



Bearing Faithful Witness' Part 3

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 (3)

The Old Testament:

Today, Christians who want to move away from all appearance or suggestion of supersessionism, and who want to respect the sensitivities of people who see pejorative valuation in words like 'old' and 'new', are trying to find another way of referring to what we have traditionally called the "Old Testament". Without solving this problem, some suggestions and comments are offered:

1. *Referring to the OT as the "Older Testament"*. The NT would become the "Newer Testament". 'Older' and 'newer' are comparative terms which imply a relationship with each other. They are not pejorative in the way that the absolute terms, 'old' and 'new', seem to be. (This way of naming retains standard short forms, OT = "Older Testament" and NT = "Newer Testament".)
2. *Referring to the OT as "First Testament"*: The NT would become the "Second Testament". Possibly the pejoratives and supersessionist tendencies that could attach themselves to an "old/new" designation would not apply to a "first/second" designation - but then again they might.
3. *Referring to the OT as "Hebrew Scriptures" or "Hebrew Testament"*: The word 'Hebrew', here, must be understood to refer to the original language of composition of the designated books. To be consistent and parallel, the NT would become the "Greek Scriptures" or "Greek Testament". These designations would be non-pejorative and accurate, and since they refer only to the language of original writing, nothing is implied that limits the authority, importance and application of the books so designated. However, the impression may be created for Christians that the word 'Hebrew' refers to the Hebrew people and that these texts have a lesser authority for those who are not Hebrews (i.e. not Jews); Christian readers and speakers would need to guard against this false impression. (For this reason as well, "Christian Scriptures" and "Christian Testament", referring to the NT, are quite misleadingly, implying as they do that the other Scriptures are of lesser or of no *Christian* import.)
4. *Referring to the OT as "Tanakh"*: Tanakh (or TaNaK) is the contemporary Jewish way of referring to the Jewish biblical texts as a whole. It is descriptive of the content and of the ordering of the collection, being an acronym formed from T (Torah), N (Nevi'im = Prophets) and K (Khethuvim = Writings). It has the advantage of being non-pejorative and accurate. It has the disadvantages of being a totally foreign designation for most Christians, and of having no obvious counterpart for referring to the NT. Whereas in Judaism this designation gives the ordering of the books, in Christianity the books of Prophets and Writings are ordered differently, being interspersed with each other.

5. Using any of the above, a Christian reader or speaker could make it a practice to refer to the text, as much as possible, by naming the book (rather than the testament) in which the text is found.

The Order of books in the Jewish Bible:

(T) TORAH: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

(N) PROPHETS: Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel, I & II Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

(K) WRITINGS: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, I & II Chronicles

How does this compare with the Table of Contents in your Bible? What do you think of the classification of I & II Kings, for example, as "prophetic"? What is so different about I & II Samuel and I & II Chronicles that they should be included in different classifications? Why is Daniel classified as a "writing" and not as "prophetic"?

The books of the Tanakh/OT are ordered differently by Jews and by Christians. The different ordering reflects important theological concerns. The Jewish order seeks to emphasize the canonical priority of Torah over all other Scripture. Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1, the first texts in the Prophets and Writings sections, respectively, stress the superior importance of the law and thus subordinate these sections to Torah. The Writings, ending with I and II Chronicles, stress the development of worship life and devotional practice in Judaism, and look forward to the true Jerusalem which will fulfill the hopes for a faithful kingdom. This ending affirms that continuing Jewish identity is located in the religious life of the people. The Christian order closes the OT with the prophetic promise and anticipation created by Zechariah/Malachi. It suggests that the Hebrew texts are all about the history of the promise of a Messiah, a promise that will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Problematic Passages:

In this paper, because we are concerned to help church members deal with anti-Judaisms in Scripture, far more space is devoted to the Second Testament texts than to those of the First. This in no way reflects a view about the relative importance of the texts. In fact, we note the suggestion of Paul van Buren that, as an interpretive guideline for the church's use of Scripture, the First Testament should actually be given priority over the Second: "in the NT, what does not fit the OT should be challenged." Use of such a principle could have saved the church from using anti-Jewish texts to construct a history of hatred toward Jews; applying it now may point a way out of the legacy formed from that hatred.

We need to know more about the Hebrew Scriptures, and Jews can help us learn. These texts are important for Judaism, and Jewish scholars through the centuries have devoted considerable effort to understanding them. It is our book too. We believe that we have been taken into the story of Israel. We are not outsiders. The story is not broken, though it has parts. Without this part of the story, we are not followers of Jesus. Jesus' people, the Jews, can help us.

