

THE ANCIENT CONVERSATION

Engaging Postmodern Jews in Scripture Study

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Ben Bag Bag says: Delve in [the Torah] and continue to delve in it for everything is in it; look deeply into it; grow old and gray over it, and do not stir from it, for you can have no better portion than it.

Pirke Avot 5.26

After my oldest daughter's Bat Mitzvah, Dave, the unbelieving Jewish husband of one of our members, came up to tell me how impressed he was with my daughter and our whole service. As we talked I could see that he was open, at least for the moment, to our Messianic beliefs and way of life, so I asked him if he would like to get together a few times and study Scripture together, to see how Messiah is presented in the Torah. Dave accepted, and our study—which took place more than just a few times—became one of the key factors in his eventually accepting Yeshua as his Messiah.

In the twelve years since, I have had the privilege of studying Scripture with a number of other Jewish men. My approach has usually been rather straightforward. We start with the Torah and trace the allusions to Messiah in Moses' writings, seeing how the Torah points to Yeshua as Messiah. Then we might move on to the gospels or other New Covenant scriptures.

In recent years, I have been studying with some Jewish men who take a rather different approach to Scripture. These friends of mine might be described as New Age or kabbalistic in their outlook, or they might just as well be described as postmodern. Their approach to Scripture, as to much in life, is subjective, relativistic, more interested in synthesis than analysis. My straightforward attempt to prove or at least defend the Messiahship of Yeshua from the Torah had little impact on them. It was not that they disagreed, as much as that they found the whole effort unappealing. I might see Yeshua in the text, but then, other readers have seen many other things, and they were seeing multiple meanings themselves. My perspectives on Yeshua were interesting enough, but they only stirred up other perspectives on other matters. The text in all its richness and complexity, and the way that our Jewish predecessors have read the text—this is what these men found most interesting.

As I realized this, I began to wonder about the value of studying with these friends at all. They were certainly not cooperating in my efforts to lead an evangelistic Bible study, and I often felt frustrated and ineffective. As I've continued to interact with them, however, I am convinced that there may be an alternative approach to Scripture study that is more in line with Jewish tradition, more attuned to the thinking of many postmodern Jews, and potentially more effective in presenting Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel to them. Furthermore, this approach to the Scriptures is not foreign to Scripture itself. In this paper, I will briefly define and underline the strengths of what I term a conversational approach to Scripture study, and then present a sample study on the Torah portion for this week (March 12-18, 2000).

A conversational approach

Conversation, by definition, is more open-ended, more engaging, and of necessity slower to form conclusions than other forms of communication. It does not go for the close , as more specifically evangelistic approaches must do. Yet for the postmodern, the sense that he is being drawn into some program or method is the kiss of death. If the conversation has an agenda, it will die.

Study of the weekly Torah portion or parasha is an ancient Jewish tradition that many Jewish people find engaging today. It creates a sense of common interest with other readers, and with the Jewish community around the world and throughout the ages. In this form of study, the parasha becomes the topic of conversation. The study is more interested in considering possibilities, exploring tough questions, and discovering novel interpretations, than in reaching conclusions. The text of Scripture is multi-faceted, infinitely rich, and endlessly engaging. A recent book on Jewish spiritual guidance puts it this way:

As we study sacred text – the touchstone of Jewish spirituality – we become conscious of every dimension of what is written; we also become insightfully aware of its silence. The rabbis understood this phenomenon. They drew meaning out of every aspect of the text. We should do the same.¹

The authors encourage us to engage in the ancient conversation with and about Scripture that has been the pursuit of Jewish thinkers over the ages.

As an example of this conversation, Midrash Rabbah on Numbers says that the tribe of Issachar's offering of one silver bowl of seventy shekels (Numbers 7:19) represents the Torah (because Issachar was considered the tribe of great Torah scholars). Torah is likened to wine, the Midrash claims, and it is customary to drink wine in a bowl, like the silver bowl of the offering. But why is it of 70 shekels in weight? As the numerical value of *yayin* (wine) is seventy, so there are seventy modes of expounding the Torah.²

The point of this rather imaginative (even by Midrashic standards) interpretation is that Torah has multiple meanings and applications. As Ben Bag Bag says, in the reference from Pirke Avot that opens this paper, Everything is in it. Moreover, it is to the Torah's glory that it has such a wealth of meanings. Seventy is a number of completion and perfection, ten times seven. It intimates that every verse of Torah is filled with meaning and that the best Jewish minds throughout the ages will spend their best energies exploring its meaning and never come to an end. Further, says the Midrash, seventy is equivalent to *yayin*, wine, according to gematria. Torah yields sweet and even intoxicating meanings as we drink of it deeply.

