

Between Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning: An Evangelical Encounters Vatican II

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Fifty years ago, it would have been impossible for an evangelical with an exclusivist theology of religion¹ to encounter *Nostra Aetate*, reconsider Christianity's relationship to other religious traditions, begin graduate studies in comparative theology (CT), discover Scriptural Reasoning (SR), and contemplate the relationship between the two disciplines. *Nostra Aetate* had yet to be promulgated, CT² and SR did not exist, and ecumenical contact between Catholics and evangelicals was rare. However, such a journey for an evangelical in the twenty-first century is not only possible, but is part of the ongoing legacy of Vatican II.

My plan, in what follows, is twofold. First, I will describe some of the primary ways the legacy of Vatican II influenced me as an evangelical, specifically my theology of comparative religion and my understanding of Judaism. I will draw on Michael Barnes' essay in *Interreligious Reading After Vatican II*, especially his analysis of biblical *ressourcement* and *Dei Verbum*, to assist my description. Second, I will focus on another concern in the same volume: the relationship between SR and CT. Peter Ochs argues in his essay in *Interreligious Reading After Vatican II* that SR and CT should remain separate disciplines, but that both hold complementary functions.³ I will propose that CT's relationship to SR depends on the traditions and subjects being compared. While other forms of Christian CT can proceed independently of SR, a Christian-Jewish CT⁴ that focuses on rabbinic literature as a source of theological learning must begin with Scriptural Reasoning before it engages in comparative theological explorations. Scriptural Reasoning sets rabbinic commentaries in a necessary communal learning environment. This environment generates better understanding of texts, in addition to crucial and intriguing questions which lend themselves to further examination and development through CT methods. To help demonstrate this, I will provide an example with the Cain and Abel pericope (Genesis 4:1-17). In this example, I will describe how I first began with this pericope in an SR environment, which then led me into a broader exploration of the relationship between confessional and reductionist approaches to biblical studies.

¹ At its core, this form of exclusivism is based on a small collection of biblical texts, such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. It is also bolstered by theologians such as Karl Barth. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. ½, trans. G. T. Thomas and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956).

² The specific form of CT that I refer to has been pioneered largely by Francis Clooney and James Fredericks.

³ For example, see Peter Ochs, "Re-Socializing Scholars of Religious, Theological, and Theo-Philosophical Inquiry," *Modern Theology* 29, vol. 4 (October 2013): 201.

⁴ By this, I mean comparative theology performed by a Christian (and even more specifically, an evangelical Christian doing text-centered study), in conversation with Judaism.

The Legacy of Vatican II for an Evangelical

I studied *Nostra Aetate* (*NA*) during my master's program at Union Theological Seminary in New York. My initial expectation was that the text would be inaccessible, written by a denomination that possessed distinct sources, methods, and presuppositions from my own. In actuality, *NA* was not only comprehensible, but familiar. There are, as Michael Barnes helps me see, two primary reasons for this. First, *NA* is a product of biblical *ressourcement*.⁵ There are twenty-five references in *NA*: one is patristic, one is from the Apocrypha, and the remaining twenty-three are from books and letters canonically-recognized by evangelicals. For an evangelical who holds the Bible as foundational for theology and practice, a text that draws on the Bible twenty-three out of twenty-five times to build an argument deserves attention.

Second, the document articulates the relationship between Scripture and tradition in terms that an evangelical can recognize.⁶ A two-source theory that gives an impression that tradition is an *independent* source of truth from Scripture is one of the main objections with which an evangelical might charge Catholicism. But a one-source theory, as articulated by *Dei Verbum* and expressed in *Nostra Aetate*, where tradition is “intrinsicly related to the revealing power of the ‘sacred page’ as it is read, prayed, studied and celebrated in the life of the church,”⁷ can align with an evangelical's theology of Scripture, especially when an evangelical considers carefully the hermeneutical process by which he/she reads the Bible.⁸

The effect of *NA*'s heavy reliance on biblical texts, coupled with its single-source theory of revelation rooted in Christ, was that when I read the document, it was accessible. This accessibility then encouraged me to be receptive to *NA*'s challenge. Before studying *NA*, my understanding of Judaism was that it was defunct, a tradition that had rejected the messiah and was therefore obsolete. My exclusivist theology of religion, bolstered by my reading of a narrow selection of biblical texts—especially Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees in Matthew 23⁹ and the Letter to the Hebrews—led me to this conclusion. *Nostra Aetate*, however, underscored biblical texts that I had not previously considered, most notably Romans 9:4-5: “theirs [Israel's] is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh.”¹⁰ With passages such as Romans 9:4-5,¹¹ *NA* challenged me to acknowledge that there is an active covenant between

⁵ Michael Barnes, “Opening up a Dialogue: *Dei Verbum* and the Religions,” *Modern Theology* 29, vol. 4 (October 2013): 21-22.

