

# SESSION II

## SCRIPTURE AND HERMENEUTICS

MONDAY, MARCH 22

**Papers presented by**  
**Rabbi Prof. Walter S. Wurzburger**  
**Prof. Elias Oikonomou**

**Chairman: Dr. Gerhart M. Riegner**

**Dr. Gerhart M. Riegner:** We will start with the reading of a Psalm from the Bible. Prof. Halpérin will read it in Hebrew and Prof. Stylianopoulos will read it in English.

**Prof. Jean Halpérin:**

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד הַנָּה מֵהַפּוֹב וּמֵהַנְּעִים שָׁבַת אֲחִים גַּם־יָחַד:  
כְּשֶׁמֶן הַפּוֹב וְעַל־הָרֹאשׁ יָרַד עַל־הַתְּקָן וְקָרְאֵהֶרֶן שִׁירֵי עַל־פִּי מִדֹּחַי:  
כְּטַל־חֶרְמוֹן שִׁירֵי עַל־הַרְבֵּי צִיּוֹן כִּי שָׁם וְצִנָּה יִהְיֶה אֶת־הַבְּרִכָּה הַיֵּים עַד־הָעוֹלָם:

**Rev. Prof. Theodore Stylianopoulos:** A poem of David: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, running down upon the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down over the hem of his garments; like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord has commanded His blessing, even life for evermore."

# SCRIPTURE AND HERMENEUTICS: A JEWISH VIEW

BY RABBI PROF. WALTER S. WURZBURGER

The crucial importance of the subject “Hermeneutics and Tradition” for the entire gamut of interreligious relationships was first suggested to me a number of years ago at a conference between Jews and Lutherans in Stockholm. A distinguished Lutheran scholar advanced the thesis that Martin Luther’s vicious antisemitic writings, which were so frequently invoked by the Nazis, did not reflect hostility to Jews as such but antagonism to the rabbinic mode of interpretation of biblical texts. He denounced Jews primarily because they adopted the rabbinic Midrash as an authoritative interpretation of the text. By not reading the Bible in the light of their own individual conscience, they were guilty of distorting the meaning of the Bible.

Hermeneutics is bound to play a decisive role in any religion which is based upon sacred texts, especially when they are acknowledged as the word of God. Since the Bible contains apparently contradictory statements, we must resolve these contradictions by ascertaining through hermeneutical procedures the real meaning of various texts that pose disturbing problems. If we recognize the Bible not merely as edifying religious literature but as the word of God, we cannot utilize the methodology of Bible criticism which attributes inconsistencies to the failings of the human authors or to subsequent errors in transmission. After all, for the believer, the Bible is *The Book* — the very foundation of both Judaism and Christianity, the source of our religious teachings. But the question remains, whether it is possible for us to understand and properly interpret what we accept as the word of God.

Deconstructionists argue that it is impossible to ascertain the objective meaning of any text. This applies especially to ancient texts. How can we who are separated from their authors by so many centuries presume to ascertain their original meaning? The Talmud already recognized that the language of the Bible differs from that of the Mishnah.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, it is impossible to understand the meaning of a biblical text without some tradition to guide us.

There comes to mind a talmudic story relating a conversation between the Tanna Hillel and a prospective convert to Judaism, who had informed Hillel that he was prepared to accept the Written Torah but not the Oral Torah, only the text itself but not its rabbinic hermeneutics. Whereupon Hillel proceeded to instruct him in the meaning of the letters differently than he had done previously. Yesterday's letter *Aleph* became today's *Bet* and vice versa. When the prospective candidate protested that previously Hillel had taught the opposite, the latter replied: "You see, no text speaks for itself. You cannot make sense of a text without recourse to some tradition as to how a text should be read."<sup>2</sup>

When a text is not merely ancient but is regarded as divinely revealed, we are faced with an additional difficulty. How can human beings claim to have exhausted the meanings of such a text? It may be that a text should be viewed from many different perspectives. Notwithstanding the fact that the Septuagint was the work of outstanding rabbinic scholars, the Talmud viewed the translation of Scriptures into Greek as a calamity.<sup>3</sup> This negative attitude in all likelihood reflects the belief that no translation can ever convey all the possible meanings of the original text.<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, every translation is an interpretation.

