

## Lecture Twenty-Two

### The Bible in Contemporary Judaism

**Scope:** In classical (Talmudic) Judaism, the Bible had unquestionable authority, but the written Torah was always read within the framework and from the perspective of the Oral Torah. After the Enlightenment, the movement called Reform Judaism represented an attempt to base Jewish life more squarely on the Bible, specifically, on the prophetic literature. The major challenge to Jewish identity, however, has come about because of two 20<sup>th</sup>-century events: the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel. This presentation touches on several contemporary Jewish views of the Bible in light of these historical developments.

#### Outline

- I. For Jews, as for Christians—though in different ways—the Enlightenment was a mixed blessing.
  - A. On the positive side, the ideal of tolerance was spelled out in the form of the emancipation of Jews from the constraints of Christendom.
  - B. From a negative standpoint, official toleration did not mean the demise of anti-Semitism; further, it increased the risks of assimilation and loss of identity.
  - C. Jews responded to these new challenges—and the even greater ones of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—in diverse ways.
- II. A major issue for Jews in Europe and America was translating traditional marks of identity in a changed world.
  - A. The development of three major streams of Judaism represents a response to modernity.
    1. The Reform movement began in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany and achieved great popularity in America. It called for a rejection of Hebrew and the Talmudic tradition, putting an emphasis, instead, on the prophets and understanding messianism in terms of social improvement. In 1937, the American Reform movement affirmed a number of traditional Jewish practices.

2. The Orthodox community maintained the Talmudic framework for reading the Bible in Hebrew, with all its traditional practices, and connected these to specific European cultural observances. Tight-knit Hasidic communities in urban areas are an extreme manifestation.
  3. Conservative Judaism tried to strike a middle position, with an affirmation of the Talmudic framework and the continuation of practices (unlike Reformed Judaism) but with a certain degree of assimilation in cultural matters (unlike Orthodox Judaism).
- B.** Zionism emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an adaptation of the messianic ideal to a new age.
1. Moses Hess first spoke of a Jewish homeland (1812–1875), and a first Jewish colony started in Palestine in 1869.
  2. A new wave of anti-Semitism in the 1870s gave impetus to the movement, but it was Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) who was the “New Moses” in the quest for a new Jewish homeland, seeking to eliminate anti-Semitism by founding a Jewish state (1896).

**III.** The Holocaust (*shoah*) and the state of Israel represent distinct yet interrelated challenges to contemporary Jews.

- A.** The Holocaust (1933–1945) not only threatened the existence of the people but raised severe questions of religious meaning (the biblical promises).
1. The immediate response? Silence, witness, or abandonment of symbols.
  2. The longer-term response? Survival of the children and the rebirth of *midrash*.
- B.** The state of Israel (1948) realized the Zionist dream but in a paradoxical way.
1. Israel is a state among other states: What role should “Judaism” and its laws play in the society?
  2. In the politics of the Middle East, the state of Israel continues to be a focus of anti-Semitism.
- C.** A radical suggestion for reading the Jewish Bible has been made by Emil Fackenheim (*The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust*).
1. All interpretation must have as its goal the survival of the people, without necessary reference to Judaism as a religion.

2. The state of Israel must be taken as “the resurrection from the dead” after the Holocaust.
3. The Jewish Bible should be read, not in religious terms, but as the history of this people, with the Book of Esther as its center.

IV. Jewish biblical scholarship takes a number of positions with respect to the dominant historical-critical paradigm among Christians.

- A. Some scholars continue a longstanding commitment to outstanding historical research into ancient Jewish life.
  1. Jewish scholars are in the forefront in the study of Judaism and Hellenism in antiquity.
  2. They are among the most important participants in the analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
  3. They engage in biblical commentaries in the dominant historical-critical mode.
- B. Others engage the Bible with a greater focus on its literary dimensions, whether prose or poetry.
  1. New translations of Torah by the Jewish Publication Society and by Robert Alter have paid close attention to the character of the ancient Hebrew.
  2. Jewish scholars have led in the literary analysis of ancient narrative (Meir Sternberg, Robert Alter) and *inner-biblical exegesis* (Michael Fishbane).
- C. Still others have sought to recover the distinctive character of old Jewish interpretive traditions in a contemporary mode (Jon Levenson, James Kugel).
- D. In conversations with Christian scholars, it is clear that on every side, apologetics has been replaced by mutual respect and a desire to learn.

**Essential Reading:**

E. Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-Reading*.

**Supplementary Reading:**

J. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. How have the conditions of modernity affected the way in which the Bible is read within Judaism?
2. Why should a biblical book that does not mention God (Esther) be recommended as the central text of the Bible for post-Holocaust Jews?