Thus Rashi, the great medieval Torah commentator, savors the views of his predecessors, explains, and expands upon them. He often seems just as interested in keeping the conversation going as in

¹ Carol Ochs, Kerry M. O'Leary, *Jewish Spiritual Guidance: Finding our way back to God* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) p. 122.

² *Midrash Rabbah, Numbers*, (London, New York: The Soncino Press, 1983) p. 534.

uncovering the one true meaning of the passage under consideration. Rashi is considered the definitive commentator. His approach to Scripture defines the Jewish outlook and methodology to this day, and it often reads like a friendly conversation.

In the same vein, Ramban, or Nachmanides, comments on the opening of the book of Leviticus or VaYikra, the portion we will be considering below. VaYikra opens with an unusual verbal construction, literally And he called to Moses, and the Lord spoke to him from the tent of meeting. Ramban explains that the Lord had to call to Moses because Moses was otherwise not able to enter the tent of meeting, according to Exodus 40:35.³ He then goes on to give a different opinion of the rabbis, that

All communications [that came to Moses], whether they are introduced by the word *dabeir* (speak), or by *emor* (say), or *tzav* (command), were preceded by a call, that is to say, G-d said to him, *Moses, Moses* and he answered, *Here am I*. This was a way of expressing affection and encouragement to Moses.⁴

Finally, Ramban adds that according to way of the Truth, which is his code phrase for kabbala, the verse under consideration, Leviticus 1:1, is like Exodus 24:1, and its secret is known from the Revelation on Mount Sinai.⁵ Ramban gives three different interpretations of Leviticus 1:1, and makes no effort to compare their merits or to decide between them. Rather he engages us in a conversation that spans a millennium and the entire breadth of the Mediterranean world.

The midrash-postmodern link

Many contemporary Jews find this ancient conversation engaging and accessible. Writer Shira Halevi introduces her commentary on the Adam and Eve story with a dialogue between herself as student (Talmidah) and her Rabbi.⁶ The dialogue reveals a link between the traditional Midrashic understanding of Scripture and the postmodern outlook of many Jewish people.

Talmidah: &We can't know for sure what the original intent of a document like the Torah may have been. It's too old & There's just no way of knowing which translation or which interpretation may be the correct one.

Rabbi: Is a correct interpretation necessary? Talmidah, what is the purpose of sacred literature?

Talmidah: It provides me with a system of ethics by which to live my life. And it teaches me the whys of life.

³ And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

⁴ R. Dr. Charles B. Chavel, trans., *Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, Leviticus* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1975) pp. 6-7.)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Shira Halevi, *The Life Story of Adam and Havah. A new targum of Genesis 1:26-5:5* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997) pp.26-27.

Rabbi: & as opposed to the how of life, which is the purpose of science. But does it really teach you the whys ?

Talmidah: In a roundabout way. Tradition actually teaches me what the sages through the ages have thought as they wrestled with the whys, and presents a never-ending parade of possibilities.

Rabbi: And how are new whys presented?

Talmidah: A sage will attempt to build upon the arguments of previous sages. If there is no precedent for his thought expressed by a rabbinic predecessor, he will *derash*, or derive it from the Torah itself using one or more accepted hermeneutical techniques.

Rabbi: How does he determine which materials he will use in his presentation, and which he will ignore?

Talmidah: Every student of Tradition must sift through the words of the sages, Rabbi. We are taught that in tractate *Avot* in the Mishna.⁷ We must sift through their teachings and in that process discard the coarse flour while retaining the fine.

Rabbi: But what determines coarse from fine?

Talmidah: One student's coarse is another student's fine.

Rabbi: You have learned well &.

We who believe in the authority of the sacred text and its ability to convey God's truth to every generation may groan at the talmidah's conclusion. One student's coarse is another student's fine. I am not, of course, advocating such a treatment of scripture as normative for establishing doctrine. But I am advocating it as a means of entering into conversation with our people, a conversation about the things that matter most, and potentially about the Messiah himself.

As an authentic conversation, this interchange will teach us as well as our non-Messianic friends. Many of us as Jewish believers found Messiah in context of a modern Protestant outlook, to which we owe a debt of gratitude and respect. The ancient conversation, however, reminds us that this outlook is certainly not the only way to view Scripture. Furthermore, when a modern Protestant outlook differs from more Jewish outlooks, it does not always do so for biblical reasons. In other words, it is inevitably shaped by its culture, a culture that is foreign to our people.

