

OPENING MINDS TO THE SCRIPTURES

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Today is Ascension Sunday in the Christian calendar, and the lectionary gives us a readingⁱ in which the risen Jesus intones some final words to his disciples before he blesses them and is then carried up into heaven: “Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then, we’re told that Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” What exactly did that mean at the time, and what has it meant for members of the Christian Church ever since? How are we supposed to open our minds to understand the scriptures?

Of course, the scriptures that Jesus was talking about are what we now call the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament. The earliest New Testament scriptures weren’t written for a generation after his death. Throughout his earthly life Jesus referenced the Old Testament scriptures primarily in relation to his central proclamation that that the Kingdom of God was breaking into the world on earth now and soon would come in all its glory. When he was asked how to enter the Kingdom of God, Jesus responded that one must keep the commandments in the law of Moses, the Torah. He said, “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”ⁱⁱ But according to today’s gospel lesson, after his death and resurrection the ascending Jesus claimed that the law of Moses had been written about him, Jesus – as had the books of the prophets and the psalms of the Hebrew Bible. To open one’s mind to understand the scriptures then meant to read what Christians came to call the Old Testament as a

foretelling of the New Testament story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,ⁱⁱⁱ someone born some 1300 years after Moses.^{iv}

This is where it becomes crucial to understand how and when the New Testament itself was written and became scripture in its own right. The earliest texts are the Apostle Paul's letters, which most scholars think were produced starting around 50 A.D. Mark is the earliest of the gospel accounts, probably written around 70 A.D. Matthew and Luke followed between 80-95 A.D. and John likely sometime after 100 A.D.^v Each of the writers were responding to particular issues, needs, and questions in their particular time and place.

Paul was the great apostle to the Gentiles, traveling across what are now Turkey and Greece to Rome.^{vi} Mark was probably writing in crisis, during the time of the Jewish war with Rome that culminated in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D.^{vii} Matthew, writing well after the temple's destruction, seems to be pitting the followers of Jesus against other Jewish teaching authorities called scribes and Pharisees.^{viii} Luke, probably written even a decade or so later, seems to be trying to connect Jewish tradition to the larger gentile world, seeing the church as a pluralistic community of Jews and Gentiles, Romans and non-Romans.^{ix} John, likely writing at the beginning of the second century A.D., seems out of touch with the other three gospel writers, and presents a hostile view of the relations between mainstream Jews and the followers of Jesus back in Israel, likely because John's Christians had been disciplined by synagogue authorities and painfully separated from the Jewish society of which they'd considered themselves a part.^x

Now, Luke, in describing Jesus' ascension speech some 60 years after his crucifixion, portrays Jesus' ministry as the fulfillment of some 1300 years of Jewish history, even as Jesus has just been condemned by the mainstream Jewish authorities and then executed by their overlords, the Romans. To understand the scriptures, then, is to understand them in this

particular context: both Luke's, at the time he's writing as part of a Christian community that's been developing for several generations, and Jesus's context earlier when he was executed after overturning tables and driving people he didn't like out of the temple in Jerusalem in the midst of the Passover season.

It's my thesis that opening our minds to understand the scriptures is a combination of both striving to fathom the context in which they were originally produced and also striving to fathom the context in which they are later applied to the particular questions, issues, and needs of a subsequent time in history. It's not surprising, nor lamentable, that we open our minds to the scriptures through the lens of our current time and place. That's what makes the scriptures live, remain relevant and helpful and hopefully even transformational.

