

What Progressive Protestants Can Learn from Jewish Engagement with Scripture

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ABSTRACT: Forty years ago, Rosemary Ruether laid out a visionary plan for changes in Christian theological education as it relates to Jews and Judaism. This essay builds on her unfinished agenda and illuminates what progressive Protestants can learn from Jewish engagement with Scripture, reflecting on the experience of a rabbi/scholar who serves as a tenured faculty member in a primarily Christian seminary. While emphasizing the study of Judaism for its own sake, Christian students also discover transformative keys to their own spiritual formation.

It was just over 40 years ago that Rosemary Ruether laid out a visionary plan for changes in Christian theological education as it relates to Jews and Judaism (*Faith and Fratricide*, 1974). A decade prior, Vatican II's statement, *Nostra Aetate*, had launched a similarly radical reassessment (1965). In Ruether's plan to educate for a new relationship, she focused on three primary areas: biblical scholarship, church history, and theology. She also insisted that students, faculty, clergy, and the laity seek out face-to-face encounters with real Jews and the living Jewish tradition.

In the field of biblical scholarship, Ruether argued that Christian theological education should include Jewish interpretations from midrash and commentary, teach about the rabbinic context of Jesus and Paul, and overcome the anti-Jewish implications of Christian Scriptures in preaching and teaching. In church history, she asserted the importance of teaching about Christian legal and social persecution of Jews and the catastrophic "translation of theological anti-Judaism into social anti-Semitism."¹ In theology, she pressed the need to reckon with anti-Judaic implications of foundational beliefs and language.

1. Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 259.

While these goals are not yet fully realized, many Christian seminaries, colleges, and churches made major strides. In the process, it became evident that much of the work was too Christian-centric, that examination of Jesus's Jewishness was primarily interested in Christian origins. Theological reconsideration of Jews in the New Testament still focused on literary Jews rather than real ones, and occasional encounters with living Jewish tradition were not sufficient. Judaism, even in Christian seminaries, needs to be studied as an independent religious tradition—one of vital and thick relationship with Christianity but ontologically significant in its own right.

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Christian seminaries and colleges, therefore, began bringing scholars of Judaism (frequently Jewish scholars) on to their faculties. I came to Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) six years ago as the inaugural chair in Jewish Studies at the first independent Protestant seminary to endow such a position.² Before my arrival, a local congregational rabbi had been teaching for decades as an adjunct professor, an intermediate step that represents what most schools can afford. Students over the years had learned about Jewish prayer and practice, history, contemporary Jewish thinkers, and so forth—Judaism *qua* Judaism.

2. A description of my context may be helpful. Chicago Theological Seminary is a politically and religiously progressive Protestant seminary with a focus on “transformative leadership.” It is affiliated with the United Church of Christ but draws students from dozens of Christian denominations. The student body also includes Quaker, Universalist Unitarian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, humanist, and transreligious individuals. Among a series of central commitments to combat poverty, injustice, racism, sexism, homophobia, and hopelessness, the “Vision, Mission, and Commitment” statement sets this paragraph:

We are committed, in conscious response to the Holocaust and in recognition of the toll taken by religious divisions in our world, to fostering better understanding and collaboration among religious traditions, paying particular attention to cooperation among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam toward the end of realizing the aims of the prophetic traditions.

A full-time faculty member, however, changes the equation. I am a member of the community—a committed Jew, a rabbi—and an integral part of this primarily Christian seminary. It is no longer simply a matter of teaching *about* Judaism; rather, the ongoing engagement of students and faculty with Jews and Jewish tradition transforms the way the community thinks about theological education. We still emphasize the need to study Judaism *lishmah* (for its own sake). Strangely, however, the more intricately embedded, the more integral my presence and teaching become in crafting a collective vision, the more they seem to impact Christian students and faculty *as Christians*.

Using Ruether's unfinished agenda related to biblical studies, I offer some reflections about my experience at CTS, illuminating what this community of progressive Protestants appears to learn from Jewish engagement with Scripture.