We tell our Jewish people that they remain Jewish when they accept the Jewish Messiah. Should we cut them off from a Jewish way of reading Scripture, from the ancient conversation about Torah that has engaged the best minds of our people over the centuries?

In a recent article to which this paper is greatly indebted, Boaz Johnson describes the postmodern Judaism envisioned by theologian Eugene Borowitz.

⁷ Pirke Avot 5.15 [or 5.18 in some versions].

It is a Judaism in which the Jewish self has turned to passion, depth, diversity, and endurance of the religious quest of the late 20th century. This quest is essentially characterized by self-realization movements which cannot be contained by a prescriptive document like the Torah.⁸

This form of Judaism, however, is rapidly becoming the norm. The challenge before Messianic Judaism, therefore, is to understand how to communicate to this generation of Jews and Gentiles. May I suggest that the essence lies in how we read, understand, and interpret the Bible.⁹

Johnson goes on to bring out some aspects of postmodern interpretation that we can only regard as an improvement over some of the critical modern approaches.

In these new literary methodological approaches emphasis is placed on *literary* aspects of the biblical text, such as art, style, poetic techniques, narrative strategies, and so on. Another Jewish scholar, Robert Alter, has suggested for instance that the reasons behind the choice of words, like repetitions, contradictions and so on, were actually purposeful, and the authors of biblical narrative discovered how the slightest strategic variations in the pattern of repetitions could serve the purposes of commentary, analysis, foreshadowing, thematic assertion, with a wonderful combination of subtle understatement and dramatic force. Even the contradictions served to highlight the unity of the text; together they brought forth mutually complementary implications of the narrated event.¹⁰

Some postmodernist writers speak of Deconstructionist intertextuality, whereby a text the Hebrew Bible for example must be deconstructed or dismantled so that elements can be related to the text of the reader's own subjectivity. The notion that the text describes an objective reality beyond itself is false. Only the interaction of text and reader is real.¹¹ Such a reading is not interested in the authority of the text, or even its integrity, but only in the actual components of the text and how they might be understood and reprocessed by the individual. In contrast, Johnson proposes a constructive intertextuality that also focuses on the text itself and relates elements of it, not to the reader's subjectivity, but to other texts of scripture. This is reading constructive because it discovers greater meaning and impact within the texts themselves.¹²

Promise of effectiveness

Johnson demonstrates that the postmodern outlook can provide a fruitful reading of Scripture, which in turn has the potential to influence postmodern Jews. I would add that such a reading of Scripture is often in line with midrash and the great medieval Jewish commentaries. This is important for us as Messianic Jews. The sages of course do not recognize Yeshua as Messiah, but they are staunchly theistic and

⁸ Boaz Johnson, "Constructive Intertextuality: A Proposal for Relating the Bible to the Postmodern Jew," in *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism*, Issue 8, Winter 1999, pp. 90-91.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

¹¹ See the discussion in Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the faith: Evangelical responses to the challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), pp. 107ff.

¹² Johnson, p. 99.

committed to the authority of Scripture. The midrash-postmodern connection provides a platform for discussion that is normally unavailable among postmoderns. It is accessible to Jewish people today and speaks to them on the familiar turf of the weekly parshiyot.

This approach to study is also promising because it is process vs. event oriented, reflecting how people actually make tend to make decisions today. We are faced with so many choices, so many possibilities, that we shy away from any option that demands a hard and immediate decision. In recent years telemarketers have learned to be non-confrontational. When a prospect declines their offer, they no longer tend to push the issue, as in the old foot-in-the-door methodology. Instead, the phone salesperson accepts your refusal and leaves you with their 800 number just in case you have questions later. They want their call to be part of a process instead of a definitive event.

Of course, the good news of Mes siah ultimately demands a response. It seeks to become an event in the lives of our Jewish people. But before it can become an event it must enter a process with them, and this is the great strength of the conversational approach.

For the past two years, I have sent out a commentary on the weekly parasha to a number of friends plus an internet subscription list. One of my first study partners was a local art dealer named Alex, who considers me his rabbi, even though he is sure that Yeshua can t be the Jewish Messiah. A few weeks ago Alex called to complain about the weekly study, because I had left Yeshua out of my commentary. I was discussing the slaying of the firstborn in Exodus and the significance of the blood of the lamb.

