



Bearing Faithful Witness' Part 2

19.08.1997 | The United Church of Canada

A Study Paper for an understanding of the Scriptures in their Jewish context and for an interpretation that is not anti-Judaic. Only the first, theological parts are at this site. The complete United Church of Canada document can be found at the Web site of the United Church of Canada: <http://www.united-church.ca/bfw/home.htm>

BEARING FAITHFUL WITNESS

A Study Paper (2)

The Relationship of the Two Testaments:

It was important to the early Christians to see themselves as emerging from within an historical process that was ordained by God. Thus they could see themselves as *new* but also as authorized *from the beginning* (ie. as having a longstanding heritage).

The earliest followers of Jesus were all Jews, as was Jesus himself. For them, "Scripture" referred to the Torah and prophetic works that are in our Old Testament (OT), along with other writings of Judaism that were treated as authoritative. Jesus did not write any book or letter that has been discovered, and presumably for Jesus the Jewish Scriptures were sufficient. Written works that did emerge within the early church were not intended to replace Scripture or even to be added to Scripture.

They sought to interpret the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, his life and teachings, for the day-to-day struggles of the emerging church. Their authors searched the Scriptures to find interpretive clues that made sense of this death and of the frighteningly strange event of Easter. It was only in the 4th century C.E. that the church officially expanded the compass of Scripture to include Christian writings, concluding a process that began at the end of the 2nd century C.E. From the beginning of Christianity, then, Jewish Scripture provided the natural interpretive vehicle for understanding God's intentions and acts; Jesus himself led the way in using these writings. The plan of God for Christianity was understood and affirmed as longstanding. The emerging Christian writings could focus on explaining the *new* things that God was doing in Christ.

Torah, Written and Oral Torah, the Mishnah, and the Talmud

The word, 'Torah', has two important meanings. Most widely, it can refer to all the teachings of Judaism; it is a legal and ethical system, a way of life, a covenant relationship, given in a narrative account, beginning with creation. More strictly, Torah refers to the first five books of the Jewish Bible, the so-called Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy as Christians name them. In these five books, the prescriptive content ("halachah" or law) is embedded within a narrative context ("aggadah") that illustrates how God and the people put the law into practice. The whole content of these books is Torah, not just the 613 laws that have been identified within them. It is not correct to say that 'Torah' is equivalent to 'law'.

The Books of Moses make up the written Torah, understood as that which was given to

Moses to be written down as directed by God. The foundation of the Oral Torah is everything that God and Moses talked about while they were together for forty days on Mount Sinai. The story has it that Rabbinic teaching through the ages has simply uncovered these conversations and collected them in the Mishnah and the Talmud and in the ongoing living expansion of teaching to this day. The Mishnah gathers together teaching of the Sages concerning the Books of Moses. The Talmud includes the Mishnah and adds commentary, clarification and discussion about the Mishnah. There are two Talmuds, the Jerusalem and the Babylonian, the latter being completed by the sixth century C.E. The Babylonian Talmud is an encyclopedic compilation of the Oral Torah and is the most authoritative source for Jewish scholarship and *halachah*. Normative Judaism requires an intimate knowledge of the Oral Torah as a basis for understanding the Written Torah.

Over time, especially after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., friction grew between Christian groups and other Jews. John's Gospel reflects the bitterness of this internal struggle. Increasingly new Christian members had a non-Jewish background. **Christianity changed from being a sect within Judaism to become an independent faith.** The newness of Christianity was accepted as obvious. The importance of its rootedness in Judaism seemed unnecessary. To some, the Jewish texts were quite alien. Marcion's canon, for example, ca. 145 C.E., excluded the OT, and Marcion argued that Jewish and Christian writings spoke of different gods. The church rejected these ideas. Marcionism was declared a heresy. Christianity's place within the longstanding intention and action of God was again affirmed using Jewish history and Jewish texts. Even so, the passage of time and the great evangelistic success of Christianity continued to give the faith its own increasing, independent authority. Christianity had not invalidated all things Jewish. Nevertheless there was room for thinking that the new had superseded the old and that the promises of God had passed from the Jewish faith community to that of the Christians.

The Noahide Covenant

"Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not deny salvation to those outside its fold. According to Jewish law, all non-Jews who observe the Noahide laws will participate in salvation and in the rewards of the world to come." (H. Revel, *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (N.Y., 1939-43), Vol. VIII, pp.227-8) The Noahide laws derive from the covenant that God made with Noah (Gen. 8:15 -9:17), a covenant that is thought by Jews to be universal in application. It requires seven things of everyone: not to worship idols, not to blaspheme God, not to kill, not to rob, not to commit adultery, not to eat flesh cut from a living animal, and to be people of law, establishing courts of justice. In this way, Judaism has always affirmed that God has a place in salvation for others: they come under the Noahide covenant. The Mosaic covenant to which the Jew adheres is simply more demanding. It is a different covenant. Both covenants serve the mysterious purposes of God for the betterment of the world in their own ways. Judaism has never had a dictum to parallel the one that the Church affirmed for centuries (now rejected): "outside the Church there is no salvation". The view was put forward within the house of R Shammai that the "goy" (non-Jews) would be cast into utter darkness, but this isolated opinion was never accepted.