⁶ Barnes, 22.

⁷ Barnes, 18, 22. See also *Dei Verbum*, 10.

⁸ He or she never encounters a text as a blank slate, but always in conjunction with his/her own theological and exegetical tradition and commitments.

⁹ In my understanding, the Pharisees of the first century were an accurate representation of Judaism in the twenty-first century.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions], sec. 4, accessed Dec 5, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

¹¹ In addition, Romans 11:28-29 and Zephaniah 3:9.

Judaism and God, forged at Sinai, and that through this covenant, Judaism remains integrally part of God's redemptive plan.¹²

Nostra Aetate's argument eventually became convincing. In addition to its accessibility, what helped make it influential was the collegial mode by which I learned it alongside Catholics. I studied *NA* with Paul Knitter, and I discovered its positive ramifications on Christian-Jewish relations over the last fifty years with Mary Boys.¹³ Boys, in particular, encouraged me to revisit my supersessionist readings of texts like Matthew 23 and Hebrews and analyze them alongside work produced by scholars of Jewish-Christian studies.¹⁴ This collegial mode, David Ford and Paul Murray note, is part of the legacy of Vatican II, an ecumenism that promotes a mutual exchange of ideas without polemics or conversionary tactics.¹⁵ Knitter and Boys, both Catholics, exuded a receptive ecumenism, which made learning not only possible, but desirable between members of two denominations that would not have easily conversed before Vatican II.¹⁶

¹² Barnes, 21-22. Barnes also is careful to note that these positions are not necessarily explicit in *NA*, but can be seen in them. The ambiguity of the text has led to more modest interpretations, such as Gavin D'Costa's in his recent publication *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). However, the line of interpretation that Barnes promotes, I believe, can be seen in the trajectory of documents the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has published over the decades, most especially the 2015 document "*The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of 'Nostra Aetate' (No.4)*," accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html.

¹³ For an excellent example, see Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Due to space constraints, I can only give references to sources that helped me reread these biblical texts. For the Pharisees, see Boys, 91-110. For Hebrews, see Jesper Svartvik, "Reading the Epistle to the Hebrews without Presupposing Supersessionism," in *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationship*, eds. Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, Hans Hermann Henrix, and Jesper Svartvik (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 77-91. I should also note that the field of Jewish-Christian studies itself only exists because of *Nostra Aetate* and Vatican II.

¹⁵ David Ford, "Scriptural Reasoning and the Legacy of Vatican II: Their Mutual Engagement and Significance," *Modern Theology* 29, vol.4 (October 2013): 103-104; Paul D. Murray, "Families of Receptive Theological Learning: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology, and Receptive Ecumenism," *Modern Theology* 29, vol. 4 (October 2013): 86-87.

¹⁶ In time, I came to see that evangelicals were also making important strides in the theology of religions discourse, especially when it came to Judaism. Karl Barth is among the pioneers. See Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 2.2, secs. 34-35 of *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, J. C. Campbell, Iain Wilson, J. Strathearn McNab, T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, J. L. M. Haire, and R. A. Stewart, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 1-110. The problems with his position have been explicated. E.g. Angus Paddison, "Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of Romans 9-11 in Light of Jewish-Christian Understanding," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28:4 (2006): 469-488. But both Barth's promising proposals and his tenuous conclusions have given some theologians and exegetes after him the space and materials to construct more coherent positions. E.g. R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996). However, the ecumenical environment I encountered with Catholics, coupled with provocative Catholic exegesis, made the deepest impact.

Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning

The ecumenism of the post-Vatican II era again became important when I began graduate studies in comparative theology at Boston College, a Jesuit institution. The Catholic theologians at BC also exuded a receptive ecumenism that made training in CT possible for an evangelical. Christian comparative theology today has a diversity of approaches. In the method I have adopted—modeled after Francis Clooney, S.J.—one reads back and forth between texts of two religions traditions with the goal of offering a constructive contribution to his/her community. When reading another tradition's texts, the aim is to understand those texts *as that tradition understands them*.