But the blood marking the doors of the Israelites signifies much more than obedience. It involves substitution. In place of the life of the firstborn that God was requiring of each household in Egypt, he would accept the life of the lamb. Substitution defines some of the most powerful scenes of Torah. At the Akedah, the Lord provides a ram as a sacrifice in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13). At Yom Kippur, the live goat, in place of the people, carries all the sins of Israel off into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20-22). At the first Passover, God declares that all life is his that he, not Pharaoh, has the right to the firstborn. But God will permit a substitute to be offered in place of the firstborn of Israel.

Alex wanted me to mention Yeshua there, not because it was didactically correct or theologically necessary, but because Yeshua has entered our conversation, and here was a fitting place to bring him in. My skeptical friend missed Yeshua in this discussion. Such a longing does not, of course, equal salvation, but it does mean that the Messiah has entered deeply into the Jewish space of weekly Torah study, and will certainly have more to say.

The Ancient Conversation in Scripture

The conversational approach is not the method for deriving systematic theology, or foundational doctrine, but it is not foreign to Scripture. It is Hebraic rather than Western. It does not seek to define one precise and correct interpretation to the text, but to mine the text for its interpretive riches. This distinction does not mean that anything goes interpretively, but it does allow the possibility of multiple meanings.

Scripture conveys truth through story, which is inherently more flexible and multi-faceted than straight propositional presentation. Scripture itself seems more comfortable with ambiguity than many of its modern interpreters. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into a detailed study, but I will suggest three examples from Yeshua's teachings.

□□ Yeshua portrays John the Baptist as Elijah to come, promised by the prophecy of Malachi 3:23-24 (4:5-6 NKJV), but intimates that the prophecy will have multiple fulfillment. And **if you are willing to receive it**, he is Elijah who is to come (Matthew 11:14; emphasis mine).

And they asked Him, saying, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Then He answered and told them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and restores all things. And how is it written concerning the Son of Man, that He must suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I say to you that Elijah has also come, and they did to him whatever they wished, as it is written of him" (Mark 9:11-13).

□□ In the Olivet discourse, Yeshua mentions the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet (Matthew 24:15). Yeshua undoubtedly was aware of the fulfillment of this prophecy in the days of Antiochus, plus he seems to apply it both to the first century Roman destruction and to a final catastrophe at the end of the age.

□□ Such an approach does not apply only to prophecy. When Yeshua disputes with the Sadducees concerning the resurrection, he says, "Have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matthew 22:31-32). This is an imaginative use of Scripture that discovers new and unexpected meaning in a familiar passage, much as does the Midrash & and some of my postmodern friends.

A Sample Torah Study

We conclude with an example of this approach to Scripture study, chosen simply because it is the passage for this week. I will let the study speak for itself, and simply point out two or three features. First, the study opens with a consideration of specific word usage. This is typical of midrash and allows the constructive intertextuality that Johnson proposes. It appeals to postmoderns because it draws them into the text itself without apparent theological presuppositions. Second, the study engages traditional Jewish sources in a conversational manner, not necessarily agreeing or disagreeing, but joining the discussion on their terms. Third, the tone is not didactic. The study ends with a question that points toward Messiah, but keeps the process going. The ancient conversation continues.

THE CALL ACROSS THE DIVIDE

Parashat vaYikra, Leviticus 1:1-5:26

VaYikra, the Book of Leviticus, begins with the words *vayikra el Moshe*, And he called to Moses & Normally, when God speaks to Moses, the Torah employs the Hebrew verb *amar* or *davar*. *Vayyomer Adonai*, and the Lord spoke, is a common formula throughout the Torah. *Vayikra*, on the other hand, as the sages noted, is unusual. It is used to describe God's speaking to Moses at only three points in the story.

The first *vayikra* comes at the Burning Bush. Moses is in the wilderness tending the flock of his father-in-law Yitro when he sees a bush burning without being consumed by the fire. He turns aside from the flock to observe it more closely. Adonai saw that he turned aside to see and God called out to him *vayikra elav Elohim* from the midst of the bush and said Moses! Moses! and he replied *Hineni* here I am! (Exodus 3:4).

The second *vayikra* comes twice at Mount Sinai. As soon as Israel arrives at the mountain, Moses went up to God and Adonai called to him *vayikra elav* from the mountain (Exodus 19:3). And again, after Adonai speaks the Ten Words and the first series of instructions to Moses and the people agree to obey them, Moses goes back up the mountain to receive the stone tablets. Moses ascended the mountain and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of Adonai rested upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. And he called to Moses *vayikra el Moshe* on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud (Exodus 24:15-15). There are two callings at Mount Sinai, but the circumstances around them are nearly the same.