A dramatic example of how the change in meaning of ancient terms poses problems for inter-group relations is provided by the Septuagint's rendition of the Hebrew *torah* by *nomos* (plural *nomoi*). The misconception that Judaism is not a religion but merely a legal code devoid of genuine spirituality can be largely attributed to this mistranslation. Unfortunately, very few scholars are aware of the fact that, as Prof. Mosli-vatch has pointed out, in ancient Greek usage, *nomos* referred not only to law but to guidance or order.

Since most people associated *nomos* exclusively with the realm of law, there was a tendency to ignore the extra-legal dimensions of Judaism. Very few non-Jewish scholars paid attention to the talmudic state-

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1. B. T. Chullin 137b and Avodah Zarah 55b.

2. B. T. Shabbat 31a.

3. Sofrim 1.

4. Criticism of various highly regarded Bible translations is expressed in B. T. Megillah 15a.

ment that Jerusalem was destroyed because the people abided only by the provisions of the law and ignored the requirement to engage in supererogatory conduct, i.e., to realize that one must sometimes voluntarily go beyond the minimum of conduct that the law defines.<sup>5</sup>

Another illustration of how hermeneutics in the form of translation sometimes does violence to the meaning of a biblical text is provided when the Hebrew *emunah* is translated as *pistis*. Hebrew scholars demonstrated that the Hebrew *emunah* does not refer at all to faith as an act of dogmatic affirmation, but rather denotes unswerving faithfulness and loyalty.

By now it is generally accepted that biblical texts do not speak by themselves but must be interpreted. Even those who reject reason as an independent source of religious truth and advocate *sola scriptura*, still employ reason to ascertain the meaning of the biblical text. Many scholars take it for granted that many phrases cannot be taken literally. The Targum Onkelos already presupposed that many anthropomorphic expressions of the Bible must not be taken literally because Jewish monotheism rejects the attribution of corporeal attributes to God. Thus, "the hand of God" is rendered in this classic Aramaic translation of the Torah as "the power of God." Maimonides not only objects to anthropomorphism but insists that the talmudic phrase "The Torah speaks in human terms"<sup>6</sup> implies his doctrine that all positive attributes of God which are encountered in the Bible must be interpreted either as negative attributes or as attributes of action.<sup>7</sup>

Maimonides maintained that every biblical statement must be interpreted in such a manner that it conforms to the requirements of reason. The Song of Songs is viewed as an allegory depicting the passionate yearning for God which is the hallmark of genuine piety.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Maimonides maintains that the biblical account of the Garden of Eden<sup>9</sup> and the Book of Job<sup>10</sup> must be read as allegories. As a rationalist who accepts the Bible as the word of God, Maimonides has no choice but to interpret the Bible in such a manner that there is no contradiction between the revealed word of God and the demands of rationality. By the same token, Maimonides emphasized that taking literally aggadic (non-legal), talmudic and midrashic sources is a disservice to the cause of religion.

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5. B. T. Bava Metzia 30b.

6. B. T. Berakhot 31b; Yevamot 71a.

7. *Guide*, I, 36.

8. Code, Laws of Repentance, 10:6.

9. *Guide*, II, 50.

10. *Ibid.*, III, 23-23.

It is well known that Spinoza in his *Tractatus* bitterly attacked Maimonides for distorting the meaning of biblical texts. For Spinoza, who denied the very possibility of divine revelation, the Bible was simply an ancient human text. He therefore resorted to Bible criticism rather than to ingenious sophisticated re-interpretations in the attempt to resolve apparent inconsistencies.

While there is disagreement as to the extent to which biblical texts must be interpreted in the light of reason, there is general agreement that some passages must not be taken literally. I am not aware of anyone who claims that the verse, "Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts"<sup>11</sup> must be interpreted literally rather than as a figure of speech. No one ever suggested that the verse should be viewed as mandating open heart surgery.

