How Should Christians Read the Hebrew Bible?

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I was sitting in a Bible class one night as we were studying First Samuel. A woman in the group had a question.

“Why are we spending so much time on the Old Testament? When I read the Old Testament, I don’t feel the love and assurance on every page that I feel when I read the Gospels.”

The question is not unreasonable, considering that Samuel is full of violence, war, and politics. It is actually a fascinating narrative, though admittedly not always uplifting.

In chapter 6 of *Simply Christian* N.T. Wright provides some perspective. He rightly points out that if you don’t understand the Old Testament, you can’t understand Jesus. The Old Testament constitutes the scripture that Jesus knew and the world from which he came. Jesus himself represents the culmination of the Old Testament story. The writers of the New Testament were themselves Jewish, and the Old Testament is what they knew, grew from, and lived with. So the Old Testament is one fundamental part of Christian tradition. Wright goes even further: “Indeed, to say nothing about the Jewish story, within which Jesus made the sense he did, is to connive at that anti-Judaism which had been latent for many years.” The Christian story begins with the Jewish story.

Before we proceed, a word on terminology. The Greek word for “testament,” διαθήκη, is used to translate the Hebrew בְּרִית which means “covenant.” Sometimes you will hear people refer to the two parts of the Bible as “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant.” The implication of this terminology is a theological mistake. It suggests a succession of “covenants,” a new one replacing an old one. But a covenant is a promise, and God does not break a promise. If God could break the “old covenant,” God could break the new one too. That is not the God we know. Therefore, the terminology I prefer is “Original Covenant” and “Extended Covenant,” to emphasize that there is only one Covenant, originally made through the Jewish people and extended through Jesus to include Gentiles. More simply, I will follow the practice of most modern biblical scholars and just refer to the “Old Testament” as the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible is actually a record of the human search for God, and the gradual realization of God as a presence in human life. This is why the Bible is so full of politics, wars, and violence. The Bible begins where we begin, and where our search begins, not up high in heaven but here on earth with all its earthiness. It has taken a long time, and is still taking time, for humans to recognize the direction of God and follow it. The Bible tells the story of people who were searching for God even while still immersed in their human failures, conflicts, and intrigues. The consciousness of God is a very gradual evolutionary process. The Bible finds this process unfolding in history, and so it spends much time narrating this history.

Wright mentions another important organizing principle of the Hebrew Bible. This is the theme of estrangement and reconciliation, exile and return, leaving home and coming back again. The Bible outlines a sequence of separations with many levels. On one level, the people are separated from their homeland and taken into exile. This separation is resolved with the return from exile under the edict of Cyrus from Persia (who is actually the first person in the Bible to be called “messiah,” meaning God’s anointed [Isaiah 45:1]). However, there is a greater separation that is not resolved: the separation of human beings from the awareness of their eternal source, symbolized by the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

So when reading the Hebrew Bible it is helpful to keep these two organizing principles in mind: 1) The Bible as an evolution of the consciousness of God, and 2) as a record of God’s promise to humanity (the Covenant), our falling away from God, and coming back in repentance, hope, and redemption. The final redemption, the resolution of our estrangement from our eternal source, is the messianic hope, and the primary concern of the New Testament.

To get a complete picture, therefore, it is essential to understand each part of the Bible on its own terms and within its own historical and cultural situation. The Hebrew Bible is not a primitive version of the New Testament. It is not about Jesus – not specifically. It is the story of the search for God by the Hebrew people, who gifted the world with the fruits of this search. Only with this groundwork in place could the world have become ready for Jesus, who is God’s answer to the human crisis that the

Hebrew Bible unsparingly portrays. Nevertheless, the Hebrew Bible is complete in itself. It too represents a legitimate path to God. It provides guidelines for living and a mechanism of repentance and restoration when one falls short. Both paths, Jewish and Christian, are complete in themselves, and both provide channels to reunion with God.

Therefore, when reading the Hebrew Bible, the starting point should always be the meaning of the passage within its own historical, cultural, and theological context. Once that is understood, then one is prepared to engage in further elaboration. What this means will shortly become clear.

