

Shabbat – Friday, March 13, 2009 – A sermon preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell, Beth Hillel Synagogue, Bloomfield, CT

Exodus 30.11-34.35

Shabbat Shalom. Thank you so much for inviting me to celebrate Shabbat with you this week and for the opportunity to speak. Ostensibly my topic is *Hearing Hebrew Scripture With Christian Ears*. I'd like to explain how and why Hebrew tradition and scripture are at the root of Christian experience. It occurs to me to explain something about Christian scripture first, especially the Gospels, which attempt to explain the Jesus story.

Perhaps you won't be entirely surprised to learn that many Christians—perhaps most—forget that Jesus was a Jew. This Palestinian man—a man completely of your tradition—was apparently well versed in the Hebrew scriptures and keenly involved in issues facing the Jewish people during his lifetime. (And, I hasten to add, he certainly could not have looked like the tall, blue-eyed Norwegian guy with a nicely kempt beard and snow-white robe we see in modern depictions.)

We know a few things about Jesus because a Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* on behalf of the Romans in about 90 of the Common Era. Josephus refers in two passages to the career of Jesus and his crucifixion by Pilate, the Roman governor.

We also have some information about Jesus because many, many so-called Gospels (*evangelion* – “good news”) were written offering various versions of his life and teachings. In addition, and, in fact the earliest writings about Jesus, come from a Jewish Pharisee-turned-Christian named Saul. After his conversion, he became known as Paul.

Paul says very little about the life of Jesus. His focus is far more theological. And, the myriad Gospels, likewise, are written for theological reasons to communities of people—some to synagogue congregations—struggling to decide whether to continue as faithful Jews or whether to become what I call Christ-ian Jews.

Sometime in the 3rd century, four of these Gospel writings formed the core of the Christian canon, not unlike your five books of the Torah which are at the core of your scriptures. You may have heard of them: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.

The first, Mark, was probably written in about the year 70 of the Common Era or 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. Many passages

can be understood with reference to things that were happening to the Jewish community at the time Mark was writing. The destruction of the Temple is one example. It may have been that Mark, whoever he was, wrote in order to preserve the oral record and tradition of his Christ-ian Jewish sect, for, as you know, the threat to the Jewish people as a whole and to their traditions was severe following the rebellion that began in the year 66. Indeed, there were not only terrible persecutions of Jews, but also of early Christ-ians by Nero and other Roman emperors.

Please know that the Gospels are not journalistic accounts of the life of Jesus. Nor are they histories. Rather, they are a combination of memory, classic Jewish midrash, theology and an effort to package the Jesus story in religious terms. Perhaps with the exception of Luke, the Gospels were distinctly Jewish writings for Jewish people, albeit Christ-ian Jews.

In sum, the hard historical information we have about Jesus, the Palestinian Jew from Nazareth, is quite limited. In recent times, however, dozens of historians have begun to tease out who the historical Jesus actually might have been. These scholars are not so interested in the theological representation of Jesus as the Church depicts him, but as who he was as an active member of the Jewish community of his day.

So basically, that's my introduction. Jesus was a Palestinian Jew who was steeped in the tradition of the Jewish people. The question, now, is how did the Hebrew scriptures, with which Jesus was so familiar, play in the ears of Christ-ians? And, why are they so integral to Christian worship today?

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We are 2000 years removed from the experiences of our ancestors, both Jewish and Christ-ian. It may be difficult for us to understand or accept that the earliest followers of Jesus very much felt they were Jews. The religious tree of Abraham, so deeply rooted in centuries of tradition by the time Jesus came along, was throwing off two distinct branches. The primary one, we now know, became the rabbinic Judaism of your practice—in contrast to Judaism centered in Temple worship. The second branch on the tree of Abraham was the sect I am calling Christ-ian Jews.

For many reasons, almost all having to do with the Hebrew scripture and certain expectations of the Jewish people at the time, the Christ-

ians looked back into the scripture and tradition to explain for themselves who Jesus was to them. They then used that material to write the Jesus story itself in the form of the Gospels.

There is a term for this: *midrash*. Roughly speaking, midrash is an ancient Hebrew writing style or interpretive technique whereby material from the past is brought forward to the present and used to explain something. Let me give you a brief example of what I mean using the single phrase *good news*, which is actually what the word “gospel” means, *evangelion* in Greek.