The third *vayikra* comes here at the beginning of our parasha. To understand it properly, we need to see vaYikra, Leviticus, as a continuation of the story of Exodus. Exodus concludes with the tabernacle or Tent of Meeting in place, erected according to the instructions that God gave to Moses. The glory-cloud of God's presence fills the Tent of Meeting so that Moses cannot go in. In this context we read the opening words of vaYikra: And he called to Moses, and Adonai spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting &

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah I.7) likewise connects the opening of Leviticus with the conclusion of Exodus.

What is written prior to this subject? The section of the Tabernacle, [every paragraph concluding,] *Even as the Lord commanded Moses*. This may be compared to [the case of] a king, who commanded

his servant, saying to him, Build me a palace. On everything he built he wrote the name of the king; he built the walls, and wrote on them the name of the king; he built pillars, and wrote on them the name of the king; he roofed it with beams, and wrote on them the name of the king. After some time the king entered the palace, and on everything he saw he found his name written. Said he: All this honour has my servant done me, and I am within, whilst he is without! Call him, that he may come right in. So, too, when the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Make me a Tabernacle, he [i.e. Moses] wrote on everything he made *Even as the Lord commanded Moses*. Said the Holy One, blessed be he: Moses has done Me all this honour, and I am within whilst he is without! Call him, that he may enter the innermost [part of the Tabernacle]. Therefore it is said, AND THE LORD CALLED UNTO MOSES.¹³

Whether because of Moses' faithful service, or because of his own grace, God desires to bring Moses near. He calls across the distance that separates them, the distance of his otherness and awe. The glory-cloud keeps Moses at a distance; the voice of Adonai calls him near.

This same dynamic is at work in the other two calls of Adonai. At the Burning Bush, God appears to Moses as transcendent and awe-inspiring. The fire of God keeps him at a distance, but the voice of God calls to him across the distance. This is holy ground, but God calls Moses into dialogue with the Almighty. Likewise at Sinai; the appearance is awesome; the glory-cloud covers the mountain and no one can approach. But the voice of God calls Moses to come near and gives him the instructions that will guide Israel from then on.

God calls to Moses across the distance of his holiness. He cannot diminish the impact of his holiness, but he still seeks to bring humanity near. Here is a remedy to our tendency to reduce the divine to our own terms, to produce a user-friendly god. The God of Israel will always transcend our understanding, but he has called to us across that divide. Spiritual development means learning to recognize God's transcendence, as well as learning to hear his call across the divide.

This divine intention is evident in the first words that Adonai speaks to Moses after he calls him. Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, When a man among you brings an offering to Adonai, you shall bring your offering of the livestock, of the herd and of the flock (Leviticus 1:2). The word for offering is *korban*, from the root *karav*, meaning to come or be near. Through the offering, the children of Israel can come near to God, even though his holiness would keep them at a distance. Indeed, the root *karav* appears twice in this one verse, for it also forms the verb translated as bring. Literally then our verse says, When a man among you brings near a near-offering &

God calls to Moses across the distance of his holiness and gives him instructions on how one can draw near to the holy. The offering itself bridges the distance between man and God, for it is *korban*, that which comes near, and a man must come near to present it.

Worship is the goal of the Exodus from Egypt. Why then does the Torah seem to make worship so difficult in the Book of Leviticus? Surely it is our understanding that is at fault; the rules of offering do not make worship more difficult; rather they make it possible. There is a vast gulf between man and God. God calls to man (or his representative Moses) across that gulf to provide a way for man to worship him.

How different is this understanding of the sacrificial system of Leviticus from the typical modern view. We tend to see the elaborate requirements and regulations of sacrifice as creating a distance between man and God. In our enlightened times, we like to emphasize the approachability of the divine. After all, God

¹³ *Midrash Rabbah, Leviticus* (London, New York: The Soncino Press, 1983) p. 11.

is everywhere, and we can always draw near to him. Hence, we see the altar and priesthood as impediments, relics of a bygone era.

In the context of Torah, however, altar and priesthood are precisely the opposite. God is everywhere, but his holiness keeps us at a distance. The Levitical system is given, not to impose or maintain the distance, but to bring us near. This perspective inevitably alters our view of our current spiritual circumstance. If altar and priesthood served not to create a barrier between man and God, but to bridge the barrier, what is our situation now that they have passed away? What, or who, will bring us near to the holy God?

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