The two traditions that I study are Christianity and Judaism. My main interest with Judaism is rabbinic commentaries from late antiquity. When I began reading these commentaries, I soon discovered that it is exceedingly difficult to understand them without partners,¹⁷ and more seriously, I discovered that these rabbinic texts are *not* traditionally studied in Jewish settings *without* partners. The *beit midrash* (house of study), the native context for these commentaries, assumes communal learning, which meant that my goal of learning a tradition as that tradition understands itself was in jeopardy. I was not able to find a solution to these issues until I was introduced to Scriptural Reasoning. At first, I practiced CT and SR independently, but I soon came to realize that my ability to engage in CT improved if I began with SR: my understanding of texts increased, and I encountered more interesting questions than I did on my own.

With regard to some of the primary difference between CT and SR, Mike Higton writes that unlike CT, SR is “insistently and irreducibly social.”¹⁸ While CT can progress with individual study, SR *needs* communal interaction. Higton also writes, “In Comparative Theology, the primary site for wrestling with doctrinal questions is in the internal dialogue of the comparative theologian's own rumination, albeit fed by the experience of live inter-faith dialogue. By contrast, Scriptural Reasoning is a practice in which the primary form of engagement is in live conversation, albeit fed by the internal deliberation of the individuals involved.”¹⁹

Higton notes that his description of CT is based on Clooney's work.²⁰ Clooney, in turn, bases his description of CT on his extensive experience with Hinduism. This is a pattern in *Interreligious Reading After Vatican II*; it is also a pattern in broader comparative theological

¹⁷ To name a few challenges, these texts are frequently elliptical, ambiguous, and polysemic, and they typically assume a breadth and depth of knowledge of rabbinic methods, practices, and theologies.

¹⁸ Mike Higton, “Scriptural Reasoning and the Discipline of Christian Doctrine,” *Modern Theology* 29, vol. 4 (October 2013): 136.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121. There are, of course, many other differences, not least of which the necessity of specialization in CT and CT's explicit goal, in its textual study, of making a contribution to its (academic) community. However, I focus on Higton's observations, because they are the most relevant to the present conversation.

²⁰ See Higton, 120.

circles. A recent article indicates this,²¹ as does Clooney.²² The result is that when CT is discussed, no reference is made to Christian-Jewish CT. In what follows, I would like to bring Christian-Jewish CT into the discussion about the relationship between CT and SR. I do this because I believe it will help define the relationship between the two disciplines. To be clear, my goal is not to reconstruct the discipline of comparative theology (or Scriptural Reasoning) in general, but to argue that CT's relationship to SR depends on the traditions being compared.²³ In the case of Christian-Jewish CT, when rabbinic literature is the focus of comparison, I believe CT must depend on SR.²⁴

In this proposal, I conceive of Christian-Jewish CT moving in two stages: the first is a session in the mode of Scriptural Reasoning, in which better understanding and questions are generated; the second is an engagement with one of these questions, drawing on comparative theological methods for the purpose of offering constructive insight to one's community.

The first stage of Christian-Jewish CT involves the exploration of texts (both scriptures and commentaries) in the presence of members of other religious traditions. The ways in which Highton describes the processes of SR, I believe, are also integral to this stage of Christian-Jewish CT. The best conversations, as Highton states, do not come from a pre-determined doctrinal topic, but an organic conversation that unfolds through the course of the study of texts, following many if not all of the procedures of SR.²⁵ For Christian-Jewish CT, special emphasis on commentaries

²¹ Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, "Comparative Theology and the Status of Judaism," in *The New Comparative Theology: Thinking Interreligiously in the 21st Century*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 89-108.

²² Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Traditions* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 20.

²³ In this way, I agree with Ochs that CT and SR should remain distinct. Cf. Ochs, 201. The proximity or melding of the two disciplines will depend on which traditions are being compared.

²⁴ I make the following proposal not as a definitive statement about Christian-Jewish CT, but as a possibility of where the field might head when comparing Christian and rabbinic texts. This does not preclude other forms of Christian-Jewish CT that compare non-rabbinic texts.

