

NOTES OF INTEREST

Jacob and the Angel: Modern Readers and the Old Testament

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Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord:

And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it. (Amos 8:11–12)

If we simply open our eyes and look about us, it would seem that Amos got it wrong. In societies insulated by affluence, where life runs in routine and moves by diversion, it is visible that the word of God is something most people get along very well without. But in the lives of individuals and societies, tragedies befall, the comforts of routine and the anodyne of affluence cease to satisfy, and people are at length obliged to look for what supports life at its foundations.

In that case, Amos says it just right—nothing has been more persistent among people of the most various temperaments, circumstances, cultures, and generations than the disappearance and the seeking after the words of God, the voice of what we consider to be ultimate in the cosmos, speaking in judgment on the ways of the world, commanding duties, and offering redemption.

Where do people look for the word of God? Usually in superficial places—at the check-out stand in the supermarket, where the tabloids always have some story of life elsewhere in the universe (abduction by aliens), knowing the future (prophecies by Nostradamus or Jeanne

Dixon), or proof of the Bible, and so forth. They look for it in the popular press, where cover stories about religion always guarantee a larger than usual press run. But they also look for it in the books of scripture, the stories of what happened to others as they searched for the divine: books such as the Bagavahd Gita or the Tao Teh Ching in the East or the Qur'an or the Old or New Testaments in the West. They look for the word of God in stories of people like Jacob.

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We meet Jacob in his mid-life. From his birth, he had been an ambitious, striving, and therefore disquiet man. Even in the womb, he was in conflict with his twin brother Esau and was born "clutching at Esau's heel." It is a figure for ruse and deception which marked the course of Jacob's life. He had recourse to a ruse to get Esau's birthright. He used gross deception, he and his mother, to get the blessing of the first-born from Isaac. But when he had succeeded, Jacob found it prudent to flee rather than confront Esau or Isaac, since Esau was threatening to kill him. (Read Genesis 27ff. for the whole story.)

He then left his home country for about twenty years, during which time, in the employ of his kinsman Laban and again by the use of shrewd tactics, he became wealthy. He was always able to work an angle and turn events to his benefit. Having accumulated two wives, two concubines, eleven sons, and a daughter, he returned to his homeland and learned that the first one he would meet would be Esau, who was accompanied by several hundred armed men. Jacob therefore sent all of his household over the river and spent the night alone . . . wrestling.

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his twelve children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the daybreak.

When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak. But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go, except you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The sun arose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. (See Gen. 32:22-31)

With whom is Jacob wrestling? Jacob does not know. It is with a "man" who is more than a man. A part of his divided self? Esau? His image of Esau? An angel? God? The struggle continues through the night, neither contestant being able to best the other. Finally, his opponent dislocates Jacob's hip, but Jacob persists. His opponent then asks for release. Jacob still persists. He will not give up the struggle until he has a blessing, the blessing of knowing what God intends for him and the reunification of his divided and fragmented life. It did not suffice that twenty years previously he had had a vision, or a dream, in which he saw a great stairway reaching up to heaven and angels going up and down on it. At the head of it had stood the Lord, who told him that he, Jacob, would have an innumerable posterity and that He, the Lord, would give them the land upon which Jacob was now sleeping and, furthermore, that He would be with Jacob and protect him.

But even such a grand manifestation as this did not suffice. Jacob hedged his bets, as it were, receiving such promises conditionally: "if God protects me . . . if God provides me food and shelter . . . if God brings me back safely to my father's land . . . then the Lord shall be my God" (Gen. 28:10-22). But now he can no longer rely on deceptions or shrewd tactics. He is totally engaged in the wrestle.

The story of Jacob and the angel is a metaphor for the reading of the Old Testament which has to be entered into with seriousness of intent before it will yield its blessing. The Old Testament is the most contemporary of our scriptures. Its view of humanity is stark and unmitigated: Sin is real, evil is real, and people struggle with elemental forces for their survival. The books in it are often powerful in their statements and in their contradictions. In them we find the human questions—that is, the religious questions, which are the ones worth wrestling about. It is here also that humanity can wrestle with its own image; and many have said that, through the wrestle, they have come to see the face and experience the presence of God.

Others, it is true, report merely a dislocated hip.

