

2019 WALLS LECTURE MANUSCRIPT

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"Discovering Jesus' Personal Bible: The Greatest Archaeological Find Ever"

Introduction

I already know what you're thinking: The title I've chosen for this "last lecture" is a sensationalized and shamefully misleading claim. There has been no archaeological dig in Nazareth in which Jesus' residence has been identified. No site with a mailbox sporting the initials J.J. was found. None of Joshua ben Joseph's notes that he made when reading the holy scrolls were nicely arranged in a file cabinet that he made as an apprentice in his dad's carpenter shop. Nice try, Spina, but your lame effort to replace the greatest textual discovery of the last century—the Dead Sea Scrolls—would not tempt even the most unscrupulous tabloid hack to run with what is obviously yet one more example of *fake news*.

Well, allow me a little push back. I admit that we have not discovered Jesus' personal Bible. But that is only because it did not need to be discovered. Jesus' Bible has been there all along, as the Jewish scriptures. Today, Jews refer to their sacred text as *the Bible*, when Christians are not lurking. When Christians are around, Jews call their bible variously the *Jewish Scriptures*, the *Hebrew Bible*, or *TANAK*, an acronym for the *Torah*, *N^ebi'im*, *K^etubim*, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Christians, on the other hand, call this material the *Old Testament* whether it is in its Hebrew or Greek form. But that term was not coined until the Church added documents to the Jewish Bible which would eventually be called *The New Testament*. That took place long after the century in which Jesus lived. Once the Church canonized the New Testament, it had an Old Testament on its hands. Before then the Jewish Bible was the only one that Jesus read, believed, thought was authoritative, and a testimony to himself.^[1]

This means that Jesus knew nothing of a New Testament. Ironically, neither did any of the authors of the writings that eventually became the New Testament.^[2] These authors did their best to convince their readers that what God had done through Jesus was congruent with the Jewish scriptures. The New Testament may be more than a commentary on the Jewish scripture, but it is hardly less.

Admittedly, a *new testament* is mentioned in the Christian Bible, but not as a canonical set of writings. This designation appears in Jeremiah 31 and is explicated, for example, in the Epistle to the Hebrews (8:8-13). Here a *new testament* is a *new covenant* that was a feature of the messianic age that Jesus had inaugurated. It involved a new relationship with God, not the introduction of new writings. In fact, the author of Hebrews contrasts what the prophets had proclaimed—that is a cipher for the Jewish scripture—with what we now know about God not through new biblical material but through God's incarnate Son (1:1-2).

Paul also alludes to the Jeremiah passage (along with Isaiah 59:20-21) as a future covenant that God will make with Israel, though he does not use the adjective new (Romans 11:27). Again, this a new relationship, not another scriptural tradition. Then again, when Paul rehearses what Jesus said at the Last Supper, he cites Jesus as mentioning a *new testament* or *covenant* (1 Cor 11:25). Jesus is reported as using this same language, again at the Last Supper, by Matthew (26:28), Mark (14:24), and Luke (22:2), at least in some manuscript traditions. In every one of these cases, though, this *new testament* or *covenant* describes a different relationship with God not a new textual witness. The old witness was just fine.

The logic of Jeremiah's prophecy was that Israel's old covenant/ testament had to be renewed, which God would bring about in the future (31:31). That's why the author of Hebrews said the old covenant was obsolete (8:13). Paul uses a different metaphor to assert that the old covenant/testament is no longer effective (2 Cor 3:14). He describes Moses' veil as something that needs to be removed by Christ so that divine glory can be fully observed. However, while the old covenant/ testament no longer worked, *Israel* was alive and well. God's elect people was hardly obsolete. In the fullness of time, God would engage Israel anew. Clearly, the writer of Hebrews affirms that that day had indeed arrived. Paul believed that too. Quite obviously, so did Jesus, which is why he announced the good news of the kingdom's arrival to Israel. The old covenant or testament was on the way out. A new covenant or testament was being established. This divine action had nothing to do with replacing one set of Scriptures with another. In the first century there was a debate with enormous implications about whether Jesus had launched the messianic age in which God had *cut*—to use the Hebrew metaphor-- a new covenant or testament, but that momentous debate had nothing to do with the Jewish scriptures *per se*. The issue turned completely on how those scriptures were to be interpreted.

