

The Seventy Faces of Torah: The Jewish Way of Reading the Sacred Scriptures

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The New Testament and the Mishnah

Very striking is the clarity with which Wylen sees the relationship between Christianity and Judaism as expressed in the relationship between the New Testament and the Mishnah:

The New Testament and the Mishnah differ from one another in style and content, but they are parallel texts in the role they play in Christianity and Judaism, respectively. The New Testament is the Christian continuation of the Hebrew Bible. The Mishnah is the Jewish continuation of the Hebrew Bible. (p.31)

The Mishnah and the New Testament are, respectively, the Jewish and Christian continuations of the writing of Scripture. ... It is not useful, accurate, or meaningful to compare Judaism with Christianity by comparing the Old Testament with the New Testament. A proper comparison results only from comparing the Mishnah with the New Testament. It is difficult for one person to master both of these texts, but this is what is needed for any meaningful comparison of the two separate faiths.

It is false and misleading to suggest that Judaism is the religion of the Old Testament whereas Christianity is the religion of the New Testament. Judaism and Christianity represent two different ways of reading the Hebrew Bible. The Mishnah reflects the Jewish reading of the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament reflects the Christian reading.

Let us repeat what we have just said, because this is the central lesson of this book: *One cannot compare Christianity with Judaism by comparing the New Testament with the Old Testament. A proper comparison of Christianity and Judaism compares the New Testament with the Mishnah. These two works were written at about the same time, reflecting the Christian and Jewish ways of reading their common heritage, the Hebrew Bible. Judaism is not the Old Testament religion. Judaism and Christianity result from two different ways of reading the Hebrew Bible.* (pp.32-33)

Some fun moments from *The Seventy Faces of Torah*:

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reports ... that in Eastern Europe, when one Jew greeted another, even an ordinary Jew, he would often say to his fellow, *Sog mir a shtickl Torah* – “Say me a little Torah”. This was an invitation to a dialogue, usually about a difficult passage of the Talmud. These Jews believed the saying in *Pirke Avot* that “when two Jews get together, and the words of Torah pass between them, the *Shekinah*, the Divine Presence, makes a third among them.” (*Pirke Avot* 3:3). (42)

The ancient Rabbis had a saying, “Blessed is he who spends a whole day speculating about the list of the five kings who ruled in Edom before Israel entered the promised land”. (46)

The soul of the soul of the Torah, the innermost level of Torah, is the actual being of God. ... The person who plumbs the Torah to its greatest depth finds himself standing in the very presence of God. (47)

A later generation of sages said of Hillel and Shammai, “The words of this one and the words of that one are both the word of the living God. But the law follows Hillel because he was kindly and modest” (Talmud *Hagigah* 10a). (56)

According to the story in the book of Exodus, 600,000 Israelites stood at the foot of Mount Sinai to hear God reveal the Torah. The rabbinic Sages taught that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah, one for each Israelite who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. (61)

Related to the emphasis on studying Torah through Talmud: A Jewish joke: Someone shows a yeshiva student a copy of the Bible. Amazed, he later tells his friends, “Guess what – someone collected all the ‘verses’ on the Talmud and put them together into a single book!” (73)

Halakah exists on three levels. The first level of the halakah is that of mitzvah, a commandment of God. A mitzvah is an explicit statement in the written Torah. Jewish tradition says that there are 613 mitzvot in the Torah; 613 is a symbolic number. There are 365 instances of “thou shalt not,” one for each day of the year. Every day says, “Please do not sully me with sins.” There are 248 instances of “thou shalt,” one for each bone

in the human body (according to the ancient count). Every limb of the body cries out, "Please use me for the performance of a mitzvah." (82-83)

Jewish ways of interpreting Scripture

Mostly worrying stuff from *The Seventy Faces of Torah*

Midrash is the nonliteral reading of the Scriptures. Midrash is the interpretive, homiletic, sermonic way of reading. Midrash is the deconstruction of the Bible. In midrash, context no longer matters. Every verse, phrase, even word, can be isolated and given its own interpretation. (37)