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A preliminary problem: What is the name of the thing that we are

studying? And whose book is it? Four religious traditions lay claim to direct revelation as their founding warrant, and all of them accept what we call the Old Testament as revelation. They are Judaism, traditional Christianity, Islam, and in a modern day, a new kind of Christianity: Mormonism.

Within Judaism, this collection of books is known simply as the Hebrew Bible, or the Tanakh (the acronym in Hebrew for the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings). As such, it is the entirety of the revelation of God to the covenant people. It has its own integrity and its own direction.

Within Christianity, these same scriptures are called the Old Testament, implying that the first testament is not complete without a second, the New Testament. The Old Testament thereby becomes a Christian document, which it certainly was not at the beginning. It had been in existence several hundred years before there was such a thing as Christianity, but the emerging Christian church used the Hebrew Bible (in its Greek translation, the Septuagint), as its official scripture. There weren't any other scriptures for the early Christians, but they established their own interpretive position around it, and it gradually became a Christian document.

When we consult the Qur'an, which was compiled between 644 and 656 C.E., we find many references to what we call the Old Testament. The same cast of characters is spoken of as prophets or messengers whom God sent to another people. They are part of that large stream of revelations which prepare the way for the final and definitive revelation received by Mohammed. So what we call the Old Testament thereby becomes also an Islamic document.

And within Mormonism, the Old Testament has been Mormonized and has hereby become also a Mormon document, part of the Mormon canon and accepted as part of God's continuing revelation to the world over the ages.

Whose book, then, is it that we are studying? It belongs to all those who will peruse its pages and make it a part of themselves.

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Now when we cast about for the word of God, we must first of all become aware of the interpretive context we are using, which consists of the initially unidentified presupposition we make about the text, for there is no text so plain that it does not require interpretation, and no revelation

is so plain that it does not require another revelation to interpret it. Therefore, each of the four religions laying claim to direct revelation—Judaism, traditional Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism—has developed an interpretive context consisting of a set of tacit suppositions or of articulated rules that in themselves carry the authority of revelation and thus can be invoked to decide between ambiguous meanings possible in the text.

In the Jewish tradition, this interpretive context takes the form of the double Torah, i.e. the written Torah and the oral Torah. When God gave Moses the written law, the Torah, he also gave another set of verbal teachings for the interpretation of the Torah, which was not to be written but passed on verbally from generation to generation. Eventually, much of this accumulated interpretation was compiled in the Talmud, a summary of oral law and practical wisdom which represents Judaism's traditional understanding of the Torah.

In the Roman Catholic way, the interpretive context of the scriptures is made up of the traditions of the Church, i.e., the teachings of the apostles and Church fathers as handed down verbally within the church. Catholics have often argued, therefore, against Protestants that ambiguous passages of scripture cannot be rightly interpreted without the tradition of the original prophets and Church fathers who said how they should be interpreted.

Protestantism held to the written text and supposed it would itself provide the keys to its interpretation. For example, early in the Protestant tradition, when Luther was translating the Old Testament into German, he would come upon a verse where two meanings were possible. In such cases he would choose the one nearest to the meaning of the Christian gospel. A presupposition about the gospel thus served automatically as a yardstick.

An example of this procedure can also be seen in the King James translation of Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive." The word translated as *virgin* can also be translated just as well as *young woman*. *Virgin* is used, presumably, because it fits better with the preestablished doctrine of the virgin birth. The Old Testament thus becomes the prelude to the New Testament, needing the New Testament to complete it. The Old Testament thus de facto becomes a Christian document.

In the Qur'an, we also find materials of the Old Testament referred to as authentic parts of God's revelation given in preparation for the final revelation given to the final prophet, Mohammed. The Qur'an recounts

the calling and testing of Abraham as the friend of God, but relates that it was Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael, whom he saw in a dream that he was to offer up. Since Ishmael also surrendered to the will of God, both became prophets of Islam. In fact, the Qur'an even accepts the virgin birth of Jesus, which Muslims interpret according to their own presuppositions. Since God is all-powerful, it costs Him no more to create a soul without sexual intercourse than with it, which marks Jesus as a great prophet, but not as the son of God, since God has no partners. Again, the interpretive context acts as the fulcrum by which the interpretation is moved.