Septuagint

The Septuagint is a translation from Hebrew into Greek of important Jewish texts. It was begun around 260 B.C.E. to serve Jews throughout the world who might have difficulty reading Hebrew. It also made Jewish texts accessible to non-Jews, and influenced a growing number of "God-fearers" who admired the ethics and teachings of Judaism (Acts 10:2,35;13:43). Legend has it that the translation was made independently by seventy translators (hence, 'septuagint'), and that their work, when compared, was found to be identical. The Septuagint is often designated by LXX.

Apocrypha

When Jerome (d. 420 C.E.) translated the Bible into Latin, he used the Septuagint. Not all of the texts in that collection, however, had been included in Jewish Scripture when Jewish canonization took place between 75 and 130 C.E. Jerome's *Vulgate* contained more than the Jewish faith came to recognize as authoritative. At the time of the Reformation, Protestants accepted the authorized Jewish selection of texts in preference to the Septuagint selection. The extra texts in the *Vulgate*, accepted today as Scripture by Roman Catholics but not by Protestants, are known as the books of the Apocrypha.

When we turn to problem texts in the Hebrew Scriptures, we note that usually the problem is one of understanding the nature of God. **These texts can be just as problematic for Jews as they are for Christians.** For example, consider I Samuel 15. When God commands Saul to slaughter all the Amalekites, Saul allows Agag, the King, to live; Samuel, the prophet, acting for God, chastizes Saul and "hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal" (I Sam. 15:33). This passage marks the rejection of Saul and prepares for the emergence of David as King in Israel. The passage also remembers the unprovoked attack in the desert by the Amalekites on the vulnerable Israelite people (Exod. 17:8-16; I Sam. 15:2), and it holds the Amalekites to account for posing a genocidal threat. Kyle McCarter, (*I Samuel*, The Anchor Bible, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1980, p.269), wonders whether, given the language used, "Agag suffered a ritual death, . . . a punishment for covenant violation", presumably over a covenant that would have predated the desert attack (he notes "we have no knowledge" of such a covenant). From this, we might claim that we can see how this story fits into the flow of stories in the Bible. We can also see how it has functioned to warn Israel to be wary of genocidal threats and to help Jews think about what it means to retaliate in kind to such threats. What remains difficult for us is what this passage literally says about God's directive of vengeance. But this is difficult for Jews too. Jews have made the passage serve by coming to see genocide as a heinous crime for all involved, not just for its recipients but for its agents too. They have consciously rejected genocide accordingly. Maybe this is enough, in the wisdom of God, for the passage to help accomplish.

The Ineffable Name: A note about YHWH

This combination of four Hebrew consonants is the name of God (Exod. 3:14; called the "tetragrammaton" meaning "four-lettered name"). It is not to be said under any circumstances today by Jews. How exactly it is to be pronounced is not known anymore. In pointed Hebrew texts (i.e. ones to which vowels have been added), the vowels of 'Adonai' (= 'Lord') have been included with these consonants in order to remind the Jewish reader to say "Adonai" in preference to anything else. From this combination of consonants and vowels, Christians have produced 'Jehovah' as a divine name. Many English translations still follow the King

James Version in rendering YHWH by "the LORD" (i.e. with all letters capitalized), thus allowing English Bible readers to know when the four consonants appear and also to respect their special sacredness. Increasingly today Christians are using the word, 'Yahweh', and even pretending to know that this formulation from YHWH is the correct one. It cannot be known whether it is correct. Whether correct or not, Jews believe that to use it is disrespectful and disobedient to God. Be that as it may, if we respect Jews, both 'Jehovah' and 'Yahweh' should be avoided. Even in Jesus' time, YHWH was only pronounced once a year on the Day of Atonement within the Most Holy place. Jesus probably never said the name. Today, without the Temple, it is not pronounced at all.