Teaching rabbinic interpretation

Why did Ruether promote inclusion of Jewish biblical interpretation? Presumably, she wanted to demonstrate that there is another religious community who claims the Hebrew Bible as sacred scripture, with its own equally valid exegetical tradition. This is a worthy goal. It not only brings the continuous Jewish engagement with Scripture to life, however; it also shapes how students perceive their own interpretive lenses.

I teach a course called History of Jewish Thought. Because the vast majority of Jews today are shaped by rabbinic Judaism, we spend half the semester studying rabbinic texts. As students observe how the rabbis read the biblical text through the lens of their own experience, they see more readily how the authors of the New Testament do the same. *Maaseh avot siman labanim*, the rabbis assert: That which happens to the [biblical] ancestors is a sign for their descendants.³ The Book of Lamentations speaks to the rabbis' own suffering in exile, centuries later. Esau's animosity toward Jacob reflects Roman oppression of Israel. Biblical affirmation that the covenant abides and promises of restoration continue to sustain the hope of the nation.

3. The Hebrew articulation changes (see, for example, *b. Sotah 34a*, Nachmanides on Gen 12:6), but the hermeneutical principle remains consistent.

Suddenly the students grasp the import of Walter Brueggemann's insight in *Theology of the Old Testament: Seeing "fulfillment in Jesus Christ"* of passages from the Hebrew Bible is a subsequent Christian interpretation,

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not a prophetic mystery. “. . . [T]he Old Testament (even the Old Testament as a confessional Christian document) does not narrowly or resolutely point to Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴ He maintains that such readings are among the hermeneutic possibilities

of a text overflowing with promise, but they can no longer foreclose the contextual sense of the passage or trump other interpretations. Abandoning hermeneutical supersessionism, students can still imagine Jesus as a suffering servant, for example, without seeing it as *intended* in the Book of Isaiah. This move does not diminish the inspirational capacity of Scripture; instead, equipped with a rich collection of rabbinic interpretations that identify with the servant as the people of Israel, students relate a revitalized sense of this figure's abiding relevance in the religious imagination.

Something else happens as well. Since my Jewish background trains me to embrace the multivocal and provisional exegeses of Scripture, it can still surprise me that the broad array of Protestants in my classroom frequently find it to be a new and liberating idea. Even as they study all the critical lenses that deconstruct and reconstruct meaning in the text, and even as they recognize the multiplicity that results from *sola Scriptura*, they are initially liable to expect *one* interpretation to be true (and often universal). Part of this instinct is likely a result of the misapplication of scientific theory to hermeneutics, but it also reflects the residue of doctrinal exegesis. Studying Jewish engagement with Scripture helps them re-embrace exegetical dynamism and even contradiction.

The most surprising part of this process for students is that the interpretive tradition *expands* exegetical possibilities. Many carry with them subconscious baggage of the Reformation, viewing the history of Catholic exegesis as a burden they must shed in order to free the revelatory text

4. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 109.

from its institutional confines. After coming to appreciate the multivocality of Jewish interpretation, however, they can see how the Catholic *Glossa Ordinaria* in some ways offered the same type of “conversation” as *Mikraot Gedolot*, the classic collection of medieval rabbinic commentators. Best sellers in the Middle Ages, both works collected commentary from across boundaries of time and space in ongoing engagement with the living Word. My students frequently determine that the history of exegesis does not provide satisfactory answers to their concerns, but they are astounded that almost all of their questions are raised within, alongside other compelling queries that did not even occur to them.

Jewish engagement with Scripture also reintroduces them to the art of close reading—not for a technical gloss or grammatical parsing—but to unpack possibilities of meaning. This exercise was common to all interpreters of antiquity and late antiquity, who saw their Bible as thick with hidden significance, but it is not as common among Protestant readers today.

Cain said to his brother Abel . . . and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him (Gen 3:8 JPS). In *Genesis Rabba* 22:7, the rabbis excavate the ellipsis: What words could possibly have been uttered that would prompt a man to murder his brother? The students are delighted to discover the gap in the Hebrew text that was bridged by the Septuagint, and they plunge into the archetypal sources of human conflict raised by the midrash. In a different course, students read closely a collection of Hebrew Bible passages and realize that all the primary discourses about justice today are found within: not only the retributive justice of reward and punishment but also restorative, procedural, and distributive notions of justice. It challenges and inspires them to imagine a more enlightened criminal justice system, to reconsider what combination of forces make for justice, and to think more deeply about the moral order of heaven and earth.