Parenthetically, though perhaps a topic for another lecture—I should have announced this as my next-to-last lecture (!)—there is a difficulty with asserting the arrival of the new covenant as Jeremiah envisioned it. Jeremiah saw a future in which God's law would be written on the heart, such that no one would have to be admonished to “know the Lord” since a forgiven Israel would know their God due to God's action. If that new covenant was now a reality because of Christ's coming, why would those who believe in Jesus need to be admonished? Yet, the whole New Testament is replete with admonishments geared to enable folk to “know the Lord.” Even the writer of Hebrews admonishes throughout the letter. Conceivably, we might locate this new covenant in Jesus the Christ. That makes some sense. But are we able to make a similar claim for those who follow Jesus? Put more sharply, can we make a case that the Church has been or is now more moral—more attuned to God—than Israel, or later the Synagogue? I regard the question as rhetorical. Back to my ostensive “last lecture.”

Textual Traditions and Canonization

At this point it is important to keep in mind that in Jesus' lifetime there was not yet a fully stabilized biblical text either in Hebrew or Greek form or a finally established canon. Stabilized textual traditions and canonical processes required centuries to develop. In the post-exilic era (beginning in the late sixth century B.C.E), a variety of Jewish religious communities came into being and subsequently flourished. Consequently, they generated differing textual traditions, literatures, and concomitant nascent canons. This historical period—conventionally referred to as the Second Temple period—was theologically and religiously fecund. We encounter a measure of this Second Temple diversity in the New Testament when we encounter Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Samaritans, and the like. The Essenes, of Dead Sea Scrolls fame, were part of this religious mix even though they are not mentioned in the New Testament. Interestingly, during this time of significant ferment some of these Jewish communities were, counter to later popular conception, were not reluctant to proselytize non-Jews. Many Gentiles were enamored with aspects of Jewish religious expression.

The reason I refer here to Jewish religious expression as opposed to *Judaism(s)* is because using Judaism as a moniker for these Jewish groups is an anachronism. Judaism as it exists to this day arose after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. That is Pharisaic Rabbinic Judaism—most of the other Jewish sects virtually disappeared due to assimilation or other factors.^[3] In the latter part of this

same century there was a gradual parting of the ways between the minority of Jews who believed that Jesus was the Israelite messiah and the majority who did not.^[4] Previously, both groups worshipped in synagogues even though they were engaged in an intense intramural theological debate.

The New Testament Witness

That Jewish debate manifests itself in every nook and cranny of the New Testament. Even though biblical texts had not yet been stabilized and even though there was no finalized canon in the first century, all four Gospels portray Jesus regularly affirming Jewish scripture as authoritative and a testimony to himself.^[5] These scriptures may be viewed as at least proto-canonical, but nevertheless on a tenure track—to use James Sanders' lovely metaphor—toward being finally canonized. Still, though only proto-canonical in Jesus' time, there was little dispute about their divine provenance and therefore their authority.

The authors of all four Gospels insist that Jewish scripture is about Jesus and they portray Jesus agreeing with this sentiment. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus maintains that he had come to fulfill not abolish the “law or the prophets,” shorthand for Jewish scripture (Mt 5:17). Jesus equates knowledge of God's power with knowledge of the Jewish scripture in Mark's Gospel (12:24). Famously, when Jesus encountered two men on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, he taught them everything that scripture said about him beginning with “Moses and all the prophets” (Lk 24:27). Subsequently, in that same chapter, Jesus tells the “eleven” that he had fulfilled everything in Moses' Torah, in the Prophets, and the Psalms (24:44) and then goes on to “open their minds” to understand the scriptures (v45). Jesus proclaims in John's Gospel to a Jewish audience, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me” (5:46; see v47).

This deference to Jewish scripture is characteristic beyond the Gospels, too. The Book of Acts, the epistles, and the Book of Revelation are saturated with claims that, to paraphrase Paul's words, everything that God accomplished in Jesus was “in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). Every single New Testament author reads Jewish scripture with Jesus in mind.

As is well known, Jesus in the Gospels typically locks horns with Jewish interlocutors. Most of these exchanges centered on interpretive matters. No one on either side of these debates ever questioned the scriptures themselves. The issue was only how rightfully to understand them. In these instances, Jesus positioned himself against a plethora of biblical interpretations that violated what he thought was the basic starting point of all biblical interpretation, namely, undiminished love of God and neighbor (Mt 22:37-40). Jesus was never bashful about criticizing various Jewish interpretations or, for that matter, on occasion the sincerity of those with whom he sparred. But his complaints never had to do with the scriptures themselves. The authority of Jewish scripture was simply assumed by Jesus and those with whom he argued.

