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TEACHING THE BIBLE AS A “TROUBLING TEXT”

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The most worthwhile text I am obliged to teach is the Bible. It is also one of the most troubling texts.

The opportunity to teach the Bible arose in the context of the undergraduate offerings in Religion at Boston University, where I straddle the fields of scripture and interpretation on the one hand and modern Jewish thought on the other.

“RN101The Bible” is offered as a general service course to the undergraduate population. It meets distribution requirements and attracts students from all disciplines. Because it combines Tanakh and New Testament, the sizeable observant Jewish population on campus keeps its distance and I am confronted mostly with decent suburban white Catholics and a few Protestants. In a recent poll conducted by the university’s alumni magazine *Bostonia*, not a single one of my 60 students identified him- or herself as not believing in God or a higher being. I am responsible for teaching the Bible to conventionally pious, nice kids.

Of course, the Bible I present to them is nothing like the one they expected to read. A sizeable chunk of my task and that of my teaching fellow, Lesleigh Cushing, is defamiliarization. Instead of the merciful God

of their Sunday schools, students find a mixture of echoes of ancient Near Eastern mythology, a YHWH who almost destroys all of the human race and who is so interested in his own fame that he hardens Pharaoh's heart beyond the ordinary measure of royal stubbornness, prolonging suffering in order to make the salvation appear all the more miraculous. After half a semester, the students begin to articulate the degree to which they find disorienting what they read in the Bible. They express, with apologies, that they find the God of Genesis and Exodus not to conform at all to the image of a kind and loving God they were taught to believe in. Instead, they are faced with a willful, impatient, and cruel deity. Although such observations are hardly a novelty in the history of the interpretation of the Bible, they are novel to the students themselves. Despite the fact that I am aware of the effect critical study of the Bible can have on the mind of a devout believer in the divinity of Scripture, I am still amazed at the impact this course has on these particular students with whose education, or at least with an important part of it, we have been entrusted.

I used to be convinced that it is an end in itself to acquaint students at a liberal arts college with the history of critical scholarship on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. It seemed to me to allow students to undergo an enlightening experience. They would come out on the other end as more sophisticated and philosophically contemporaneous modern individuals with a healthy dose of criticism of religion and religious institutions. However, it seems to me that what really happens is what happened all along in modern culture: people become less respectful of the Torah as the basic text and their real (Christian) faith emerges pretty much unfazed or even reinforced.

In our discussions what emerges as highly troubling are the following issues:

- a) Teaching Hebrew Bible and New Testament in one and the same course and offering as the textbook a single volume edition, as we have in the past, unduly privileges the Christian interpretation of the Bible. Students are enabled, at least for as long as the New Testament is not itself the subject of discussion, to harbor the

illusion that Jesus, the suburban God of mercy, will reemerge as the hero of the Bible. The OT is thereby too easily dismissed. When we had more Jewish students in the classroom, this problem was mitigated by the latter's attachment to the texts.

- b) The students are irritated by the dissolution of "religious" meaning and significance of the text that is achieved by filtering the text through the lenses of ANE parallels and Higher Criticism/documentary hypothesis. If everything is, in the final analysis, a matter of interpretation, so they are tempted to think, faith is deprived of its most solid foundation. This disenchantment can be compared to the account of Tacitus on Pompeius' entering the Holy of Holies and finding — *gur nisht*. The potentially anti-Jewish implications are evident.
- c) To teach Scripture as a cornerstone of the Western imagination in literature and the arts is of no real meaning to students who are on a quest for the grounding of their personal spiritual home in the biblical tradition. In contrast to the population at other universities or even to other generations of students, the current bunch is not moved to great bursts of enthusiasm if one points out to them the self-evident significance of the social and political dimension of biblical literature and the inherent rationality and morality of the (ideal) covenantal constitution inherent in the Torah. The ancestral laws of early Judaism and the current search for spirituality are worlds removed from each other.

My gripe with the course I teach does not lead me to believe that Higher Criticism must be abandoned in the context of liberal arts education. But it seems as if the distance from critical scholarship to responsible and intelligent education on the Bible is much more significant than I thought.