Jewish Scriptures, being retained, could be interpreted in ways that supported Christian ideas. For example, the church used the "new covenant" idea in Jeremiah 31, not only for interpreting God's

action in and through Jesus (the one who inaugurates a new covenant written on the heart), but also for organizing the Scriptures themselves into "old" and "new" testaments (literally, "covenants"). Again, the "Servant Songs" of Deutero-Isaiah were used to show that, contrary to Jewish expectations, since the suffering of the servant was preordained by God, the execution of Jesus did not invalidate his claims to Messiahship. The search for the right relationship between Jesus' teaching and Torah invariably drew on scriptural authority, no matter how that relationship was finally seen. Consider the sayings of Jesus about the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1-8: Matthew claims that Jesus retains the law and correctly reinterprets it rather than setting it aside; he quotes Hosea 6:6 as God's support for Jesus' view ("I desire compassion and not sacrifice"; cf. also Mt. 9:13); consistent with Mt. 5:17, Jesus is presented as a Torah-respecting and Torah-observing Jew, fulfilling the law through a true reinterpretation of it. Retaining the authority of Jewish Scripture is a necessary part of Matthew's interpretation of Jesus.

The "Servant Songs" of Isaiah

Four passages in Isaiah are known as "the Servant Songs": 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13 - 53:12. The author refers elsewhere to the whole of Israel as a servant (e.g. 41:8, 42:9, etc.), but the servant of the "Songs" seems to be different. The passages could be speaking about an individual. They speak uniquely about the transformative power of suffering. Did Jesus understand his calling with reference to these passages? From early times the church interpreted Jesus' work in terms of them. Even though in Isaiah the servant is never called "messiah" (and Cyrus who is called "messiah" is not called "servant", 45:1-7), these passages were used to support the claim that Jesus was the Messiah awaited by the Jews.

- Remembering that these passages are within Jewish Scripture and that the idea that they refer to Jesus of Nazareth is rejected by Jews, how do you think a Jew interprets them?
- Can we affirm truth in both the Jewish and Christian interpretations, or can only one be true?

The most prominent way of using Jewish Scripture texts within Christian writings involved a promise-and-fulfillment motif. This motif also came to be the primary one for characterizing the relationship between the testaments themselves. Christian writers claimed that the Jewish Scripture texts presented promises that Jesus and Christianity fulfilled. This view was and is an ***interpretation*** of the Jewish texts.

Jesus and the Torah

All indications in the NT would suggest that Jesus was a Torah-observant Jew. He kept the Sabbath (Luke 4:16), he fasted (Matt. 6:16), possibly he wore fringes (Mark 6:56) and phylacteries (Matt. 23:5), he affirmed Torah as needful (Luke 16:17; Matt. 5:17), and so on. Eating with sinners did not violate Torah nor cause ritual impurity; it did not make a person a sinner. If Christians are guided by an approach to spirituality that seeks to imitate Jesus and to value what Jesus would have valued, then understanding Torah must become an important undertaking for Christians, perhaps the most important biblical study. Believing that Jesus

affirmed Torah would alter our interpretation of many of his teachings.

In the application of Torah, Jesus quite often makes a more rigorous demand than, on the face of it, Torah itself would seem to be making. Jesus stands within a particular Jewish tradition that would fulfill the law by going beyond its specific requirements. Jesus is confirming the Torah and its importance while at the same time, insisting upon the centrality of love, mercy and generosity. Even in this emphasis on love, Jesus is not unique (Deut. 6:4; Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:29-34, note that the scribe agrees).

- 1) It is not the only interpretation that is possible, credible and defensible. Many other groups within Judaism at the time also made claims to know and "fulfill" the plan and intention of God. They used the (Jewish) Scriptures to support their positions. Rabbinic scholars today continue to base their faith understanding on these Scriptures without reference to Christ as an interpretive guide.
- 2) It is not obvious that God's promises to the Jews need fulfillment beyond that which is given in the Jewish texts themselves. Promises to give children, generations, land, and a great heritage are all fulfilled; only the end-time (eschatological) promises of communal peace with justice and of international reconciliation are not accomplished, but neither are they fulfilled in Christianity.
- 3) If the Jewish testament needs "fulfillment", it is not obvious that the Christian writings properly or best accomplish this. The Jewish testament, on different interpretations, leads to the Talmuds, the Christian writings, and the Qur'an. It must be emphasized that all of these are interpretive extensions.