That reason functions as a hermeneutical tool is further evidenced by the question that is frequently posed in the Talmud concerning the need for biblical support of various laws. "Why do we need this verse, is it not a self-evident proposition?"<sup>12</sup> Apparently, it was felt that reason was a sufficiently reliable instrument for ascertaining the will of God.

To be sure, Jewish history is replete with controversies revolving around hermeneutics. There were major disagreements on the issue between the Samaritans, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Karaites. In our time, the major issue dividing various Jewish religious movements such as Orthodoxy, Conservatism, Reform and Reconstructionism, is whether the biblical text represents the revealed word of God and should therefore be interpreted in accordance with traditional canons or whether the Bible merely represents a human document to be analyzed, as Spinoza maintained, by the methods of historical scholarship and literary criticism.

An even greater gulf exists between Jews and Christians on the methods and procedures to be employed in elucidating the meaning of Scriptures. To begin with, while for Jews the Hebrew Bible represents Scriptures, the Greek translation of the original Hebrew is regarded by the Greek Orthodox Church as the authoritative text. As I pointed out previously, since every translation is in itself an interpretation, no translation can possibly do justice to the totality of meanings that can be derived from the original. Moreover, it must be realized that what Orthodox Christians call the "Old Testament" does not coincide with what Jews call "Holy Writ." The Greek "Old Testament" includes a number of apocrypha, books Jews consider to be highly valuable, and some of which are even quoted in the Talmud, but which, nonetheless, have not

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11. Deut. 10:16.

12. B. T. Ketuvot 22a; Bava Kamma 46b; Niddah 25a.

been canonized as “Holy Writ.” Obviously, the very term “Old Testament” is not acceptable to Jews, because it implies that there is a “New Testament” which has superseded the old one. Naturally, Jews object to the typological approach that is so frequently employed by Christians in the attempt to read *into* the Hebrew Scriptures the message of the Gospels.

Jews are supposed to read and interpret Scriptures in the light of the tradition of the Oral Torah. It is this tradition which determines both what books comprise Holy Writ and what for normative purposes (Halakhah) is mandated by a biblical text. This type of hermeneutics is referred to as Midrash (literally what is “demanded” of the text). To cite a well-known example, the verse “an eye for an eye” is not interpreted literally as *lex talionis* (inflicting an identical injury on whoever causes an injury), but is taken as the requirement to pay compensation to those who have sustained personal injury for their losses.

Thus, insofar as Jewish religious law is concerned, the meaning of the Bible is what the rabbinic tradition, utilizing the hermeneutics of the Oral Torah, declares it to be. But this does not mean that this method exhausts the total meaning of Scriptures. Interestingly, Maimonides, in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, states that while for legal purposes “an eye for an eye” must be interpreted as compensation, the literal meaning of the text shows that while it does not make sense for a human court to exact more than monetary compensation, this is not really adequate retribution for such an enormous offense.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the literal meaning and the rabbinic exegesis of the text, the word of God as recorded in the Bible can also be interpreted allegorically as parables or in a mystical sense by those qualified to comprehend such esoteric knowledge. Even for strictly legal purposes, a biblical text may be interpreted in a variety of ways. In support of this methodology, the Talmud<sup>14</sup> invokes the biblical verse, “God spoke one, but I heard two.”<sup>15</sup>

Traditional hermeneutics does not seek to ascertain the original meaning of the Torah, but to establish its normative meaning for a given historic situation. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook repeatedly stresses the notion of the ongoing revelation through which the word of God is mediated throughout history. In this sense he interprets the rabbinic statement that whatever novel interpretation will at some future time be offered by a scholar is already contained in the Sinaitic revelation to Moses.<sup>16</sup>

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13. *Guide*, III, 41.

14. B. T. Sanhedrin 34a.

15. Psalm 62:12.

16. *Olat Raiah*, I, p. 61.

