

Between the Gospel and the Torah¹

The Gospel (New Testament) is not enough as a witness to God. It only makes sense in light of the Scriptures that the Lord Christ (his peace be upon us) knew. In the same way there was no New Testament for his earliest followers, because what they knew of God came both from the Torah, Psalms and other books of the ancient prophets, in the Hebrew language and the Septuagint translation in the Greek language. These first followers became known as “Christians” because they understood him to be the awaited Messiah who fulfilled divine promises found in the Holy Scriptures. Over several centuries, Christians discerned that some of their own writings about our Lord Christ were also revelations from God, and the Bible found among Christians was formed by combining in one book the Noble Gospel and previous heavenly Books.

We should always remember that the combination of the Gospel and the books of the ancient prophets into one book was undertaken by Christians, not by Jews. In this way the Bible circulated among Jews has given life not just to the New Testament but to the Talmud which is considered a re-interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. But neither the Talmud nor the New Testament are fully consistent with the Hebrew Bible; they are different spiritual visions of how God’s activity in the created realm is to be understood. But in many respects, the Hebrew Bible is only normative within the later religious traditions. No tradition regards the Hebrew Bible as independent to these later developments in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, it is important to strive to understand the meaning of the Hebrew texts in their own right and to distinguish that meaning from what later interpreters say about these ancient texts, because the Hebrew Bible is like a jewel whose facets are illuminated by the different lights that are shone upon it.

The ‘Old Testament’, as Christians came to name the Hebrew Bible, does not directly mention our Lord Jesus; rather, it speaks about the historical experiences and hopes of the Sons of Israel. However, Christians read the

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ancient scriptures in a new way in light of the astonishing teachings of our Lord Christ, who did not simply fulfill prophecy in ways that were anticipated, but revealed through his teaching, sacrifice of his life and resurrection from death a depth of spirituality that no-one could have guessed at without him.

For example, we know that our Lord Jesus' mother and her husband took him to Egypt, and this event is interpreted as fulfilling the word of the prophet Hosea (see Matthew 3:13-15 below). The passage from the Prophet Hosea, however, is not a prediction of the future but a reference to the past experience of the Sons of Jacob when they departed Egypt. What the apostle who recorded the revelation of the Gospel did was to show a deep spiritual analogy between the experience of the Sons of Jacob and the experience of the Lord Christ. Through such analogies, God's revelation in the Lord Christ was unveiling the true meaning of human history.

Hosea 11.1

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called my son.

Matthew 3.13-15

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

The reference to Israel's experience in Egypt calls to mind the fact that God liberated the families of Jacob from the yoke of Pharaoh, and this became a model of what the Almighty was about to do in the life of our Lord Jesus, along with the Almighty's concern for his worshippers' suffering in Egypt, and this was to be a lasting insight into one of God's praiseworthy characteristics.

God's concern for our sufferings

The deep scriptural insight that God shows concern for the sufferings of his worshippers began with the book of Exodus in the Torah:

“After a long time, Pharaoh passed away, and the Sons of Jacob continued to groan over their enslavement, and because of it they pleaded and lifted their cries to God. And God heard their moaning, and kept his promise to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob (peace be upon them). And God was Knowing and Seeing of the hardships of the Sons of Jacob”. (Exodus 2:23-25)

‘Then God revealed to him: "I am Seeing the hardships of the people of my covenant in Egypt, and I am Hearing and Knowing of their prayers and cries because of the oppression of those responsible for them. Yes, I am Knowing about their hardship, and I have manifested to save them from the clutches of the Egyptians. I will take them out of there to a wide land flowing with milk and honey,”’. (Exodus 3:7-8)

God saved the Sons of Jacob from slavery in Egypt, and gave them a new set of laws to live by. Yet no sooner were they delivered from slavery, and settled into a new homeland, than they forgot God's mercy, and cast his commandments behind their backs. Usually they would only remember Him in times of trouble and distress, and this tested the His great patience, as we read in the Book of Judges:

‘Then the Sons of Jacob cried out to God, “We have sinned against you, for we have forsaken you and worshipped Baal”. Then God sent this revelation to them, “When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried to me for help, what happened? I saved you from their hands. But you have forsaken me and served other gods, therefore I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Maybe they will save you when you are in trouble!” So the Sons of Jacob prayed and interceded, “Oh God, we have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, only deliver us, we pray, this day”. Then they got

rid of the foreign gods among them and worshipped God. And he quickly responded to their prayer because of their misery”. (Judges 10.10-16)