So, now I'd like to look with you at the New Testament scriptures, which are largely about Jesus of Nazareth, and ask how we might understand them in this twofold way. I'm guided in this endeavor by an incredibly well-researched and insightful book by the late Yale historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, entitled *Jesus Through the Centuries*.^{xi}

In his earliest portrayals by the developing Christian community in their writings, Jesus was seen as a Jew and as a rabbi. He was described this way and known this way not only by his immediate followers but also by others. The apostle Peter addresses him as rabbi more than once in the gospel of Mark;^{xii} so do disciples of John the Baptist, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, and all of his own disciples, in the gospel of John.^{xiii} Like other rabbis of his time, he taught in question and answer form and also by parables.^{xiv} He's also seen early on as a prophet of Israel -- as one within the Jewish tradition who spoke authoritatively in the name of God.^{xv} A Samaritan woman called him a Jewish prophet,^{xvi} the crowds he spoke to in Jerusalem about the coming Kingdom of God regarded him as a prophet,^{xvii} and Jesus referred to himself as a prophet.^{xviii} Jesus also became known as the Messiah, as the great turning point in history, the fulfillment of all that had

come before in Israel and the harbinger of a new and transformed future.^{xix} Indeed, his being seen as the turning point in history was marked throughout the Western world eventually by the division of time into B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini, or “In the year of the Lord”).^{xx}

By the time that the first Roman emperor was converted to Christianity in the fourth century and the first ecumenical council was convened by this emperor, Constantine, at Nicea to establish consensus on church doctrine, including seeing Jesus as identical with God and banishing church fathers who saw him as only human, [by then] the most important way of thinking about Jesus was identifying him with the Greek concept of logos, or word. The clearest biblical proof text here was the first verse of the gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”^{xxi} Logos or Word has been variously defined as mind, power, reason, structure, purpose, and more.^{xxii}

Jesus by the fourth century had become the mind and the reason of the cosmos itself. Faith in Jesus, far from being irrational, was now seen as connected to that which was the most mindful and the most reasonable. Later in history, at the time of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this more than one thousand year-old tradition of logos allowed many members of the church, but not all, to welcome and participate in scientific investigations, which depended upon the assumption that there is a rational order in the universe. Hence, laypeople like Galileo, Newton and Descartes and clergy like Copernicus and Mendel could proceed with their scientific research, thinking they were doing God’s work, the work of the Logos. The dominance of Logos also led to the rejection of astrology and other forms of arbitrariness and chance in the universe in favor of affirming the regularity and the rationality of the cosmos.^{xxiii}

With Francis of Assisi, born into a merchant family in the twelfth century and later rejecting wealth for voluntary poverty, there came to be a special emphasis on imitation of Jesus as the compassionate advocate for the poor and dispossessed.^{xxiv} Jesus, according to Luke, had said he came to bring good news to the poor^{xxv} and, according to Matthew, had told his disciples that, as they cured the sick and served in other ways, they were to “give without payment, take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey.”^{xxvi} Along with detachment from material wealth, Francis was noted for his love of nature.^{xxvii} One of the greatest Christian hymns attributed to him is the Canticle of the Sun, which elevates the burning sun, silver moon, mother earth, flowers and fruits, and all creatures of our God and King.^{xxviii} Hallowed now as an early Christian environmentalist,^{xxix} Francis has been compared to prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures like Isaiah who proclaimed that we “shall go out in joy...the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands.”^{xxx}

Despite the bloody history of wars fought in Jesus’ name, he was also held up in various eras, from the pre-Constantine early church to communities of modern conscientious objectors, as the Prince of Peace.^{xxxi} His words in the Sermon on the Mount are quoted: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9), and historic peace churches like the Quakers and the Mennonites as well as modern prophets like Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu base their commitment to nonviolent social action on his example of turning the other cheek and loving one’s enemies.

In the modern era, Jesus has also been seen as the great liberator.^{xxxii} As the Apostle Paul explained in his Letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus...For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”^{xxxiii} In the debate over slavery in the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, “Both sides

appealed to the text of the Bible and the authority of the person of Jesus. Both sides, as Abraham Lincoln said in the Second Inaugural of 4 March 1865, ‘read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other.’^{xxxiv} Paul’s Letter to Philemon in fact was used as a pro-slavery, anti-liberation proof text:^{xxxv} Paul informs a slaveholder named Philemon that he is sending a runaway slave of his back to him in order “to do nothing without your consent.” (Philemon 1:14) 212 “Yet the spirit of the epistle to Philemon, if not the letter, did call the institution of slavery into question.” As Paul wrote, he was returning Philemon to his slaveowner “In order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced...so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.”^{xxxvi}