²⁵ Highton, 123, 125. Scriptural Reasoning procedures and goals that I believe are particularly important include selecting small texts (both scriptures and commentaries) around themes, bringing the texts in translation and the original language, reading the texts out loud, explicating the plain sense of the texts before moving to exploration of commentaries, asking questions and offering interpretations of the texts, developing new insights, limiting comments to one's own experience and tradition, respecting all viewpoints, and allowing the dialogue to unfold naturally. See Steven Kepnes, "A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning," in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, eds. David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 23-39.

from each tradition is particularly conducive.²⁶ Communal learning is essential, for it “shapes the way that I read my own scriptures.”²⁷ Exactly as Higton states, “I read with others who read [their own] text religiously—who are serious about reading it more and more deeply, whose reading of this text shapes their lives, who seek to be exposed to the challenge of this text as they read.” That makes the difference, because through it, “I am made to see echoes and contrasts, analogies and distinctions, challenges and attractions between their text in their hands and mine in mine.”

Altogether, this first stage sets rabbinic texts closer to a traditional Jewish communal learning environment,²⁸ provides opportunities for a comparative theologian to increase his/her understanding and receive correction (ensuring that he/she does not misunderstand the texts),²⁹ and generates new interpretations and questions about the texts.

The second stage of Christian-Jewish CT undertakes a more comparative theological approach. A comparative theologian selects one particular question that came to his/her mind through the session and pursues it on his/her own. The comparativist seeks out sources in Judaism and Christianity that will help him/her explore the question. He or she compares the sources and discerns ways in which the comparison can further his/her tradition’s understanding. This constructive insight the comparativist then offers to his/her own community.³⁰ Allow me to provide an example of what I am describing.

²⁶ These commentaries from each tradition can come into play during the opening explanation of the texts or during the course of conversation. The commentaries help establish the plain sense of the text, but also—and more importantly—they give witness to various ways the text has been received in each tradition. Participants (both insiders and outsiders) can then interact with these commentaries, posing questions, offering interpretations of the commentaries, and identifying places where they agree or disagree with the commentaries. Distinct from some SR contexts, bringing commentaries in physical form to the session is helpful so that accurate references can be made, but this is not essential. Because commentaries are involved, specialization in one’s own tradition is conducive to the conversation, but this is also not essential. I consider this a modified form of SR, but whether this first stage of Christian-Jewish CT that I am describing can be called SR or a form of communal learning based on SR, I will have to leave to the broader SR community’s judgment.

²⁷ Higton, 134.

²⁸ It is still not precisely a *hevruta*-style engagement in a *beit midrash*, but the communal nature of SR brings a comparative theologian far closer. Perhaps what helps SR fit well with Jewish-Christian CT are the “family resemblances” between the disciplines that Murray maps out (76-85), and the connection they both have to *hevruta* (Ford, 104-105; Kevin L. Hughes, “Deep Reasonings: *Sources Chretiennes, Ressourcement*, and the Logic of Scripture in the Years Before—and After—Vatican II,” *Modern Theology* 29, vol. 4 [October 2013]: 43).

²⁹ As Tracy Tiemeier argues, the necessity of dialogue partners to correct misreadings—and *destabilize potentially hegemonic approaches to other traditions*—cannot be emphasized enough. See Tracy Tiemeier, “Interreligious Reading in the Context of Dialogue: When Interreligious Reading ‘Fails,’” *Modern Theology* 29, vol. 4 (October 2013): 150-153.

³⁰ The comparative approach that I take follows Clooney’s method in *Comparative Theology*. See especially 55-68 and 157-160. The focus of this description has been on Christianity and Judaism. I should note that in SR sessions, I find that participation from all three Abrahamic traditions leads to more interesting conversations. However, in pursuing the second stage, I focus specifically on Christian and Jewish sources only because these are my areas of specialization. Others may find that SR helps them pursue other combinations of religious traditions.

Cain and Abel

On a few occasions in SR and SR-style sessions, I had the opportunity to explore the Cain and Abel pericope (Genesis 4:1-17), the famous story of a rejected sacrifice, brotherly jealousy, and the first murder. The sessions yielded far too many questions to recount here. To give sufficient explanation, I will have to limit my discussion to one. The rabbis famously thrive on gaps in the text.³¹ In studying the text with Jews during each session, I grew more sensitive to these gaps, and over the course of two particular sessions, I became aware of one such gap in Genesis 4:8a that intrigued me.³² The Masoretic Text reads, וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-אָבִיחַבֶּל אָחִיו (“And Cain said to his brother Abel”). Nothing more, however, is provided. The reader is not told what Cain said to Abel. The text jumps immediately to בַּשָּׂדֶה בְּהִיטָתָם וַיְהִי (“And it happened, when they were in the field”). This gap in the text led me to ponder the issue further on my own. I turned to evangelical commentaries, in addition to rabbinic commentaries used during some of the sessions.