This repeated inability to keep God’s commands became such a pattern that their prophets could finally see no choice but that they be punished by being exiled (e.g., the Book of the Prophet Hosea, chapter 5). Later prophets felt that a whole new covenant was needed, since the Sons of Jacob were so consistent in their failure to keep the old covenant’s laws. But the prophet Jeremiah said that this new covenant would not be an external law, written in a book. Rather, as God says, ‘I will put my instruction in their minds and write it on their hearts’. (Book of the Prophet Jeremiah 31:33)

The exile of the Sons of Jacob was not the end of God’s grace upon them; on the contrary, it became a new revelation of grace, as it is clear not only in a new covenant written on the heart, but also by God’s explicit statements of His eternal mercy. For example, the Prophet Isaiah says, ““For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you”, says the Lord your Redeemer. “To me, this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will *not* be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed”, says the Lord, who has compassion on you’. (The Book of the Prophet Isaiah 54:7-10)

The Suffering of God’s Servant

We find revelation in the Book of Isaiah (peace be upon him) about God’s servant who embodies God’s compassion and who represents the people of the Sons of Jacob (41.8-13). We also read in several places that the servant brings justice on earth (42.1,4) and bears light to the nations (42.6; 49.6). The last verse, however, raises one of the key problems concerning the identity of the servant, for he is called the Sons of Israel in a number of verses, yet 49.6 says that he is the chosen servant to “restore the tribes of the Sons of Jacob, to bring back those of the Sons of Israel I have kept’

The apparent contradiction is relieved if we see the suffering servant as a symbol of the people of God’s covenant exiled in Babylon, for God made them

a tool to restore harmony and unity within the people of God's covenant who did not leave their land and who were scattered north, south, east and west. Also the mission of God's servant is identified with the work of God: "I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, "Give them up" and the south, "Do not hold them back". Bring my children from afar, from the ends of the earth". (Book of the Prophet Isaiah 43.6)

One of the characteristics of this servant figure is that he suffers on behalf of others, and through that suffering is bringing justice to the world, in corroboration of the words of Isaiah 'See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have chosen you in the furnace of affliction'. (48.10). And verse 53:11 indicates after self-sacrifice in this suffering: "After he undergoes all these troubles, he will be pleased with what he has achieved through his suffering in life. And God will make his righteous servant a reason to accept many people, because he will purify them from all their sins". The servant will bring peace and healing to others: "But in truth he was afflicted because we are sinful, he was crushed because we are guilty. Our lives became sound when he received blows for us and bore wounds for us." (See 53.5).

The passages about the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah are ambiguous, for it is possible to interpret them as referring to the small faithful minority within the Sons of Jacob who suffered exile along with the others. For verse 3.10 in the book of Isaiah indicates that there was a small group of righteous ones among the people. Even so, these righteous ones suffered exile along with the rest of the people, and their suffering was harsh because they had done nothing to justify this punishment. Yet the Prophet Isaiah saw their suffering as a sign of salvation for others, for God was arranging behind this something greater. The return of the exiles from Babylon to their land would be like a 'second exodus', after the first exodus of the Sons of Jacob from Egypt, but this second exodus was to happen without violence.

The prophet Isaiah also tells us that this servant will be characterized by gentleness and humility: "People struck him and humiliated him but he did not utter a word, he did not open his mouth when they took him, he was like a sheep driven to the slaughter with no one to weep over him, or like a submissive silent lamb before those who shear its wool and strip it." (53.7). "and he will not be arrogant and crush the oppressed of the earth like the flame of a wick, but he will show mercy to them" (42.3).

The Servant in the New Testament

The verses 8.32-35 in the Annals of the Apostles (or Acts of the Apostles) are one of several places in the New Testament where the Prophet Isaiah's vision of the servant is interpreted as referring to our Lord Christ (his peace be upon us). In the revelations recorded by the apostle Matthew, the citations of the suffering servant passages relate not just to the suffering of the Lord Christ but also to his healing of disease and disabilities (see Isaiah 53.4 cited in Matthew 8.16-17). Matthew also focuses on the quietness of the suffering servant (Isaiah 42.1-4 cited in Matthew 12.15-21). Quietness is a recurrent theme in the book of the prophet Isaiah which is opposed to the clamor of war (e.g., Isaiah 30.15).

There is only one text in the Annals of the Apostles where the suffering servant, as the one who brings light to the gentiles, is not understood as the Lord Christ but as the apostles who bring his message to the nations (particularly referring to Paul and Barnabas, see Annals of the Apostles 13.46-47). The focus here is on the fact that the servant brings the light of guidance to non-Jews, and after hearing God's message to them they understand that God wants them to be saved.