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Another liberative discovery is the development of faith as protest within rabbinic literature. Students understand the prophetic tradition of sacred discontent, of protesting “against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be.”⁵ Speaking truth to power appeals a great deal to these progressive Protestants, but most draw the line when it comes to speaking over against God. Jewish tradition, however, recognizes the bold precedent of Abraham, Moses, and Job and the powerful plaints made in Psalms and Lamentations; it embraces protest against God as an authentic religious posture. *Chutzpa klapei shamaya—chutzpah* over against Heaven, challenging Divine justice, questioning Divine power—paradoxically affirms faith in God by the expectations it reveals. Freed from supposed customs of proper piety to express *all* their hopes and rage and frustration and love, some students report drawing closer to God.

One of the most valuable doorways that I believe is opened by studying Jewish engagement with Scripture is a hermeneutic that develops from the requirement that we read even the ugly texts. The lectionary cycle in Judaism reads the Torah straight through, including first family dysfunction and instructions for genocide. Although it is more selective with prophetic and other texts, the readings do not shy away from problematic passages. The searing doubt of Ecclesiastes is read during Sukkot, the festival of our joy. We recite the entire Book of Esther at Purim—even the bloody retribution of the Jews upon their would-be attackers. Never mind that it is an invented tale; the text records a mighty celebration of this literary slaughter.

There are many ways in which humans circumscribe the text: Marcion’s heresy, Jefferson’s naturalism, lectionary frameworks, and selective memory all excise some of the difficulties. I frequently share with my students a poem by Yehudah Amichai with a brilliant insight about the resulting “Reader’s Digest” Bible. He claims he *tried* to edit Scripture:

I’ve filtered out of the Book of Esther
the residue of vulgar joy, and out of the Book of Jeremiah
the howl of pain in the guts. And out of the
Song of Songs the endless search
of love, and out of the Book of Genesis
the dreams and Cain, and out of Ecclesiastes

5. Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 27.

the despair and out of the Book of Job—Job.
And from what was left over I pasted for myself a new Bible.
Now I live censored and pasted and limited and in peace . . .⁶

What is he saying? Basically, he took out everything that was ethically objectionable, emotionally unbearable, or intellectually suspect—and there was not much left. He is saying a text that does not reckon with unmerited suffering and choking despair cannot speak to the human condition. A text that cannot imagine fratricide and genocide alongside liberation and holiness is surely easier to read, but it cannot tell the whole story. It would leave us censored, pasted, and limited.

“Scripture is not a Boy Scout manual,” my teacher Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf used to bellow. It does not lay out in easy steps God’s path of goodness. It is not to be read as a guidebook with all the answers. It contains the *questions*. It is a syllabus for a lifelong course in advanced ethics. Contradictions within the text, a multiplicity of interpretations, the clash with contemporary values—all these irritations are designed to create dialectical tension. We read closely, consider carefully, consult history, rub the sore spots—and we produce from the irritating grains of sand precious pearls of Scriptural instruction. We cannot simply spiritualize or ignore all the tough parts, because that is where the ethical work really happens: texts as tools of moral development.

As Jewish exegesis explores possibilities of meaning within parts of Hebrew Bible that most of our students had rarely considered, they also begin to notice what R. Kendall Soulen calls “structural supersession” in the way that early Christian commentators read the dual canon. It rendered Septuagint indecisive for Christian theology in imagining God’s redemptive plan. The essential religious narratives became creation, the Fall, the incarnation of Jesus, and the final consummation—bypassing entirely God’s involvement with the people of Israel.⁷ Eager to reclaim theologies of the Divine that are deeply invested in the incarnation of creation and the unfolding of earthly history in ways large and small, students rediscover a vast and fertile ground.