This appeal to Jewish scripture on Jesus' part should occasion no surprise whatsoever. As mentioned, every writer of the later New Testament followed Jesus in this endeavor (unless they had made up out of whole cloth how Jesus regarded the scriptures, which is implausible). Even Paul, a superficial reading of whom has contributed mightily to the generally negative assessment of the Old Testament among Christians, said as we just alluded to that Christ died for our sins “in accordance with the scriptures” and that he was raised on the third day “in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). Paul is portrayed in the Book of Acts as acting on this conviction. In the synagogue in Antioch, after the reading of “the

law and the prophets” Paul was asked to comment, which he proceeded to do by rehearsing Israel’s story (Acts 13:15-41). Even though soon after this incident Paul embarked on his ministry to Gentiles, he did that also in terms of how he read the scriptures, in this case following Amos 9:11-12 (Acts 15:12-18). None of the New Testament writers were trying to establish a new religion. Far from it. They insisted instead that the Kingdom of God/Heaven had arrived, that the messianic age was a reality, which obviously meant that the messiah or Christ had appeared to Israel, that Gentiles were part of this movement just as the prophets predicted, and that a proper reading of the Jewish Scriptures demonstrated this truth.

Jesus’ Use of Scripture

At this juncture, I want to point out a distinction between Jesus’ use of the Jewish scripture and that of the writers of the New Testament generally. The New Testament authors on occasion appeal to the Jewish scriptures in their plain sense meaning, but usually read the Jewish Scriptures *Christologically*. That is, their rereading entailed seeing the Jewish scripture as essentially prophetic—even in technically non-prophetic portions (like Psalms). That meant that Jesus—his birth, life, teaching, and most especially his death, and resurrection—was essentially a fulfillment of scriptural prophecy. Jewish scripture was even a template for telling the Jesus story and the significance of his life. This is so commonplace that documentation is unnecessary. This Christological approach to Jewish scripture was embraced by the early Church fathers. In fact, many of these early theologians, pastors, and bishops were convinced that Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecy was one of their best apologetic arguments.

Now, to understate the case, the New Testament authors were quite creative in their Christological readings. Once one is convinced that Jesus is testified to in the Scripture, it was not difficult to notice that the text witnessed to him virtually everywhere. Some of these Christological interpretations are more obvious than others, but all derive from the profound belief that the God who had acted throughout Israel’s life had also adumbrated in the scriptures how that same God would act in and through Jesus, Israel’s Messiah or Christ. Besides the prophecy-fulfillment tack, New Testament authors from time to time also made use of biblical tropes, figures, types, allegories, and the like to buttress their claims that the scriptures from front to back witnessed to Christ their Lord. For instance, Paul contrasts Hagar’s giving birth to Ishmael and Sarah’s giving birth to Isaac as representing the difference between slavery to the law and freedom in grace respectively (Gen 16; Gal 4:1-31). As well, the author of Hebrews sees Melchizedek as a type of Christ, making much of Abraham’s giving a tithe to this mysterious figure (Gen 14; Heb 7:1-3). There are several such examples. One way or another, however, the New Testament authors read the Jewish scripture with Christological lenses.

When it comes to Jesus, though, he almost never reads the text Christologically. To be sure, he claims that the whole of Scripture applies to him. We noted above a few of these texts, but there are others also (Mt 5:17; 26:56; Lk 4:16-19; 16:16-17; 24:27, 44-46; Jn 5:39, 45-47). Still, in spite of these general claims, Jesus typically appeals to the *plain sense* of Jewish scripture. A few examples should suffice to make the point. In Matthew’s Gospel (8:4) Jesus tells a person afflicted with leprosy whom he had healed to show himself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded (Lv 14:2-32). He mentions the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in a straightforward manner (10:15; 11:23) and later reminds his audience of Nineveh’s widespread repentance and the Queen of South’s visit to Solomon (12:39-41, 42), again without any typical or figural applications. Jesus enumerates several of the

commandments to a man inquiring about eternal life (19:17-19) and subsequently combines Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 to accent the greatest commandment (23:37-40). In Mark Jesus appeals to a story about David entirely in its plain sense (1 Sam 21:1-6) and debates what Moses said about divorce (10:2-9). Equally, in Luke (4:25-27) Jesus cites stories about Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:1, 8-16; 18:1; 2 Kings 5:1-14). He also asks a questioner what he had read in the Torah (10:26). Similarly, in John's Gospel Jesus mentions Israel's eating manna in the wilderness (6:49). With these few examples, I have only scratched the surface. To summarize, the Gospels portray Jesus as affirming the fact that the scriptures testify to him—but with no specifics. Much more often, however, they depict him regularly calling attention to the plain sense of scripture.