Renowned abolitionists like James Russell Lowell evoked Jesus as Liberator. So also writers like Leo Tolstoy, as he advocated for Russians peasants’ ending their feudal oppression, and activists like Gandhi, as he cited Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in his nonviolent struggle to free the Indian subcontinent from British rule. Of course, in the twentieth century, clergy like Martin Luther King, Jr. invoked Jesus as Liberator in the American civil rights struggle.^{xxxvii} This month President Obama came out in favor of same-sex marriage, noting different current understandings of scripture, but saying that he and the first lady “are both practicing Christians,” and “when we think about our faith, the thing at root that we think about is, not only Christ sacrificing himself on our behalf, but it's also the golden rule — you know, treat others the way you would want to be treated.”^{xxxviii}

So, in conclusion, how are we to open our minds to understand the scriptures, especially when opposite interpretations seem to be so easily reached? The answer, I think, is by going through a genuine, conscientious process, even knowing that different judgments can result. The Christian community throughout history has strived to understand both original context and

meaning from a myriad of biblical writers and also current context and meaning, by applying commandments and parables and stories and sayings to our present realities, as best we can, trying to further a more humane view of life and humane basis for action. The whole enterprise could be abandoned, of course, as logically incoherent and historically conditioned. But the same could be said for other sources of wisdom from which we derive our moral and spiritual inspiration, like art and secular literature, as well as reason and science.

Albert Schweitzer once said, “Each successive epoch found its own thoughts in Jesus, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live.”^{xxxix} The historian Arthur O. Lovejoy, saw the history of Christianity not as a single unit, but rather as “a series of facts which, taken as a whole, have almost nothing in common except...reverence for a certain person.”^{xl} So, “Come, [Jesus]...Fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing your grace... [For you] sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God...Here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for your very own.”^{xli} Amen.

BENEDICTION

Because of those who came before, we are.

In spite of their failings, we have faith.

Because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision, we, too, dream.

Let us go remembering to praise, to live in this moment,

To love mightily, and to bow to the mystery. (Barbara Pescan)

NOTES

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- ⁱ Luke 24: 44-53.
- ⁱⁱ Matthew 19:16-26; See also Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, pp. 486-487.
- ^{iv} *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 676.
- ^v Harold Attridge, *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), pp. 1666, 1722-1723, 1760, 1815, 1972-1973.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, pp. 1972-1973.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 1722-1733.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 1666-1667.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, pp. 1759-1761.
- ^x *Ibid.*, pp. 1814-1816.
- ^{xi} Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).
- ^{xii} Mark 9:5; 11:21
- ^{xiii} John 1:38; 3:2; 4:31)
- ^{xiv} Pelikan, *Jesus*, p. 13.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ^{xvi} John 4:19.
- ^{xvii} Matthew 21:46; Luke 7:16.
- ^{xviii} Mark 6:4.
- ^{xix} Pelikan, *Jesus*, p. 21.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- ^{xxi} John 1:1.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.
- ^{xxv} Luke 4:18.
- ^{xxvi} Luke 10: 9-10.
- ^{xxvii} Pelikan, *Jesus*, p. 138.
- ^{xxviii} *Hymns for the Celebration of Life* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1964), p. 23).
- ^{xxix} "Francis and Nature," <http://www.franciscans.org.au/spirituality/index.htm>
- ^{xxx} Isaiah 55:12
- ^{xxxi} Pelikan, *Jesus*, p. 168.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- ^{xxxiii} Galatians 3:28; 5:1.
- ^{xxxiv} Pelikan, *Jesus*, p. 209.
- ^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- ^{xxxvi} Philemon, 1:14-16.
- ^{xxxvii} Pelikan, *Jesus*, pp. 210-215.
- ^{xxxviii} Laurie Goodstein, "Churches Divided on Gay Marriage," *New York Times News Service*, May 19, 2012.

^{xxxix} Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. William Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 4.

^{xl} Pelikan, *Jesus*, p. 4.

^{xli} Robert Robinson, "Come, O Fount of Every Blessing," 1758.