Mormonism likewise, from its earliest beginnings, has had its own interpretive context by which Mormons attribute meanings to the Old Testament. This context came from a double source: (1) the widespread practice in early American churches of giving a literal meaning to the text, and (2) the early revelations given to Joseph Smith, especially in the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, and the Book of Abraham.

There is much richness in the interpretive contexts of each of these religions, in that they all engage the mind and the spirit of the reader in seeking greater understanding and deeper meaning. They all have the one drawback, however, that they tend to be Procrustean.

Procrustean? Yes, Procrustes was the robber chief of antiquity who had an iron bedstead in his cave, upon which he would place any prisoner which he took. If the prisoner were too short, Procrustes would stretch him out. If he were too long, he would cut him off. No one could say exactly how tall a prisoner was going into the cave, but he could be sure how tall anyone was coming out.

Is it possible to give a neutral, *objective* reading of any of the Old Testament texts? No. We cannot make the merest use of language without all of the subjective elements of our past experience and culture. However, we should first read simply to see what the text says as a story or statement, without having to make it fit into some previously established doctrine. Beyond that, we should read what biblical scholars have laid out through contemporary scholarship for an inquiring modern reader.

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We should steer clear of the morass of modernism and postmodernism, except to note that modernism is the project of the Enlightenment (which was, to use Descartes's phrase, to "make man the mas-

ter and possessor of nature” on the basis of a sure and unshifting knowledge). Postmodernism is the perception that the project did not work. Everything currently being said about these two notions can, I believe, be fitted under these two rubrics.

The mischief in the use of these two terms is that they suggest that one came after the other. Actually, every idea connected with postmodernism was present from the beginning and every stage of formation of the modern spirit. Every time the bright angel of reason sounded the trumpet call of progress, the slouchy devil of doubt was there to whisper over the collective shoulder, “It’ll never work,” speaking through the voices of David Hume, Jonathan Swift, Pierre Bayle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, even Denis Diderot, and hosts of lesser figures.

I take another notion of “modern.” Modern readers are those who do not remain satisfied in the time of their maturity with the understandings they had in their youth and who therefore feel impelled to rethink their beliefs in the light of a new time. Except in an unchanging world, each generation has its own aspect of modernity.

The modern reader who wishes to read the Bible in translation has many and varied options available. Prior to World War II, the English-speaking reader had few choices other than the King James Version. Although many English translations had been made since 1611, the KJV, the Revised Version (1881), and the American Standard Version (1901) were the most popular choices. The KJV retains value as a literary document and as an important influence on the English language, but its weakness as a translation and use of outdated terms makes it difficult to use for the average reader today. But in 1922 James Moffatt’s *The Bible: A New Translation* and Smith’s and Goodspeed’s *The Bible: An American Translation* broke new ground by applying a coherent theory of translation that demanded strict standards of content and style. These translations were very influential for future translation efforts.

Different translations available today seek to redress different shortcomings of earlier versions. Some, such as the Revised Standard Version (1953), depend strongly on the language of the KJV and the Revised Version. The New American Standard Bible chooses to translate the text very literally, without interpreting some of the idioms of the original language. Others such as the New English Bible (1970) provide a much freer and more interpretive translation. Even more colloquial is the Good News Bible (1976), which was intended to reach beyond church readers to a wider

audience. Colloquial translations must be used with caution; sometimes the text is interpreted beyond the bounds of its context.

Other traditions have joined the dialogue. The Jewish Publication Society published a valuable translation of the Hebrew Bible in 1962 that treats that text as the Jewish Hebrew Bible rather than the Christian Old Testament.

The choice of translations and versions is now so broad that, in considering which to use, the reader should decide what he or she wishes to draw from the text. The Bible can be read for devotion, liturgy, literature, mythology, or critical study. Each translation tends to emphasize one or more of these purposes over others. Unlike most readers of the past, these issues have an impact on modern readers, whether they realize it or not.

For all their sophistication, the arts of the modern translator have not removed the ambiguity and dissonance from the biblical text. Nor should they. By highlighting or expanding these characteristics for all to see, they do us a service. The difficulty and ambiguity of the Old Testament are what give it so much of its value, a value plumbed when we measure ourselves against this encapsulation of the human experience seeking to wring a blessing from the divine. Now, more than ever before, the wrestling match continues.