Of course, the problems we face are not entirely dissimilar to those dealt with in the sciences. Students are confronted with cultural constructs ('achievements') that developed over the course of centuries or even millennia, that are often counter-intuitive, and that took immense work and great genius to discover. Unfortunately, students and instructors are forced to neglect the element of the time that it takes to absorb the nuances

of great developments and leaps in cultural history and cover them, instead, in a matter of weeks. There is not enough time to ponder, not enough time for close readings, not enough room to allow the individual pacing necessary for the absorption of complex re-castings of the relationships between various symbolic orders. It is as if one were to force students to learn a language by lecturing about it.

To get beyond our pedagogical impasse we may be aided by the very strategies that concern us as Textual Reasoners. Perhaps the first error to be taken on is contained in the unhelpful dichotomization of text and interpretation. If we can demonstrate that the text always and by its very nature has been in need of interpretation, then we are free to consider the various communities of interpretation as on a par with one another. We can overcome the undue privileging of one interpretation over the other and retrieve the sense of peaceful competition that may have been possible before the Roman Empire forcibly privileged one interpretation over all others.

From the very outset of its promulgation under Ezra, the text was in need of translation and interpretation. The language gap between spoken Aramaic and written Hebrew alone made the Torah and its accompanying prophetic literature 'troubling' from the moment that they were accepted by a community as their sacred constitution. In addition, using David Weiss-Halivni's term, one could add the 'maculation' of the revelation — the characteristic contradictions and surface irregularities that give rise to interpretation as well as to augmentation of this with other, pseudepigraphic, sources of divine knowledge — to the factors that make the Bible a difficult text. This intrinsic difficulty (in spite of the seeming triviality of its plain meaning, or *pshat*) is the necessary condition for the fancy elaborations that shaped those religions that are still with us, and then some.

David Weiss-Halivni, the old-worldly talmudic *ilui* and intellectual historian from Sighet and New York, recently gave an interesting talk at the Harvard-Radcliffe Hillel House. He spoke on the well-known trope of an 'Oral Torah' which he asserted takes on the meaning of a distinct revelation only in the Middle Ages. Among the Palestinian and

Babylonian Sages, the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*, legal tradition, the material that becomes classified as Oral Torah (*torah she be'al peh*), is not immediately and universally considered as a distinct revelation. Rather, thematizing the relation between rabbinic tradition and the Mosaic Torah, Halivni utilized the duality of, on the one hand, exegetical association between written Torah and rabbinic Halakhah (as in halakhic midrash) and, on the other hand, the stand-alone representation of Halakhah in the Mishnah to point to an unresolved riddle: How can a later interpretation be part of an earlier revelation? This question is not resolved if, as James Kugel did in a brilliant but ultimately unsatisfying response to the challenge posed by Halivni, one points to the fact that the Bible as an enigmatic, antiquated but sacred text can be perpetuated only if, when, and where it is interpreted and augmented. For such a solution creates an unbridgeable abyss between historical consciousness and the assumption of some, many, or all sages, fathers of the church, gnostics, and other readers of the ancient texts who assumed that their interpretations were indeed mere extensions of the inherent meaning of the text. It may, of course, be that the medieval concept of a separate, orally transmitted, revelation reflects a loss in the confidence that interpretation should be as authoritative as the Torah itself.

Our attempts to unravel the relation between troubling sacred text and clarifying exegesis fall flat as long we remain caught in the dichotomy of early = original = sacred = salvific meaning and later = derivative = lesser = non-salvific meaning of a text. Nor does it help to debate whether the exegete believed he would find only what the text truly contained or whether he believed he was producing connections between originally unrelated entities (eg., Old Testament passages and events in the life of Jesus or biblical text and rabbinic oral tradition) by means of inspired or ingenious creativity. These very alternatives may be the reason why the relation between text and interpretation remains elusive that is the prevalent mode of the textual piety of the sages. We fail to grasp it because we can only think in such alternatives.