

How Christians Read Their Scriptures

A sermon preached at Temple Beth Torah, Fremont, California,
on Friday, February 22, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Exodus 21:1-11](#)

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I want to begin with a disclaimer. If you don't like tonight's sermon, blame your Rabbi. He suggested this pulpit exchange. I also blame Christianity in general for deciding to worship on Sundays, thus giving your Rabbi the last word in this pulpit exchange.

This sermon and the sermon Rabbi Schulman will preach on Sunday at Niles Discovery Church are the second half of a little sermon series we've been doing about the role and place of the Bible in a Progressive Christian church. Two weeks ago, I preached on the filters I use when reading and interpreting my scripture, about how we all have filters, and about how the only filters that are bad all the time are the unacknowledged filters. Anyone of any faith who says they read their sacred texts without any filter is being dishonest – with themselves as much as with anyone else. I will come back to filters in a little bit.

In her sermon last Sunday, my colleague Pastor Brenda Loreman, did a little quiz – “Bill, Ben, or the Bible,” where people were challenged to decide if a familiar quote was from William Shakespeare (Bill to his friends), Ben Franklin, or the Bible. She made several important points in her sermon. One is that there are plenty of one-liners that we think are from the Bible that aren't. Another is how dangerous it is to quote a one-liner from the Bible out of context. Brenda went on to point out the folly of thinking the Bible is a literal, unerring account of what happened, if for no other reason than it contradicts itself. If you've read 1 and 2 Chronicles, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, you've read accounts of events that differ in both detail and point of view.

The sacred texts of my faith tradition are important to my faith journey. The same could be said by any person of any faith tradition. But those sacred writings can only have an impact if we read them and engage with them.

So let me move into the topic for this sermon: How Christians read their scriptures. And just so I'm clear, when I talk about “Christian scriptures,” I'm talking about both the texts Jesus, as a Jew, considered sacred – the Torah, the Prophets, and the writings (what together I call the Hebrew scriptures) – and the stories and letters about Jesus and his followers that came to be considered by Christianity as sacred and part of official list, the official canon of Christian scripture. I will sometimes use the term “the Bible,” for instance in a moment when I quote the Franciscan Catholic Priest Richard Rohr (who inspired our sermon series). When I do, I'm referring to both the Hebrew scriptures and the additional Christian texts.

The first thing to say is that there isn't just one way Christians read their scriptures. There are some Christians who, as Richard Rohr put it, “want to pretend that the Bible fell fully produced from heaven in a zip-top bag,”¹ as if it entered the world unmediated by human writers, human errors, and human limit, or that it was not influenced by historical or cultural contexts. This view tends to want to remove the final “s” from the term “Christian scriptures,” and make it

¹ Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do With the Bible?* (Albuquerque: Center for Action and Contemplation, 2018), 32.

Christian scripture. When we started binding up into one volume all the different books that make up what gets called the “Bible,” they started to look like it. These sacred texts (plural) started to look like one book, like one text.

And they’re not. That single volume is actually a mini library and should be read that way. When the Christian scriptures are read as if they are one text, some important things need to be ignored to make sure it is cohesive – like the fact that there are two very different creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis, or that Matthew and Luke have very different narrative priorities and very different original audiences when they tell their versions of the stories about Jesus.

Another problem with the zip-top bag approach to Christian scriptures is that leads to literalism. If the Christian scriptures came to humanity from heaven directly, it must be error-free. God wouldn’t give us scriptures with errors. And if it’s error-free, then it must mean exactly what it says. And if it means exactly what it says and is error-free, then my understanding of that “exactly what it says” will surely also be error-free. And that is extremism.

And extremism is dangerous.

“Extremism,” writes Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston, “is a centrifugal force. It constantly seeks to draw what is in the center out toward the edges. It pulls societies, communities, apart. It divides through the pressure of fear. It seduces through suspicion.”² The danger, Christian scholar of the Hebrew scriptures Walter Brueggemann reminds us, is “that ‘final readings’ are toxic and eventually lead to ‘final solutions.’”³

Truth be told, almost all people who grow up in Christianity start with this sort of a literalist approach to scripture. That can be because we grow up in a faith community that uses this approach, or it can be as simple as the fact that when we are young, our brains interpret things concretely. Our brains haven’t developed the capacity for abstract and symbolic thinking. Luckily, we grow.

I like how John Dominic Crossan, a contemporary Christian theologian and scholar, put it: “My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.”⁴

Instead of the literal reading of Christian scriptures, a much better approach is a metaphorical-historical reading.⁵ Our task is to figure out, as best we can, how the ancient communities that produced and lived by these stories understood them. Then we can understand what these stories might have to say to us about our lives and our faith journeys.

² Steven Charleston, *Facebook* post, <https://www.facebook.com/steven.charleston.5/posts/10201926817639073> (posted and accessed 31 July 2013).

³ Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 6.

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, quoted online and in memes, sometimes citing his book *Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions About the Historical Jesus*.

⁵ For more on this approach to reading scripture (Jewish and Christian), I highly recommend Marcus Borg’s *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*.