Wright unintentionally provides an illustration, because he falls into an exegetical error surprising for a biblical scholar of his stature. He writes:

> The king turns into a servant, YHWH's Servant; and the Servant must act out the fate of Israel, must be Israel on behalf of the Israel that can no longer be obedient to its vocation….
>
> Thus Israel, gazing at the Servant, will say in wonderment, "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). *(Simply Christian,* Kindle edition, pp. 86, 87)

Wright reads Isaiah 53 as directly referring to Jesus. Christians have always interpreted this chapter that way, but modern Bible scholars question this interpretation and correctly place the chapter back within its original framework.

Let's take a closer look. Here is the chapter as a whole, beginning with the preceding verses that form part of its unit (remember that chapter divisions were added much later and are not part of the original text):

Is. 52:13 **See, my servant shall prosper;**
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
14 **Just as there were many who were astonished at him**
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
15 **so he shall startle many nations;**

kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

Is. 53:1 **Who has believed what we have heard?**
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
2 **For he grew up before him like a young plant,**
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 **He was despised and rejected by others;**
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4 **Surely he has borne our infirmities**
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
5 **But he was wounded for our transgressions,**
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
6 **All we like sheep have gone astray;**
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 **He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,**
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 **By a perversion of justice he was taken away.**
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
9 **They made his grave with the wicked**

and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 **Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.**
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
11 **Out of his anguish he shall see light;**
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
12 **Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,**
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors. (NRSV)

This does sound a lot like Jesus, doesn't it? For obvious reasons it is hard not to think of Jesus when we read this passage. Some of these phrases just cry out with song from Handel's *Messiah:*

"He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him."

"And with His stripes we are healed."

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

"He was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of Thy people was He stricken."

There are certainly surface resemblances to Jesus in this passage, which have become so familiar that many of us take them for granted. Including N.T. Wright.

Wright understands chapter 53 as Israel speaking about the Servant, who is Jesus. This interpretation relies on taking the passage out of context, and is wrong on several counts. First, taking the context of the passage into account, we can see who the speaker is. Isaiah 52:15: “Kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.” The kings of the nations are astonished at the spectacle of the suffering Servant, and though dumbstruck at first, they express their astonishment in what follows (chapter 53).

Similarly, the Servant mentioned in this passage cannot be Jesus. First, this chapter is not even about the Messiah. Nowhere is the Messiah mentioned, nor anything about a descendant of David, which we find in messianic passages such as Isaiah 11. Our present text is not about the end of days when the Messiah will come; it is about right now, right at the moment when Isaiah is speaking. That is the only way to make sense of it next to the chapters that precede and follow.

Several parts of this chapter simply do not fit Jesus:

“A man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity”: the Hebrew חֹלִי means sickness, disease, and not “grief” as translated by the KJV, and Jesus is not reported to have been sick or diseased.

“He shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days”: neither was true of Jesus, who died in his youth and had no children.

“He shall divide the spoil with the strong”: this certainly doesn’t sound like Jesus.

Finally, there is a mistranslation in verse 8: “For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.” This construes the object of “stricken” as singular (referring to the Servant). That is not what the Hebrew really means. The Hebrew phrase, מִפֶּשַׁע עַמִּי נֶגַע לָמוֹ (literally, “from the transgression of my people a plague to them”) is difficult.

The last word, לָמוֹ , the object of “stricken,” is plural, not singular. Instead of “[he was] stricken for the transgression of my people” a better translation would be “because of my people’s sins were they stricken,” “they” referring to the people Israel, “my people” referring to the people of the speaker, the nations who oppressed Israel.

Who then is the Servant?

We don’t need to guess. Isaiah tells us explicitly who the Servant is:

“But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, ‘You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off” (Isaiah 41:8-9).

“You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior” (Isaiah 43:10-11).

“But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you: Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen” (Isaiah 44:1-2).

“Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me” (Isaiah 44:21).

“For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me” (Isaiah 45:4).

“Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it forth to the end of the earth; say, ‘The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!’” (Isaiah 48:20).

“And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified’” (Isaiah 49:3).