To a Jew, the written Torah is like an entry hall full of doors. Every separate verse in the Torah is a doorway into a room. (39)

Four levels on which one can read the Torah for meaning. The four levels correspond to the four Hebrew consonants in the PaRDeS:

- P = *peshat*, the literal or simple meaning. Halakah and actual historical events are aspects of *peshat*.
- R = *remez*, the allegorical meaning according to the way philosophers read the Scriptures in which every story is an allegory for a philosophical truth.
- D = *derash*, the rabbinic way of interpreting scriptural verses through midrash.
- S = *sod*, the secret, mystical message of the Scriptures which is available only to the initiated adept. This level is revealed through study of the Kabbalah, medieval Jewish mysticism. The *Holy Zohar* reveals Torah on this level. (89)

The Rabbis taught as a principle of Torah interpretation that "there is no before and after in the Torah." That is, every verse in the Torah stands as an independent message from God, unrelated to its context in the five books. Even a single phrase or word or letter may be interpreted independently. (61)

I politely decline here to engage in Jewish-Christian debate over the meaning of specific biblical verses, as such debate is not in the modern spirit of mutual acceptance. (!) (60)

Wynen - some bits and pieces

Things from Wynen which I should have known or remembered:

Zohar – mystical commentary on the Torah – 13th C – "gives rationale to the commandments according to the doctrines of the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical system that arose in Provence and Catalonia in the twelfth century." (41)

pp53-4 – reference to the Seven Rules of Hillel and then summary statement of the Thirteen Principles of Ishmael. [Both online – at <http://www.nazarene.net/Hermeneutics/Hillel.html> and <http://www.nazarene.net/Hermeneutics/Ishmael.html> respectively]

The Karaites ["Scripturalists"] rejected the entire rabbinic tradition of biblical interpretation, the whole oral Torah. (59)

The school for higher education leading to rabbinic ordination was called a *yeshiva* meaning a place where one "sits down" in order to learn at the feet of the wise. (67)

"Torah Service as reenactment of the Revelation at Mount Sinai" (68-69)

Hasidism arose in the Ukraine around the year 1750 ... Hasidic Jews gathered around a spiritual leader and guide, whom they addressed as *rebbe*, not to be confused with *rabbi*. Many *rebbe*s were Talmud scholars but their status as *rebbe* depended upon their intimacy with the divine rather than their Torah knowledge. (94)

The great commentators: Rashi (1040-1105); Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1167); Nahmanides (1194-1270). Nahmanides = Ramban. (Maimonides = Rambam).

The servant lads in the Genesis [22] story are anonymous. Rashi identifies the two lads as Ishmael ... and Eliezer. In medieval Judaism, Ishmael and Eliezer are archetypes of Islam and Christianity. (154)

- Bavli = Babylonian Talmud
- Terms for Jews in Israel: *haredi* – ultra-orthodox; *dati* – religious, traditional; *hiloni* – secular

- Humash – a book containing the Torah, a translation and a commentary. The Humash is the Scripture book generally found in the pews of synagogues.
- Isaac Luria (the ARI): Great Kabbalist of the city of Safed in Galilee, flourished ca. 1580. Established new Kabbalistic doctrines, including the ideas of *tsimtsum* (divine contraction), *shevirat hakelim* (scattering of the divine sparks), and *tikun olam* (repairing the broken world through mitzvot).
- Parashat hashavua’ – the weekly Torah portion.

Who is a Jew?

Now this one ***really matters***. Read in conjunction with the section above, “The New Testament and the Mishnah” it is all the more powerful:

Religious affirmation, not birth, ultimately determines who is a member of Israel . . . Tradition teaches us that “children of Israel” means not literal children but adherents to the covenant. Faithfulness to the covenant of Israel makes one a member of Israel. Therefore “a person” includes the convert who lives by the covenant, but “from you” excludes the apostate who was born Jewish but now rejects the covenant. (p.104)