Translations like the NRSV often follow manuscripts such as the LXX, which contain a speech by Cain to Abel: “Let us go out to the field” (LXX: διέλθωμεν εἰς τὸ πεδῖον). Modern critical commentators, on the one hand, have sought such explanations of the textual oddity by turning to Ugaritic and Akkadian cognates (reading אָמַר as “to see” instead of “to say”—thus, “Cain *saw* his brother”), emending the text (inserting שָׂמַר, “to keep watch,” in place of אָמַר—thus, “Cain kept watch for his brother”), considering textual variants like the LXX as true to the Vorlage,³³ or granting an unintended and unrecoverable omission in the MT.³⁴

On the other hand, the late antique rabbinic commentary *Bereshit Rabbah* (*GenR*) understands the alleged omission as divinely *intentional*.³⁵ The gap *invites* the reader to insert reconstructions of the missing conversation between the two brothers. For *GenR*, the exchange is nothing other than a fight. *GenR* then offers three versions of the fight. One version centers on how the world should be divided; another revolves around where the Temple should be built; and a third around who has the right to Abel’s sister.³⁶ The complexities of the fight could be fleshed out at length, but what is especially important is that in these midrashic solutions, the murder of Abel was borne out of a brotherly argument. This, of course, is distinct from many modern

³¹ That is, problems that the rabbis perceive in the text which require explanation. The rabbinic assumption is that the text is divinely-given and therefore perfect. Consequently, any perceived problem in the text needs to be explained. See James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” *Prooftexts* 3, vol. 2 (May 1983): 144-145.

³² I am especially indebted to a session at Boston College on October 13, 2015, and also a session run by Barry Mesch at Hebrew College on December 5, 2012 for providing the settings for inspiration.

³³ See Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 272-73; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 229-230.

³⁴ See E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 30-31; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: a Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 301-302.

³⁵ See the reference to Kugel above and also Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

³⁶ *GenR* 22.7. Harry Friedman, *Midrash Rabbah*, Vol. 1 (New York: Soncino, 1983).

commentators—confessional or critical—who would locate the blame for the murder of Abel solely with Cain. Such modern commentators might see in the story a lesson that, without discipline or control, jealousy or hate can fester and lead eventually to heinous actions.³⁷ In *GenR*, however, one might see a recognition of *another* lesson about human reality: brothers are wont to fight (which is, of course, exemplified again by Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, etc.). *Bereshit Rabbah* also has another lesson in mind: that conflicts often do not develop simply because of one person. In the case of Cain and Abel, a rejected sacrifice alone seems an insufficient reason for a crime as egregious as murder. There had to be something more at issue, and the gap in Genesis 4:8a opens the possibility that there was. With this in mind, one might be encouraged to reread the Jacob cycle or the Joseph novella as instances of shared blame that have led to violence and redemption in the construction of history and identity.

Both the modern commentaries and *GenR* individually are more than sufficient answers to the problem in Genesis 4:8a. The objectives, methods, and results of the modern approaches and *GenR* are, however, largely discrete, if not inimical toward the other. One approach uses scientific methods and assumptions originating in the modern era; the other turns to ancient methods and assumptions developed in Palestine and Babylonia. One sees a mistake in the text; the other sees a divinely-given omission. One solution leads to an interpretation centered on one-sided hostility; the other to mutual aggression. Which is correct? Which should one accept? This question led me to a broader investigation, which centered on the question of how a confessional and reductionist³⁸ reading of the biblical text can be related to each other.

When wrestling with revelation and reduction in evangelical circles, often a dichotomy develops, and often the way forward becomes an either-or affair. Placed together, they are irreconcilable: in short, some believe historical criticism undermines the Bible's inerrancy and thus its reliability; others believe that such a high view of inerrancy removes the Bible from the history that so clearly shaped it. Both sides fear that the other misreads the Bible.³⁹ This tension has been enduring in evangelical circles,⁴⁰ and as Kevin Hughes observes, it was at the forefront at Vatican II.⁴¹ Some evangelicals have begun to offer promising proposals, arguing that historical criticism is not a threat to evangelical faith; rather, it is necessary precisely because God reveals God's self in history, and to understand God's message, one must also study that history, distinguishing carefully God's message as it manifests in human forms of

³⁷ E.g. Mathews, 270-71.