Since the Torah is to be interpreted in accordance with exegetical procedures sanctioned by it, whatever is obtained by reliance on such forms of reasoning is implicit in the divine revelation. Even heavenly voices or other forms of supernatural communication must be subordinated to this method of ascertaining the divine will for man. There is a famous story in the Talmud about a sage who had a different opinion from all his colleagues. A heavenly voice cried out that he was right, but they refused to take it into account. They pointed out that the Torah itself says that "the Torah is not in Heaven"<sup>17</sup> but must be explicated through human exegesis.<sup>18</sup>

Although for legal purposes the Jewish tradition insists upon the binding character of the rabbinic exegesis, on matters that do not affect practice there is complete freedom of interpretation. To illustrate the wide range of interpretation which Judaism finds acceptable, we refer to a famous statement of Abraham of Posquière, who sharply rebuked Maimonides for insisting that belief in the purely spiritual nature of God was a religious dogma, and labeling as heretics individuals who attribute to God corporeal features. Abraham of Posquière contended that while to endow God with corporeal features was intellectually wrong, a mistaken belief that reflected misunderstanding of scriptural expressions in no way affected the religious status of those who fell into this error.<sup>19</sup>

It must also be noted that while for normative purposes the rabbinic Midrash is binding, many medieval commentators interpret the rabbinic statement *ein mikra yotze miyedei peshuto*<sup>20</sup> as implying that the literal meaning of a text must not be ignored. The emphasis upon the literal meaning of the text also prevents Jews from subscribing to the allegorization or spiritualization of terms such as Israel, Zion or Jerusalem. It was for this reason that some church fathers spoke so disparagingly of the "carnal Jews."

There are, of course, numerous ways in which the Bible can be interpreted. Before and during the American Civil War both advocates of slavery and abolitionists defended their positions on biblical grounds. Within the Jewish community the same biblical passages are invoked on the one hand to justify the State of Israel and, on the other hand, by a tiny minority, to challenge the legitimacy of establishing a sovereign Jewish state in a pre-messianic era.

There is an additional hermeneutical principle which Jewish tradition employs in addition to the well-known thirteen or thirty-two meth-

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17. Deut. 30:12.

18. B. T. Bava Metzia 59b.

19. *Hasagot Hara'avad* to Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 3:7.

20. B. T. Shabbat 63a; Yevamot 11b and 24a. In the Soncino translation this statement is rendered: "A verse cannot depart from its plain meaning."

ods of Midrash. This basic principle, unfortunately, is widely overlooked. The Babylonian Talmud stresses that whenever a text is ambiguous, it should be interpreted in a manner most conducive to our sense of ethical propriety, because the Torah is described in the Book of Proverbs as "its ways are the ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peaceful."<sup>21</sup> Basing themselves on this verse, the Amoraim formulated the concepts of *darkhei noam* (ways of pleasantness)<sup>22</sup> and *darkhei shalom* (ways of peace).<sup>23</sup> The Torah should be interpreted with the understanding that the word of God is designed to promote peace, harmony, fraternity and love.

This proviso is especially relevant to our time. When religion is engulfed by the tidal waves of a rabid nationalism of idolatrous proportions, it is imperative that we re-examine our traditions to reduce the potential for divisiveness and hatred. The Jewish tradition declares that various biblical laws which discriminate against some specific ethnic groups are no longer applicable. Regulations governing relations with the ancient Canaanites, Edomites, Moabites and Egyptians were declared inoperative by the Tannaim on the ground that, in the wake of the dislocations caused by the conquests of Sennacherib, these various ethnic groups can no longer be identified.<sup>24</sup>

It is in the spirit of the "ways of peace" and the "ways of pleasantness" that we should re-evaluate our mutual misunderstandings and antagonisms. Many of our attitudes reflect responses to an entirely different set of historic circumstances. We ought to bear in mind that the word of God was not merely addressed to a specific historic era, but is eternally valid. It is our task to ascertain the meaning of the word of God for our time!

IMMANUEL 26/27

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21. Proverbs 3:17.

22. See the discussion of *darkhei noam* in *Encyclopaedia Talmudit*, vol. 7, pp. 712-715.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 716-724.

24. Tosefta Kiddushin, Chapter 5.