6. Yehuda Amichai, *Time: Poems*, trans. with Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 29.

7. R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 28–33.

The proto-rabbinic context of Jesus and Paul

At CTS, our professors of New Testament have been teaching the texts through a Jewish prism for many years. They present Jesus as an observant Jew and the literary assaults on the Pharisees as an internal Jewish polemic with the closest “competition.” They recognize the Jesus movement as an emerging particularity, alongside other expressions of Judaism—all struggling to maintain their identity over against the universalist imperial engine of the Greco-Roman world, even as they are also significantly impacted by it. These insights help to defuse some of the anti-Judaism that stained Christian teaching in history.

Engagement with rabbinic literature adds two critical dimensions. The more established endeavor relates to New Testament study, for which careful analysis of historical context and Jewish tradition allows us to better understand what the text may be trying to teach. For example, the Mishnah (*Yoma 8:1*) testifies that Jewish law had transformed “eye for an eye” into a system of restorative justice: One is liable to compensate the injured party for pain, for time lost from work, for medical expenses, for any permanent loss in earning potential, and for emotional suffering. No reciprocal eye gouging is involved. Redacted at the end of the second century CE, this rabbinic text is evidently recounting law already in force in the Jewish community and is important if one is to understand Jesus’ perspective in Matthew 5.

Another example is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Long treated in Christian exegesis as a critique of Jewish purity praxis—as if the priest and the Levite pass by the wounded traveler because of concerns about contact with a corpse—the passage actually says nothing of the kind, and rabbinic law makes the interpretation highly unlikely. *Mishnah Nazir 7:1* insists that even the high priest must attend to a neglected corpse without concern about contracting uncleanness. Jewish tradition also gave precedence to the possibility of saving a life (*pikuach nefesh*) over any ritual instruction.⁸ Stripping the exegesis of erroneous assumptions allows the narrative to drive home its message more effectively with the still-pressing question, “Who is

8. The Talmud most directly roots the principle in Leviticus 18:5: *You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which a person shall live; I am YHWH.* Jewish tradition generally cites the Hasmoneans’ decision to defend themselves on Shabbat in 167 BCE as the earliest recorded example.

our neighbor?" The priest and the Levite have significant responsibilities on behalf of the community—they, of all people, *should* have stopped to help—and yet they turn away. The third passerby, whom narrative logic suggests will behave differently, surprises the listener because he is not "Israel" but a Samaritan, an identity with some historical hostility toward the Judean community. Like the lesson of Jonah, we learn that human interdependency and compassion do not stop at national boundaries; they extend even to our enemies.

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It is the of study rabbinic literature for its own sake, however, that catalyzes Christian spiritual formation in new ways. We study the rabbinic *mashal* and appreciate how parables were essential pedagogical tools of the age. We look at sage stories about miracle workers and charismatics in the late Second Temple period. Honi the Circle Drawer is among the most famous. Like all the great miracle workers of his time, including Honi's grandsons Hilkiyah and Hanan, he could command the rain. Students begin to see such gifts, less as signs of special status than as Divine graces to provide what the people most desperately need. The portrait of Rabbi Hanina b. Dosa seems most illuminating to them; just a few years younger than Jesus, he cured the sick even from afar (*y. Berachot 9d*), just as Jesus healed the servant of the Roman centurion (Matt 8:5–13, Luke 7:1–10, John 4:46–54), and he also cast out demons (*b. Pesachim 112b*). Rabbi Hanina had issues with established leadership, too, driven by their concerns that his power could disrupt the status quo.

We look at rabbinic stories of preternatural infants, voices that critique imperial oppression, and efforts to distill the highest values of Jewish text and tradition that reshaped praxis and community.⁹ We examine evolving

9. Examples of preternatural infants include Moses in Josephus *Antiquities II, b. Sotah 12b, Pirqa Rabbi Eliezer 48, Midrash vaYosha*. There are a variety of reform movements at work among Second Temple Judaism: the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls inveighed against the corrupt leadership of the Temple, disciple circles of pharisees worked to interpret the text in new ways, and zealots sought to challenge the oppressive power of Rome.

Jewish ideas of messianism. For our students, especially those who prefer a Christology that emphasizes the earthly ministry of Jesus, studying these Jewish texts helps them make sense of Jesus's work. They are drawn to consider the tremendous theological implications, as Daniel Boyarin does in his most recent book¹⁰ of Jesus appearing in history in an extraordinarily normal way.