The evidence is abundant: the Servant in these passages is Israel (also known by the names Jacob and Jeshurun; they all mean the same thing).

You may know that the book of Isaiah is not the product of a single person. There are at least two Isaiah's, one responsible for the first 39 chapters, and a "second Isaiah" picking up at chapter 40. The first Isaiah lived before the Babylonian exile and his prophecies were largely warnings and denunciations of social corruption. The second Isaiah prophesied years later during the exile in Babylon, and his message was one of consolation and encouragement to the exiles. Here is how Second Isaiah begins:

Is. 40:1 **Comfort, O comfort my people,**
says your God.
2 **Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,**
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD'S hand
double for all her sins.

The tone shifts completely, from admonition and condemnation to support and forgiveness. The people have served their term; they have received double for all their sins. *This is the context of Isaiah 53.* The chapters preceding and following chapter 53 are all like this. God has forgiven Israel and is no longer dwelling on its sins. It is therefore incongruous to have Israel talking about its sins in chapter 53 and portrayed as the guilty party, as happens nowhere else in Second Isaiah. In Second Isaiah Israel's sins have been expiated and Israel's guilt is no longer the issue. The guilt now shifts to the surrounding nations, who inflicted on Israel a destruction far worse than anything Israel deserved. It is the surrounding nations, not Israel, who are speaking in chapter 53, and it is Israel, not Jesus, about whom they are speaking. By seeing the excessive damage they inflicted on Israel and coming to terms with it, those nations will be made whole – that is the prophecy.

Therefore Wright's exegesis needs to be questioned. It ignores the time, place, context, and intention of the surrounding chapters, as if a prophecy about Jesus were suddenly inserted out of nowhere into a place where it

doesn't fit. To understand this chapter as originally intended, it must be taken with Isaiah's own identification of the Servant as Israel.

But we cannot leave the discussion right here.

What about the New Testament's use of Isaiah 53? Here we find Isaiah 53 used to refer to Jesus: see for example Matthew 8:17, Luke 22:37, John 12:37, Acts 8:32-35. Did the New Testament writers get it wrong?

We need to consider how Jews of the time understood their biblical texts. They would search those texts for layers of meaning. Their method of searching is called *midrash.* We may define *midrash* (plural: *midrashim)* as "the creation of legend to reveal spiritual truth." Let us consider an example.

Genesis Rabbah is a classic collection of midrashim on the book of Genesis. In this collection we find a midrash on Generis 4:8: "Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him." This is the NRSV, which is based not only on the original Hebrew but on early Greek and Aramaic translations. In the original Hebrew the words "Let us go out to the field" are missing. The text breaks off suddenly without telling us what Cain actually said to Abel.

This omission perplexed the rabbis, who wanted to know what could possibly have been so important that Cain would even kill his brother over it. So Rabbi Joshua of Siknin commented in the name of Rabbi Levi: they were arguing about the Temple. Cain insisted it be built on his land, while Abel insisted it be built on his. How do we know this is really about the Temple? Because our text says "And when they were in the field," and "field" refers to the Temple. How do we know that "field" refers to the Temple? Because we read in Micah 3:12: "Therefore because of you Zion [meaning the Temple] shall be plowed as a field."

Of course this seems far-fetched to us, if we take it literally. The "field" in Micah has no necessary connection to the "field" in Genesis, the Temple was not built until the time of King Solomon, and the prophet Micah came even much later than that. But this is no more far-fetched than interpreting Isaiah 7:14 to refer to the virgin birth of Jesus, especially since Jesus also lived much later (by several centuries) than the event about which Isaiah

was prophesying, and also since the word translated “virgin” doesn’t even mean virgin. But midrash is not concerned with such historical and contextual details and often ignores them. Therefore, no midrash will stand up to the highest levels of biblical criticism. But they are not meant to. A midrash is not scholarly exegesis; it is an exposition of a text to find new layers of spiritual truth, and if the text must be turned this way and that before it yields that truth, it is OK.