***A different "god of wrath"
from the Christian "God of love"?***

Consider the following quotation from Jewish scholar Claude Montefiore's 1909 commentary, *The Synoptic Gospels* (rev. 1927). It is cited from James Parkes, *Prelude To Dialogue* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp.170-72). Parkes says, "Examining a description of the Day of Judgement put into the mouth of Jesus, and particularly the verse, 'Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels' [Matt. 25:41], [Montefiore] wrote:

Such passages as Matt. xxv,41 should make theologians excessively careful of drawing beloved contrasts between Old Testament and New. We find even the liberal theologian, Dr. Fosdick, saying: "From Sinai to Calvary - was ever a record of progressive revelation more plain or more convincing? The development begins with Jehovah disclosed in a thunderstorm on a desert mountain, and it ends with Christ saying 'God is a Spirit and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and truth'; it begins with a war-god leading his partisans to victory, and it ends with men saying 'God is love; and he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him'; it begins with a provincial deity loving his tribe and hating its enemies, and it ends with the God of the whole earth worshipped by 'a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues'; it begins with a God who commands the slaying of the Amalekites, 'both man and woman, infant and suckling', and it ends with a Father whose will it is that not 'one of these little ones should perish'; it begins with God's people standing afar off from His lightnings and praying that He might not speak to them lest they die, and it ends with men going into their inner chambers and, having shut the door, praying to their Father who is in secret" (*Christianity and Progress*, 1922, p.209). Very good. No doubt such a series can be arranged. Let me now arrange a similar series. "From Old Testament to New Testament - was ever a record of retrogression more plain or more convincing? It begins with 'Have I any pleasure at all in the death of him that dieth?'; it ends with 'Begone from me, ye doers of wickedness.' It begins with 'The Lord is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy'; it ends with 'Fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in gehenna.' It begins with 'I dwell with him that is of a contrite spirit to revive it'; it ends with 'Narrow is the way which leads to life, and few there be who find it.' It begins with 'I will not contend forever; I will not be *a/ways* wrath'; it ends with 'Depart, ye cursed, into the everlasting fire.' It begins with 'Should not I have pity upon Nineveh, that great city?'; it ends with 'It will be more endurable for Sodom on the day of Judgement than for that town.' It begins with 'The Lord is good to all, and near to all who call upon Him'; it ends with 'Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, there is no forgiveness for him whether in this world or the next.' It begins with 'The Lord will wipe away tears from off all faces; He will destroy death forever'; it ends with 'They will throw them into the furnace of fire; there is the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.'" And the one series would be as misleading as the other."

When Rabbi Gunther Plaut (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981, pp.416-17) looks at the repeated hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exod. 4:21 to 11:10; 14:17), he acknowledges the problem of Pharaoh's apparent lack of freedom. He tells us, "The Midrash asks, 'Does this not afford an opening to heretics?'," i.e. by bringing God into disrepute. This is a serious problem for Jews, just as it is for Christians. Plaut notes the easy solution that "God merely informs Moses of what God knows is bound to happen"; he leaves this statement for those who will be satisfied by it, but he does not accept it himself. He states that the will of God is "pivotal to the story, . . . all explanations attempting to 'absolve' God will remain forced." But he also states his firm conviction that "Free will is never at issue, for to deny man his ability to make moral decisions would be wholly at variance with all biblical thought." What then can we finally say about God's action here in hardening Pharaoh's heart? The story presents repeated occasions for showing God's glory and reinforcing God's redemptive power. Plaut suggests the story is "not concerned with theological contradictions", but only with making God's faithfulness to declared promises abundantly clear to everyone, especially to the people of Israel. "God's freedom prevails over [human freedom]." Does this "solve" the problem? Probably not. Christian interpreters have had no easier time coming up with a solution. For Jews and Christians alike, God remains God, both with us and beyond us. (Maimonides in the 12th century noted that between the fourth and fifth plagues Pharaoh ceases to harden his own heart (Exod. 8:32) and God takes over (Exod. 9:12). According to Maimonides the loss of free will becomes part of the punishment and not the crime. But already at Exod. 4:21, God is intent on hardening Pharaoh's heart and is resolute about how the drama will unfold. Maimonides' suggestion did not end the search for understanding.)

We note the discomfort of Jews over the harsh treatment of Egypt in this story in spite of the claim that Egypt only received her due punishment. Despite all the oracles against the nations, calling for judgement for crimes committed, Isaiah's vision of redemption in the day of the Lord embraces the greatest of Israel's enemies, past (Egypt) and present (Assyria). "In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.'" (Isa. 19:24-25)

Often, Jewish reflection on problem texts provides very helpful assistance for coming to terms with them. Jewish faithfulness to God, whether or not there is understanding, can be a marvellous example for Christians. We remember Elie Wiesel's story from the death camps about Jewish inmates putting God on trial for what was happening there, finding God guilty, and then joining in the daily prayers. There is not rejection of God here, but there certainly is questioning.

[Content](#)

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

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