Overcoming anti-Jewish texts and traditions

Amy-Jill Levine from Vanderbilt University came to speak at CTS a few years ago, presenting her top 10 pitfalls of Christian interpretation.¹¹ Our students were surprised by how many of these errors they themselves had committed: denigrating "the law" or seeing it as an impossible burden, presuming that Jewish emphasis on praxis was how Jews imagined earning Divine love and salvation, maintaining that God stood distant in Jewish imagination until Jesus called him Abba, believing that Jews were parochial and exclusive so Paul invented universalism (like Al Gore invented the Internet), thinking that Jesus stood over against a "Temple domination system." In many ways they knew better, but when she mentioned specific New Testament texts and the history of interpretation, they recognized their own understanding.

It was true even for those who had come to appreciate how the praxis of Shabbat fashions sacred time, how *halachah* could be a dynamic embodiment of values, not a sterile diminution of Divine teaching. Even those who knew to translate Torah as Divine instruction, not law, realized they still spoke about the letter and the spirit in ways that presumed most Jews

10. Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels* (New York: New Press, 2012). For Boyarin, it is not simply Jesus's manner of teaching, his mission of reform, and his special gifts but also many of the theological tropes we consider most Christian that flow from the deep reservoir of Jewish religious imagination. Other academics and clergy have investigated related questions of Jewish precedent for what most people now identify as Christian concepts; see, for example, Israel Knohl, *The Messiah Before Jesus*, trans. David Maisel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Prayer of Joseph," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 699–714; John Shelby Spong, *Liberating the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1997).

11. A brief rendering of this list is available in Levine, "Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made about Early Judaism," *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 501–504.

of the time to have missed the point. Even those who believed that God's love is not conditional in Judaism, and that observance is about covenant and relationship rather than salvation, still recalled having set works and faith as universally oppositional paths to being saved.

Even those who had read texts in which God goes into exile with the nation and who saw how Hebrew Bible relates a deep intimacy between God and Israel, had also preached how Jesus was the first to draw God near. Even those who knew about Philo and Hellenistic influence in universal philosophy, and those who knew that rabbinic Jews also proselytized until it was ruled illegal by Christian emperors, had at times mistaken particularism for parochialism. Even those who knew of the people's deep love for the Temple and the national trauma of its destruction, had equated it with Roman oppression; they imagined that Jesus sought to topple it rather than reform it.

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How could this be? How could they have learned so much and still make the classic mistakes of interpretation? Until they connected what they studied about Jews and Judaism back with their identity as Christians, back to the preaching they had heard growing up, they could never relearn it. It was as if they no longer believed these denunciations were true but still accepted that they were surely what the New Testament taught. When I decided to come to CTS, it did not really occur to me that teaching Jewish studies here would be an important part of Christian spiritual formation; I naively thought I was simply coming to teach *about* Judaism. It is only through opening new ways of knowing themselves as Christians, however, that the Jewish teachings securely take root.

Closing reflection

These observations echo some of the emerging methodology of comparative theology, in which one's own faith is enriched and complicated by deep understanding of the discourses, perspectives, practices, and priorities of another tradition. To the extent that these concepts are assimilated into one's own theology and practice, there is the potential problem of erasure. No respectful encounter with someone else can be "all about me," even if it is motivated by a desire not to misrepresent the other and a readiness to be changed by the meeting.

This issue is especially fraught in a context of Christian privilege. Thus, in addition to teaching Judaism (and other traditions) as ontologically significant in its own right, we are working to shape an approach to theological education that is about "us." We have started small, examining curriculum and community; reinvigorating our Center for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Studies; and recruiting a self-consciously multifaith cohort that can model the transformative engagement we expect in spiritual formation. Recognizing that the Master of Divinity degree is inherently Christian in organizational structure and the societal superstructure, we are working through our range of graduate degree programs. We have also implemented a requirement in the MDiv program to pursue advanced course work in a non-Christian tradition because we believe that one cannot be a religious leader or teacher in our multifaith context without knowing something about other religions. We do not know yet where this encounter will lead us, but it draws its strength, as many things do, from our collective engagement with sacred text.

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