³⁸ By reduction, I follow Russell McCutcheon's definition as analysis of religion with recourse to modern science alone, excluding from its consideration the possibility of the transcendent. (Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* [London: Cassell, 1999], 127.) However, I will also use it as a shorthand in this essay that includes under its umbrella higher criticism.

³⁹ Christopher M. Hays and Christopher B. Ansberry, eds., *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2013), 1-5; for a fuller account of the issue, see Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131-138.

⁴⁰ See Grant R. Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 42, vol. 2 (June 1999): 193-197 for a short summary of major figures and positions in recent history.

⁴¹ Hughes, 36-43.

communication. One can do this while still affirming that the Bible is inspired.⁴² As Christopher Hays and Christopher Ansberry explain, because the Bible has both “human and divine natures,” historical criticism and theology work best when they work together in “mutual influence”: “the family of historical-critical methods illuminates the human processes employed in the production of the biblical material and provides a window into the historical realia of the events it reports, while theological approaches illuminate the Spirit’s work in and through these human processes and provides a window into the divine realities to which the biblical text bears witness.”⁴³

Fides et Ratio

Beneath these recent proposals, I believe, is a method that is articulated well by John Paul II’s papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio (FR)*.⁴⁴ The encyclical opens with a metaphor: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”⁴⁵ John Paul II argues that faith and reason must collaborate: they are on a journey together, a long process of ascent, where “every truth attained [through their collaboration] is but a step towards that fullness of truth which will appear with the final Revelation of God.”⁴⁶

Along this path, faith and reason must remain distinct, having different methods and different results. In order for the two to productively interact, theology (faith) and philosophy (reason)⁴⁷ must be allowed to develop “autonomously” of each other to the full extent each is capable. Nevertheless, as Thomas Aquinas indicates, because both derive from God, neither can possibly contradict the other.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, John Paul II observes, the autonomy granted to each over the centuries has led to a schism between the two, which in turn has led to a severe mutual mistrust. The goal, he argues, of the present age is to bring the two back together, for reason without faith tends toward “losing sight of its final goal,” that is, knowledge and understanding of the ultimate horizon of human existence and the divine. Faith without reason leads to irrational and even “superstitious” personal “feeling and experience” (i.e. fideism). The

⁴² See Hays and Ansberry, 6-7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 208-209. For other examples, see also Enns’ essay in Brettler, Enns, and Harrington, 140-161, and Osborne, 197-210.

⁴⁴ Hays and Ansberry themselves cite Vatican II and the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s view of historical criticism as influential in their thinking (9-10).

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998), 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 2, 5.

⁴⁷ Reason is the path of philosophy, which utilizes the human intellect and experience, seeking answers— independent of revelation—to the deepest questions humans have about themselves and the universe. Faith is the path of theology, which receives revelation, and attempts to understand and systematize its content in conjunction with its own questions (*Ibid.*, nos. 1-6, 3-13; no. 44, 68; no. 64, 95-96; no.93, 136-137).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 43, 65.

solution, however, is not to eliminate the autonomy of either, but to maintain it while bridging the gap for mutual enrichment and purification.⁴⁹

Though *FR* is primarily centered on the relationship of philosophy and theology, its arguments are easily transferrable to our present concerns of confessional and reductionist exegesis, with little translation necessary: faith/confessional exegesis and reason/reductionism each has distinct objectives, methods, and results; each should maintain its autonomy and freedom to investigate a matter as deeply as possible; each, in principle, has insight that can inform the other. Neither, however, can possibly contradict the other.⁵⁰

Seeing with Both Eyes

As I noted above, the harmonious approach of confessional and reductionist exegesis is extremely promising and has already yielded important results for evangelicals. However, a question still lingers. What happens when harmony cannot be achieved, when the exegesis is irreconcilable? For example, modern critical approaches and *GenR* have two distinct views about Genesis 4:8a: one sees a mistake and the other sees perfection. Their interpretations depend on these presumptions. How is one to face the disharmony when both seem plausible? Must one approach ultimately be rejected?