Promise and Fulfillment

In the birth stories of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (ch. 1-2), several times we are told that something happens "to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet". Understanding 'fulfillment' here as recapitulation and confirmation accords very well with the writer's purposes: Jesus relives the history of his people. That history is remembered, re-presented, and re-affirmed in Jesus own life; Jesus is shown to be immersed in and very much a part of the experiences that have shaped Judaism. Matthew does not intend that the earlier events are to be understood as foretellings of what would happen to Jesus. Those events stand in their own right as complete happenings. But just as they are formative events of his people Israel, they are formative for Jesus too. The people were called out of Egypt by God's grace; Jesus relived it (2:15). The people experienced the innocent suffering and death that accompanied exile; Jesus relived it (2:17-18). The people in time of hardship were told that events were already happening amongst them that would lead to deliverance; Jesus relived it (1:22-23). The past is full and complete. Jesus comes to it and it fills him full, too. He confirms his history as he recapitulates it, and he is confirmed by it. In the same way, the promises of the Old Testament are also full and complete. In the life of Jesus they are confirmed and recapitulated by God. Their benefits and blessings are made more widely applicable. The new thing that is realized is the breadth of God's loving embrace.

The situation is complicated by the variety of ways in which "promise-and-fulfillment" language can be understood. In II Corinthians 1:18ff, Paul states, "As surely as God is faithful, our word to you

has not been 'Yes and No'. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, . . . was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes'. For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'." Paul is saying that God's promises have found their confirmation (cf. Romans 15:8). In being confirmed, the reach of benefits of the promises has been extended to the gentiles (Romans 11:25ff). This is not the simple coming-to-pass of that which was predicted. It is not prefiguration and subsequent recognition/identification. A new thing has happened that was both within the scope of the promises and not previously known to be so. The pattern is important: the story of Christ is understood in the light of the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is not that those stories were deficient or incomplete in any way, or that Christ adds something that people were missing. Rather, the story of Christ recapitulates the Hebraic stories, catching up the promises of God and newly revealing the content that God always saw was in them. "Fulfillment", then, is about revealing Torah and the content of the covenant that has been from of old. It is totally inappropriate to understand "fulfillment" in any way that would include ideas of abrogation, supersession, displacement, substitution, etc. The word, 'fulfillment', is used in absolute wonder over a God who can do old-new things! Nothing is taken away; what was always there is revealed again, and made available more widely to gentiles.

Each New Testament writer uses the "promise-and-fulfillment" motif in some way or other. It is so central to New Testament thought that it cannot be ignored. But **the purpose of the motif is to push us back into the texts** that the followers of Jesus knew to be Scripture and to find language *there* that makes sense of Jesus' story. It was not to take us out of that Scripture and into new texts that had pretensions of becoming Scripture alongside the old texts. In time, to be sure, the church came to recognize Old and New Testaments (i.e. Covenants), and to believe that there were two covenants, and that the new superseded the old. But originally the church knew that there is really only one covenant, fulfilled, "irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29), renewed, because of which the gentile "too may now receive mercy" (Rom. 11:31) having been grafted onto the rich root of Israel (Rom. 11:17).

What books were authoritative for Jesus' community?

James Charlesworth states, "the books in the Old Testament are frequently cited as inspired and authoritative to the New Testament authors, but [this fact alone] fails to do justice to the other works cited as inspired by them". In a footnote at this point, Charlesworth adds, "the New Testament authors apparently quoted from (or alluded to the inspired or authoritative nature of) the Ascension of Isaiah (Heb. 11:37), Testament of Moses (Jude 9), Baruch (1 Cor. 10:20; Rev. 8:2), 1 Enoch (Luke 16:9, 21:28; John 5:22; Col. 2:3; Heb. 11:5; 1 Pet. 1:12; Jude 14-15; Rev. 5:11, 15:3, 17:14, 19:16), 3 Maccabees (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 14:10, 17:14, 19:16, 20:10, 21:8), 4 Maccabees (Matt. 22:32; Rom. 7:7), Psalms of Solomon (Matt. 6:26; Luke 11:21-22; John 1:14; Rev. 2:26-27, 21:24,26), many documents in the Old Testament Apocrypha, Aratus's *Phaenomena* 5 (Acts 17:28), Cleanthes (Acts 17:28), Epimenides *de Oraclis* (Titus 1:12), and Menander's *Thais* (1 Cor. 15:33)." See "What has the Old Testament to do with the New?" in James H. Charlesworth & Walter P. Weaver (eds.), *The Old and the New Testaments: Their Relationship and the "Intertestamental" Literature*, Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993, pp.55-56 & p.81, n.48. A wider literature was available to NT authors than we have been accustomed to considering, and this fact is significant. E.g. when Paul says "according to the Scriptures" in I Cor. 15:3-4, what exactly does he have in mind?

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#) || [Next Page](#)

This study paper is part of a [larger document](#) of the United Church of Canada