As I mentioned just a few minutes ago, we also need to be aware of our filters. I have two primary filters.

When I look at the metanarratives in the Christian Scriptures, I see stories of liberation. The Exodus story is a story of God's faithfulness to oppressed slaves leading them to freedom. The story of the Babylonian exile is a story of God's faithfulness to an oppressed people during their time of exile and God's faithfulness leading to their return. The story of Jesus takes place in a time of Roman occupation. Jesus and his people were oppressed, and in inviting people to see themselves as citizens of God's empire rather than Rome's empire, Jesus invited them (as he invites us who follow him today) to stand up against the principalities and powers of oppression. So, my first filter is a filter of liberation. If a particular reading from my scriptures doesn't support liberation, it is suspect.

My second filter is reactive to the current environmental crisis. The climate crisis is a product of the Industrial Revolution. That is why there's nothing in the Christian scriptures that talks about it. There are, however, scriptures that remind us that the earth is God's (not ours) and we are called to be stewards of it – for the sake of God, for the sake of humanity (and especially the marginalized of humanity), and for the sake of all creation. If a particular reading from my scriptures doesn't support our calling to be faithful stewards of creation, it is suspect.

Let's take a look at an example. The Torah Portion for today is Exodus 21:1 to 24:18. The first eleven verses talk about slavery. "When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt." It goes on to talk about various permutations, about what happens if he gets married or has children during that time of enslavement. Then it shifts to daughters sold into slavery, where the conditions are significantly worse. This is a troublesome passage for me.

If I'm a literalist, then the passage's assumption that slavery is a given means that I should assume slavery is a given, too. If I'm a literalist, then the passage's assumption that women should be treated as property, whether they're enslaved or not, is a given means that I should assume that women should be treated as property. Luckily, I'm not a literalist.

Our metaphorical-historical approach, on the other hand, recognizes the cultural assumption for the times in which these directives were written. Slavery was a cultural given. The treating of women and children as property was a cultural given. Neither of these are cultural givens anymore. If this passage tells us anything about today, it reminds us that slavery still exists around the world, including right here in the United States where it's supposed to be abolished.

And here's where my filters – particularly the liberation filter – kick in, and I have to argue with Moses. Moses, if those rules about slavery worked for you back then, good for you. I don't think they agree with your own story of liberation from slavery. They certainly aren't going to push me to support slavery today. In fact, because they are reminding me that slavery, though outlawed, still exists, I'm going to work toward ending it.

Some Christians, and perhaps some Jews, would say that I'm rejecting part of the scriptures, that I'm taking an X-acto knife to the scriptures and excising these eleven verses, and that doing this is sacrilegious. I would argue that I'm not excising these eleven verses from the Bible; they are still there. I'm saying that the assumptions behind these verses – that slavery is a given and that women are property – are wrong. And that means these verses, these

commandments, have no application today. And I think I'm in good company doing to. Take a look at how Jesus, at least as he is presented in the gospels, treated his scriptures, that is the Hebrew scriptures.⁶

Jesus seldom quotes scripture. He never quotes from 19 of the books of the Hebrew scriptures. When he does quote scripture, he seems to have some favorites: Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Hosea, and Psalms.

While it's clear that the Hebrew scriptures were instrumental in forming his consciousness, Jesus ignores vast portions of them. In particular, he doesn't seem to care about or is outright opposed to passages "that appear to legitimate violence, imperialism, exclusion, purity, and dietary laws."⁷ Jesus "gets the deeper stream, the spirit, the trajectory of his Jewish history and never settles for mere surface readings."⁸

It's interesting to note that the one time he does quote Leviticus, he quotes one prescriptive commandment – "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" – in a book that is loaded with proscriptive commandments (you shall nots).

Jesus finds as much, and perhaps more, authority in his own experience of the divine as he does in the Hebrew scriptures, and he finds wisdom in sources other than scripture. Some of his aphorisms and perhaps some of his parables come from outside the Jewish tradition.

There are a few passages where Jesus openly, verbally disagrees with the Hebrew scriptures, and there are other stories in the gospels where Jesus' disagreement can be seen in his actions. This makes me feel freer to disagree with passages in both parts of the Christian scriptures. In the opening of his public ministry as told in Luke's gospel, Jesus simply leaves half of a verse off of a reading from the prophet Isaiah. The first part of the reading made the point Jesus was trying to make, but that pesky half verse at the end was a problem. So Jesus simply didn't read it.

Jesus feels free to use the Hebrew scriptures to defend people. He feels free to reinterpret the Torah. And he constantly draws a wider circle, bringing outsiders inside. "Well over sixty percent of Jesus' stories make the outsider the hero of the story, while criticizing the insider!"⁹

When Jesus does use his scriptures, it is "to teach a message of radical inclusivity, mercy, and justice, and to negate ... messages of exclusion, religious righteousness, and oppression of the underdog, the impure, and the sinner."¹⁰

That's how I want to read my scriptures.

Amen.

⁶ This list is taken from Rohr, *op. cit.*, 44-52.

⁷ *Ibid*, 46.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 50.