In seeking an answer, I turned to Jewish sources and focused on Abraham Heschel's monumental work, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*. Heschel engages in a delineation of the late antique schools of R. Ishmael and R. Akiva.⁵¹ He argues that the School of R. Akiva approaches Torah through an esoteric paradigm, while the School of R. Ishmael approaches it through a rationalist lens.⁵² To provide a few examples, the School of R. Akiva understands Torah as transcendent and infinite, every aspect brimming with meaning;⁵³ the School of R. Ishmael sees the Torah as immanent, known only through plain sense reading and human reason. For the former, every *halakha* (law) and religious content is explicitly or latently present within the Torah; for the latter, some *halakhot* (laws) or theological concepts can and

⁴⁹ Ibid., no. 48,73-74; no. 100, 145.

⁵⁰ *FR* also discusses biblical studies directly, using the same model for faith and reason (no. 30; no.88, 129; no. 94, 138).

⁵¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*, trans. and ed. Gordon Tucker (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

⁵² Heschel cites the pioneering work of David Hoffmann on the differences between the R. Ishmael and R. Akiva Schools. Hoffmann only found significant differences in the approach to *halakhah* (law), not *aggadah* (story). Heschel's goal is to show that the distinctions should be extended to *aggadah*. More recent work has found the picture to be much more complicated, and that the distinction of the two schools is a retrojection of the redactors of the midrashic compilations. For further discussion and bibliography, see H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 247-251. For a contemporary approach to the issue, see Azzan Yadin, "Resistance to Midrash? Midrash and *Halakhah* in the Halakhic Midrashim," in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 35-57. Recent research notwithstanding, I find Heschel's insights still useful.

⁵³ E.g. the direct object marker ׀א, the conjunction ׀, and the emphatic infinitive absolute all have a significance and interpretive content that exceeds (and even violates) their function in the normal rules of Hebrew grammar.

must be grasped through human intellect.⁵⁴ The former holds to the inexplicability of divine miracles, each of which reveals an aspect of God; the latter believes there is a natural explanation for them.⁵⁵

By the end of Heschel's delineation, the tension between the two schools is abundantly clear. The esoteric and the rationalist approaches are, in many respects, contradictory positions. What, then, is one to do with the contradiction? Is one approach to be favored over the other? Heschel responds, "Jewish thought is nourished from two sources, and it follows two parallel paths: the path of vision [i.e. R. Akiva/esotericism] and the path of reason [i.e. R. Ishmael]. With respect to those things that are given to objective measurement, reason is primary. With respect to things of the heart, vision is primary."⁵⁶ Both are essential, as both have their individual emphases. To help justify his claim, Heschel turns to a series of rabbinic principles, including the famous dictum "both these and these are the words of the living God,"⁵⁷ but the most provocative comes from b.Hag 2a, the ruling that "one who is blind in one eye is exempt from the pilgrimage."⁵⁸ What Heschel means by citing this text is that a person has two eyes by which he/she reads the Torah—R. Akiva's esoteric approach and R. Ishmael's rationalist. The one who chooses to read with *only* one eye cannot attend the pilgrimage (of life), because one's perception has become skewed. But the one who reads with both eyes will see the necessary depth of truth for the journey ahead. The trick, then, is to engage in dialectics, to see with each eye and to synthesize one's perception. Heschel, however, is quick to warn that while dialectics progress one's understanding, not all contradictions can be resolved. He addresses this problem by quoting m.Av 5:17: "a controversy that is for a heavenly purpose will in the end endure." Some contradictions will remain, because each eye, though distinct in its range of vision, still sees truth and because there is holiness found in the tension itself.⁵⁹ To be sure, truth is one (Heschel eschews relativism), but the way of perceiving is two.⁶⁰ For Heschel, then, the dichotomy of

⁵⁴ Heschel, 47-64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-70.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 707-708.

⁵⁷ B.Er 13b. Amidst a debate on whether the law should follow the School of Hillel or the School of Shammai, a divine voice (or echo) interjects, declaring that despite contradiction, both "are the words of the living God." Among the reasons for this radical statement is the belief that while currently one position may be disfavored, in the future, when circumstances change, that same position may become invaluable.

