone tells you, 'The Messiah is coming!', first finish planting the tree and then go greet the Messiah" (*Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 31b). Judaism is not a religion about future salvation, even though that is included in their teaching. But it is a matter of emphasis: this life is what really matters, as opposed to the next. Repeatedly I run into Jewish authors saying this kind of thing but it is extremely rare to find in in Christian authors.

In my limited reading in the rabbinic literature, my sense of things is that when the rabbis speak about *‘olam ha-ba*, the world to come, they are doing so not so much to impart specific information about what the future might be like but rather to tell their listeners something about the present, about how to live their lives now. The coming world of justice and *shalom* should be a model for us in this world.

Let me give just one example. The Talmud relates a story of a Rabbi Yosef, who became very ill and was on his deathbed. But he recovered, and so his father asked him if he had seen anything of the world-to-come. R. Yosef said, “I saw an inverted world. Those above are below while those below are above.” His father replied, “My son, you have seen a clear world” (*Pesachim* 50a). This, of course, was a central teaching of Jesus about the world to come, the Kingdom of God, where the last shall be first and the first last, where those who are insignificant in the eyes of this world will be given a place of honor (Matt. 20:16; Luke 13:30). Now both in the gospels and in the Talmud, these sayings are not simply there to satisfy idle curiosity about the future. They are there to tell us that we are living in a topsy-turvy world whose values are all screwed up. They are there to help us see the world clearly, to see things from God’s perspective, to acquire a true vision of how this world is supposed to be. Jesus and the ancient rabbis both wanted their disciples to adopt this future vision now.

In an interview, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked about why he never writes about the afterlife, seeing that so many religions are focused on that idea. His response is fascinating: “We believe in an afterlife. But we have no information about it. I think that’s God’s business—what to do with me after life. Here it’s my business what to do with my

life. So I leave it to [God]. I am so busy trying to live a good life, and don't always succeed, that I have no time to worry about what God's going to do with me once I'm in the grave. Who knows what [God] expects of me in the grave?" (*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 411). I think this is an eminently sane perspective on things.

Focusing on this life is certainly a major emphasis in Jesus' ministry and teaching. Jesus discourages his disciples from too much speculation about the future. No one, not even Jesus himself, knows all the details (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32). That isn't for you to know or worry about (Acts 1:7). As Heschel said, that's God's business.

Notice the disciples' question in Acts 1—"Is this the time you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"—which is an expression of the ancient biblical hope connected to the messiah. Jesus does not say, "No, you all have misunderstood. Things have changed now and God no longer intends to keep the promises made to our ancestors. God is only interested in a spiritual kingdom." Instead, Jesus' reply to them confirms their hope that indeed the kingdom will be restored to Israel. It is only the point in time when that restoration will take place that remains unknown and which they shouldn't worry about. Don't concern yourselves about what will happen in the future. Rather, Jesus says, get on with the responsibilities I have given you in this world now.

I would argue that this same perspective is true for the biblical material that we think of as futuristic prophecy, like Daniel or the book of Revelation. If the purpose of those books was simply to inform people about something that would take place thousands of years later, then they were completely useless to their readers. The book of Revelation opens by declaring that it is a vision of "what must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1). Whatever future orientation it might have, biblical prophecy is always about what is happening now, and its descriptions of the future life are to tell us something about how we should be living in this life.

Christians have gotten way off track trying to use these books to construct precise timelines of how the world will end. When I was in college many people were completely taken with, and ultimately taken in by, a best-seller called *The Late Great Planet Earth* that purported to know just when Jesus was going to return, based on jumbling together a bunch of different Bible passages alongside headlines from the newspaper. Supposedly the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 had set into motion a timetable of events that would culminate in Jesus' return. Since Jesus told his disciples that "this generation will not pass until all these things will be fulfilled" (Matt. 24:34), and calculating a generation to be thirty years, that meant that by 1978 the world was going to end. Jesus' words were not understood to be actually directed to his first-century disciples but rather to us, 2,000 years later. Millions of people were convinced by this, and it became part of mainstream Evangelical Christian belief. Of course they have had to revise their charts of the end times and the major players in the fantasy many times since. I am sure that you can go on YouTube and find preachers making a new adjustment to it in light of the events in the Ukraine. It is basically a kind of prophetic conspiracy theory that can be stretched and contorted to fit almost any set of circumstances. The "Left Behind" series has continued to promote this false prophecy for a new generation.

At the time I thought this was a ridiculous way of using Scripture; more and more I have become convinced that it is also dangerous. It uses the Bible for purposes for which it

was not intended; its claims make a laughingstock of Christians for the rest of the world. If you ask the wrong questions of the Bible, you will get all sorts of crazy answers. Most importantly, it is a complete distraction from what the church should be focusing on. I have actually heard people celebrating the fact that things seem to be getting worse and worse in our world because that is a sign that the messiah is coming soon. So we can just sit back, ignore all those problems, and wait for God to rescue us, to rapture us out of the mess and leave it for others to deal with.