Here is Mark’s Gospel’s opening sentence: “*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.*” Please excuse the reference to Jesus as Son of God here in the synagogue. I’m not trying to be theological but instructive. *Good News* is a catch word in Christianity. It occurs to me, however, to ask where Mark—or maybe Jesus himself—got this idea of *good news*.

Well, consider Isaiah 61.1: “*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring **good news** to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favor,*” etc. Or, listen to what Isaiah 52.7 says: “*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings **good news**, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’*”

You see, those fellow-Jewish countrymen and women, early followers of Jesus, reached deep into the Hebrew scriptures and tradition by way of explaining for themselves the Jewishness of the Jesus’ story. Obviously, most Jews at the time disagreed with this Christ-ian understanding and they remained in the fold.

At some point, somewhere, for some particular congregation, the conflict between traditional Judaism and the up-start Christ-ian sect came to a head. The elders in the synagogue prevailed and the messianic believers needed to leave. But, because they identified themselves as Jews, the Christ-ians could hardly abandon their tradition and rituals—the rich Torah and weekly Shabbat, for example.

The result? Christ-ians would celebrate Shabbat as always—from sunset Friday until sunset Saturday. Why not? That’s what they always did. It was bred in the bone. They would listen to the Hebrew scriptures, sing psalms, hear a commentary on the Torah and celebrate fellowship much as you do today.

But Christians had an additional ritual, one that was not from the Hebrew tradition. It is called the Eucharist—from the Greek word, *eucharisteō*—which means “to be thankful”. This ritual centers on eating bread and drinking wine in memory of Jesus and it was carried out on the first day of the week, the day Mary Magdalene discovered Jesus had vanished from the tomb. (We won’t go into resurrection theology this evening, although I believe that too comes from Jewish expectations, especially ones associated with Daniel.)

So, if you’re keeping track, these newly minted Christians worshiped in the Jewish tradition on Friday—Shabbat—and in their own, evolving way on Sunday with the Eucharist.

For reasons long lost to history, various congregations of Christians made a monumental decision—to move their Shabbat worship to Sunday and combine it with the celebration of the Eucharist.

This must have been a profoundly difficult move. Yet, it simplified worship and established an independence for Christianity’s branch of the Abrahamic tree. Perhaps this is when Christian Jews ceased considering themselves Jews and singularly identified with their new religion.

If you were to attend a Sunday service at Old St. Andrew’s, you would notice that the first half of our worship is very similar to Shabbat. We begin by reading a selection from the Hebrew scriptures—this week happens to be Exodus 20.1-7—and singing a Psalm. We then read our Christian scripture. Following a sermon, a statement of belief, some prayers and a confession of sins, we greet each other with the *Kiss of Peace* which is identical to the greeting *Shalom*.

This *Kiss of Peace* ritual is like a hinge in our worship service, for it concludes the Shabbat-inspired part of worship and shifts us into the Eucharist.

So, you see, hearing the Hebrew scriptures week-by-week, provides Christian people with an important touch-stone to Jesus’ own tradition as a practicing Jew. As I said earlier, much of the Jesus story is directly inspired by Hebrew scripture (*midrash*). Moreover, if the ancient Jewish scriptures inspired and informed Jesus himself, we need to pay attention to them.

Besides, much of Hebrew scripture has set the standard for human behavior for three millennia. Although Christians may not adhere to all of the behavioral codes—like kosher—there needs to be a deep and

abiding respect for the Jewish heritage out of which the Church evolved.

Would most modern Christians agree with the way in which I tell this story? I don't know. Maybe, maybe not.

As I mentioned at the outset, many Christians neglect Jesus' background as a Palestinian Jew and focus only on the religion founded after his death. Which brings us to conclude with one of the most interesting hypothetical questions hanging around: What would Jesus think today of the Church which purports to represent his teaching, life and death and, what, too, would he think of Judaism as you practice it here at Beth Hillel?

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you. I look forward to Rabbi Atkins' visit to the pulpit at Old St. Andrew's in a couple of weeks. Please remember that our congregations will share a learning Seder at 7 p.m. on Monday evening, March 30th at OSA. Until then, Shalom.

Amen.

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