⁵⁸ This ruling, Gordon Tucker indicates, was originally designed to grant an exemption from the thrice-annual pilgrimage festivals to those who were blind in one eye. Heschel, however, "has another kind of pilgrimage in mind, namely, the religious quest itself, the desire to be in the Presence of God" (n. 23, 708).

⁵⁹ Heschel, n. 24, 709.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 709. Heschel goes on to argue that while both eyes are necessary, it is important to "shift viewpoints from time to time in order to see the fullness of reality," to see with only one eye for a time so that nothing is lost.

esoteric and rational—and here, one can readily transpose the concepts of confessional and reductionist I have been using—travel toward truth in both synthesis and contradiction.⁶¹

Two Wings, Two Eyes

When comparing John Paul II's approach to faith and reason with Heschel's approach to the Schools of R. Ishmael and R. Akiva, several clear parallels emerge: for example, the belief that each side (faith/esotericism and reason/rationalism) is insufficient without the other; that one side centers on human capacity while the other on divine initiative; that truth is one, with each side accessing it through distinct means. There are, to be sure, several differences. The one I find most intriguing is the distinct metaphors John Paul II and Heschel use. These metaphors—wings versus eyes—are, I believe, indicative of a stark contrast between each understanding of the relationship between faith/esotericism and reason/rationalism.

Focusing first on John Paul II's metaphor, flight requires both wings, moving independently but in harmony. One can see this notion operative in John Paul II's belief that faith and reason must maintain their autonomy but can never be in contradiction. John Paul II conceptualizes their mutuality as a circle: theology begins with revelation, moves toward reason, and returns with a better understanding of revelation; similarly, reason begins with human intellect and inquiry, moves toward theology, and returns with new questions that theology has inspired.⁶²

With Heschel's metaphor, vision occurs through both eyes working together. If one eye is lost, impairments include decreased peripheral vision and depth perception. Similarly, for Heschel, just as two eyes increase one's vision, so too the esoteric and rational approaches, working together, increase one's understanding of the text. However, similar to a Venn diagram, for Heschel, though each eye overlaps in vision, each has a field of vision that the other does not, both in the periphery when the eyes are operating in tandem, and also when each eye is operating independently from its own vantage point. Thus, synthesis is not always possible, because each approach can view discrete aspects of truth.

Indeed, one should seek harmony between faith/esotericism/confessional exegesis and reason/rationalism/reductionism. But, as Heschel argues, there may be instances when contradictions remain stubborn. When this happens, perhaps Heschel's rabbinic approach may be helpful: rejection of one view for the other may not always be the soundest reflex, as both views may have an important aspect of truth in sight. So, while critical and confessional exegesis will often find syntheses, at the points they do not, an either-or approach could prevent one from finding truth in the periphery.⁶³

⁶¹ Heschel is clear that the debate between religion and science, or the "external challenge to religious thought" is not in his purview. His main concern is the "conflict between two different conceptions within religious thought itself" (714). My concern leans more toward the "external challenge," yet his approach still remains useful with no modification necessary.

⁶² Heschel, n. 73, 107.

⁶³ This might be one way to address the dangers of binarism that Peter Ochs warns of, by finding a way for critical and confessional exegesis to work in "tandem," as Hughes argues for. See Ochs, 208-210 and Hughes, 42-43.

Conclusion

Whether this rabbinically-informed approach to confessional and reductionist exegesis has merit must be left to the broader community to decide. In the meantime, the experiment itself exemplifies my proposal for a two-stage process for Christian-Jewish CT. It begins in an SR setting. This becomes the site of understanding and inspiration, wrought through the presence of the religious other, which can then lead to further exploration on one's own of a specific theological problem that one noticed during the encounter, using the methods of CT.

In my case, I began with the Cain and Abel pericope in SR and SR-style environments, which led me to think more deeply about the relationship between confessional and reductionist exegesis, which then led me back to the text to consider its possible meanings for my community. One might wonder if I might have found an impetus to begin an exploration of confessional and reductionist exegesis on my own. It is plausible, but that is not how the exploration developed. Moreover, I am continuing to find that the most interesting, pertinent, and provocative topics of comparison arise for me out of an SR context. Consequently, I argue that when engaging rabbinic texts, Christian-Jewish CT is dependent on SR from its very first act. This is a form of CT that is forged by the specific traditions that it compares—Judaism and Christianity—which means that it finds its starting place in the lively, unpredictable, and dynamic setting of communal learning.

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