But in the case of the first epistle of the Apostle Peter 2.21-23, the servant of Isaiah 53.9 becomes a model of life for all believers, for they should not commit sin, nor return insult for insult, rather they should place their entire trust in God. In short, we can say that the model of discipleship in the epistle of 1 Peter is a development of the challenges to faith set out in the book of the prophet Isaiah: to do justice; dependence on God alone, and not to fear worldly power even though this may lead the believers to suffer injustice. "Those who bear up under pain and the harshness of oppression for the sake of God, obtain the good pleasure of the Almighty." (1 Peter 2.19). "Even if you are wronged for the sake pleasing God, then how good for you! For the words of the Almighty on the tongue of his prophet Isaiah (peace be upon him) says: Do not be fearful or disturbed by their threats!" (1 Peter 3.14).

Faith and Practice

The Gospel records are consistent that followers of the Lord Christ are called to act justly and to care for the poor, just as God commanded the prophets of the Sons of Israel previously. But the apostle Paul is insistent that the traditions of the people of the Torah are not binding on other nations, and acceptance with

God is not on the basis of belonging to the people of the Torah, but because of the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus the Messiah. Then he suggests to non-Jews that if they are looking for a model of righteousness, they should focus on the prophet Abraham, not on Moses, since Genesis 15:6 says that God accepted Abraham on the basis of his faith before the law was given to the Sons of Jacob, the law that distinguished them from the other nations. Thus Paul tells the people of Galatia: “Indeed, God revealed in the Scriptures that he would make the non-Jews righteous servants because they depend on his promise, and the Almighty revealed this good news to Abraham from ancient times when he said: ‘Through you all the nations of the earth will enjoy my blessings.’” (Galatians 3.8)

Paul cautions us, however, that freedom from Jewish traditions does not mean we can indulge in sin. On the contrary, this freedom is based on a foundational principle of the Torah, which is love – “Love your neighbour as you love yourself” – and on the fruit of a life produced by God’s Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.” (The Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Loved Ones of God in Galatia, 5:22-23).

The apostle James in his letter emphasizes ethics even more strongly than Paul. He also cites the example of the prophet Abraham’s faith, but this time the point derived from Genesis 15.6 is different. Abraham (peace be upon him) believed in God before the laws were given to the prophet Moses, but the verses 2.20-24 in the epistle of James emphasize that God tested the prophet Abraham’s obedience to the extreme when he asked him to offer his son as a sacrifice. So it is possible to say that a believer’s faith is never separate from his behavior.

Three records of the life of the Lord Christ in the Gospel share a tradition of summing up the commandments of the Torah by citing two key commands found in it. In Luke’s record, an expert in religious law asks our Lord Jesus how to find eternal life, and he (his peace be upon us) directly responds by asking him to sum up the Torah. The expert answers with the two commands: Love

God with all your being (Deuteronomy 6.5) and your neighbour as yourself (Leviticus 19.18). Then the Lord Christ addresses him saying, “If you do this, you will be victorious and be one of those who are eternal.” (Luke 10:28), implying that faith cannot be separated from actions. But the expert comes back with another important question, ‘Who is meant by one’s neighbour?’

But our Lord Jesus (his peace be upon us) answers not with a legal definition, but with a story about the good Samaritan, a story in which a Jewish priest turns out to be less compassionate than the Samaritan, something that shocked Jews who were accustomed to thinking of Samaritans as a people who had gone astray. This story shakes up the preconceptions for someone who reflects upon it. When our Lord Jesus challenges the counterfeit purity of Jewish priests, he does so following the example of the prophets of the Sons of Israel who preceded him (see for example the book of the prophet Isaiah 1:11-17; and the book of the prophet Amos 5:21-24). This story contains at least two key points: first, there is no conflict between loving God and loving strangers. Secondly, we may be taught how to love strangers by the most unlikely people.

If we wish to tell stories about our neighbours in the manner of the story of the Good Samaritan, we will find ourselves with stories of love and compassion between people who are different from each other, people who are strangers to each other. The stranger is by definition someone who we don’t know; we don’t know anything about their experience of life, their beliefs, their virtues or their sins. We can also say that our Lord Christ’s parable describes a situation in which deep suspicions, prejudices and histories of pain are set aside.

There were deep divisions between Samaritans and Jews in the first century A.D., as there are today between many ethnic groups the world over. But we read in the New Testament, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, “Do not forget to

show hospitality to strangers (*philoxenia* in the original Greek text – ‘love of the other’), just as some of the prophets hosted angels without knowing.” (Hebrews 13.2) The reader is meant here to recall the story of the prophet Abraham’s guests in the Torah, in chapter 18 of the book of Genesis. This story teaches us to love God and to love others in ways that our own culture or law does not yet understand. The prophet Abraham learned in this story, as we have learned, that the angels of God the Merciful might be found outside of the scope of all that we expect.