For this reason, Jewish exegetes have always distinguished between the plain meaning of a text (פְּשָׁט) and its homiletical interpretation (דְּרָשׁ). One would not normally confuse the two. A rabbi delivering a sermon might talk about Cain and Abel fighting over the Temple, but no serious Jewish Bible scholar would make such a claim. Midrash is a valid way of approaching a text, as long as the process and its purpose are clear.

The Jewish authors of the New Testament came from this milieu. They were midrashists. The Greeks who later read their scriptures were not. So when Gentiles read the New Testament writings they took them literally. *They conflated the plain meaning and the homiletical interpretation, and took the latter for the former.* So if Matthew refers Isaiah 53 to Jesus, the assumption is that must be what Isaiah was actually preaching about. This has caused no end of confusion and strife.

Why is it important to keep the plain meaning and the homiletical meaning separate?

First, the Christian midrashic interpretations, just like Jewish ones, will not stand up to critical scrutiny. We have already seen that with Isaiah 53. It is also true of Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6, and every similar “proof text” that Christian missionaries use to convince Jews that the Jewish Bible is really about Jesus. When you take prophecies concerning events over five hundred years before the birth of Christ and refer them to a time centuries later, you lose Jewish history. And if you lose Jewish history, you lose the background that formed Jesus and from which he came. A related problem is that when taken literally these proof-text interpretations are easily refuted, putting the credibility of Christianity at risk. Christian faith should not need to depend on questionable scriptural manipulations that take phrases out of context and often rely on mistranslations. The identity, life, and teachings of Jesus Christ should speak for themselves.

Another reason why these considerations are so important is that such Christological interpretations of the Hebrew Bible create extreme tension between Christians and Jews. Since historically Christians have believed and insisted that Isaiah 53 refers to Jesus, many began to wonder why Jews didn't accept Jesus as their Lord since the Jewish Bible is supposedly talking about him. They then began to resent Jews for not believing their own Bible. What happened after that is in the historical record and sadly familiar to everyone.

The theological challenges that come from looking at this history are not simple. Yes, Jesus did take Hebrew prophecy to its ultimate conclusion, and this belongs to the core of Christian faith. But this is not an explicit part of the Hebrew Bible. So Jews are right in maintaining that their Bible tells their story and is complete in itself. And Christians are right in maintaining that the human longings recorded in the Hebrew Bible are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But one can hold this position without reading back into the Hebrew Bible interpretations that belong to a much later period. This is necessary both for historical integrity and to affirm the validity of both religions as legitimate paths to God.

So what of these Christian interpretations of Hebrew scripture, which are understandably dear to many Christians? One can engage in such interpretation, *as long as one is aware that one is doing midrash.* The midrash, the homiletical meaning, may not be the original meaning, but it is intended to convey a spiritual truth. Especially in our own age, which is much more keyed to scientific accuracy than the first century, it is important to keep the distinction between the plain meaning and the homiletical meaning in mind. Therefore, when a noted Bible scholar like N.T. Wright quotes Isaiah 53, he should not leave the impression that the homiletical meaning is the original one. A midrash builds upon the original meaning of the text; it does not replace it. The homiletical meaning, *understood as midrash,* has its value. Homiletically, Christians will see the Hebrew Bible as pointing forward towards the ministry of Jesus, and this should help them appreciate the connection between the Jews' own story and their Christian faith. But this can really only happen after first having attained a grasp of the Hebrew Bible's story told in its own terms.

So how should Christians read the Hebrew Bible? Just a few things to keep in mind: The Hebrew Bible is a record of the discovery of the consciousness and involvement of God in human life revealed in the history

of the Hebrew people. The path to this discovery was indeed circuitous; nevertheless, every part of the Bible, including its recording the worst of human flaws, contributes to that end. The Bible should be read first in its own context of time and place and cultural circumstances. Then, like any good Jewish text, the Hebrew Bible can be read midrashically. One can see in its pages foreshadowings of the fulfillment that Jesus will bring, and perhaps even ironic hints of his life and death in Isaiah 53 – as long as one understands it as midrash *and not as literal history.* And that in no way diminishes its significance. Midrash is greatly valued in Jewish tradition. But midrash only makes sense after the plain meaning of the text is understood.

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