

How Jesus Understood the Bible

Jesus said: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not abolish but to fulfil' (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus was a Jew and as a Jew it would be unthinkable that he would have thought of Scripture as being anything other than a revelation of God's will. But his mission to Israel was to reveal his Father's will in a new and radical way: that meant interpreting Scripture in a way which would challenge the Jewish authorities notably the scribes and the Pharisees and open the eyes of ordinary people to see God's Kingdom as being accessible to them.

So how was he to do this?

For centuries before Jesus Jewish teachers or scribes had developed a method of interpreting Scripture, or the Law and Prophets (as it was often referred to), which the later rabbis called midrash. Midrash means literally 'to seek out God's will' through discussion, debate, drawing analogies, comparing different passages of scriptures with each other, telling stories and so on. By Jesus' day the sayings and teachings of many of the scribes or teachers of the law were treated as having almost equal authority with the Law and were referred to as the Oral Law or the Traditions of the Elders.

So, that is where we often see Jesus, amongst the scribes and Pharisees fiercely debating scripture with the common aim of understanding the will of God better.

Let's look at one particularly significant debate over the issue of divorce. The Law of Moses was clear on the matter. Deuteronomy 24 states that divorce is permissible if a man 'finds something objectionable about her [his wife]'. But what exactly does 'objectionable' mean? Views amongst the rabbis in Jesus' day were divided: some considered it would have to be for something serious such as adultery, but others thought it could be for something much more trivial such as failing to carry out housewifely duties.

Jesus' interpretation itself is ambiguous, and has been much debated, but what he does is at the heart of midrash and that is to ask the question: what is God's intention, what is marriage fundamentally about? To answer this Jesus uses a midrash method which is to use another passage from Scripture. In this case where better than to quote from Genesis where God's plans for his creation are set out. Genesis 2:24 states God's intention is that 'a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and the two become one flesh'. But to this Jesus goes further by adding his explanation, 'therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate' (Mark 10:9). Jesus' interpretation of Scripture is intended to make one think: what is God's fundamental purpose of human relationships? It is not that he has given a definitive answer, it is the nature of midrash that we should continue to ask and debate an answer today.

So, we see that in line with the other rabbis of his day Jesus was no literalist – Scripture cannot be read off as if each word of scripture has a simple meaning; quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10 he warns that those who fail to look beyond superficial meaning of scripture will ‘listen but not understand’ (Mark 4:12) and remain outsiders to the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ warning message is clear for us to today – we have to struggle with scripture and be open to new meaning, for every age presents new situations which require fresh interpretations.

It may surprise us to know that Jesus had to struggle with the interpretation of scripture and its meaning. The Temptations are a window into his inner thoughts. The setting in the wilderness is of course meant to make us think back to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness as they encountered many temptations. But Jesus’ temptations are in the form of a rabbinic debate in which Satan poses three scriptural challenges. The first temptation to turn stones into bread; Jesus’ reply from Deuteronomy 8:3 is that true bread or sustenance is to trust in God. In the next temptation the question is quite reasonably posed from Psalm 91:11-12, that if he is the Son of God then God will protect him. Jesus counters this with another quotation from Deuteronomy 6:16, that the failure of the Israelites was to tempt God into performing signs for them; Jesus’ life, on the other hand, is one of faithful obedience. The final temptation recalls how in Deuteronomy Moses was shown the panoramic of the promised land; now Jesus contemplates whether he is to be a political messiah and he finds his answer in Deuteronomy 6:13 that he is to worship God alone.

Jesus’ temptations prompt us to question, how are we to interpret scripture? Do we only read Bible passages which confirm what we’d like to hear, or do we struggle with harder parts of the Bible? How do we interpret these difficult passages with other parts of the Bible?

‘I have come not to abolish but to fulfil’. I hope you can see how Jesus used scripture in his teaching to fulfil God’s will. But not all his interpretation of scripture was in dispute and conflict. The final way in which he fulfilled scripture and that was to live it. At his very first sermon in Nazareth, Jesus read from Isaiah 61 and announced that today in their hearing Isaiah’s vision of social reform was fulfilled. In other words, he claimed to be the ‘anointed who would bring good news to the poor’ (Luke 4:18). It is not that Isaiah was talking about Jesus, but that Jesus interpreted Isaiah’s prophecy as the blueprint for his mission to the ordinary people and in particular to the marginalised.

That leads us to ask of ourselves: how much do we allow the Bible to change us and we in turn to change the world?

Jesus’ final mortal words from the cross, were from Psalm 22, ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’ Jesus lived, breathed and died Scripture. He offered us ways of understanding and interpreting scripture. Lent gives us the opportunity to reflect on his methods and how we might reapply them to the pressing issues which confront us today.

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