Admonitions for the Church

In my judgment, this is something that the Church needs to take much more seriously. As much as we would have wished for Jesus to say precisely where and how the scriptures testified to him, he does not go there. For all practical purposes, the Christological readings were left in the hands of the New Testament authors. But relative to scriptures' plain sense, Jesus is rather cooperative. My question to the church is this: Why do we not follow Jesus in appropriating the Old Testament much more in its plain sense? If Jesus does this so easily and as a matter of course, why is the church so averse to imitate Jesus in this practice?

From my standpoint, the church's use of Jesus' scriptures—the Christian Old Testament—may be summarized in the following manner. First, the church knows the Old Testament primarily in terms of how New Testament authors make use of what we now call the Old Testament. This is so prominent that it is not uncommon for people in the pews to think that such texts meant very little until they were applied to Jesus. Second, some well-known stories found in the Old Testament have always been part of the Church's lore. These stories—the usual suspects are familiar to all of us—are used sometimes in preaching ministry but more commonly in Sunday School or Adult education curricula. In terms of total content, however, these materials constitute only a small percentage of the Old Testament. Am I exaggerating to say that only the Psalms have had a disproportionate impact on the Christian church?

As the situation stands today, vast swaths of biblical content from Jesus' Bible are seldom preached on or taught. They are frankly ignored, out of sight and mind. When is the last time you heard a sermon on Tamar's sleeping with her father-in-law, or Ehud's assassination of Eglon, or Jael's dispatching Sisera, or the Levite's concubine, or Jonathan's victory over the Philistines, or why Saul was prescient about David in 1 Sam 16 but ignorant in 1 Sam 17, or Adonijah's failed attempt to succeed his father, or the lying spirits that Micaiah ben Imlah said YHWH had sent to Ahab's prophets, or Josiah's reform and Huldah's role in it? Why do we not compare the prophet Nahum, which vilifies Nineveh, with the book of Jonah, which celebrates the repentance of all of Nineveh, including the cows? Why do we not compare Israel's story as recounted in Samuel and Kings to the completely different narration in Chronicles? I could go on, and on, and on, I promise you. As much as I love the lectionary, the lectionary bypasses these incredibly rich texts with all their maddening ambiguity, drama, nuance, hue, poignancy, and texture. How did we get to the place where when good church people are exposed to all of Jesus' Bible, it is as though they're reading it for the first time? In short, how do we justify our startling ignorance of the only Bible that Jesus recognized, read, thought was inspired, and believed to his core was God's word?

The Antitheses

Just in case you think that the question I just posed is answerable rather than rhetorical let me respond to what I discern at least some of you have in mind at this very moment. Are you asking yourself: Why should I spend any more time than is necessary in the Old Testament, when Jesus in no uncertain terms demonstrated the inferiority of the Jewish Bible in the so-called antitheses in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 5:21-48)? You'll recognize this is as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5—7). Recall how it begins, "You have heard . . .", or, "it was said," whereupon Jesus elaborates by improving on what was heard or said. The topics are: replacing not killing with not getting angry, not committing adultery with not lusting, giving a certificate of divorce with causing a divorced person to commit adultery, do not swear falsely with not swearing at all, love your neighbor but hate your enemy with loving your enemies. The standard interpretation of this section of Jesus' sermon is that here he is demonstrating his superior ethic by contrasting it with the terribly backward and legalistic ethic of Jewish scripture. If Jesus is deconstructing his own scripture, why should I not follow suit? The Old Testament is like a relative who is a lush but must nevertheless be invited to a family gathering. Almost surely some cringe inducing embarrassing behavior will occur sooner or later.

But it turns out that Jesus is not denigrating scripture in Matthew's account. On formal critical grounds, nowhere in the New Testament is scripture introduced with the formula: "You have heard" or "It was said." The so-called antitheses broach several hot button issues involving interpretation of scripture, other religious writings of the day, or positions that had been adopted by various Jewish groups. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Jesus' Bible never commands anyone to "hate their enemy." The antitheses are not intended to illustrate how Jesus replaced his Bible.

The immediate context should settle the matter. Right before these antitheses, there is an introductory paragraph in which Jesus says unambiguously:

Think not that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches people so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

Don't be confused by the word "law." This is the Greek equivalent of Torah, which does mean law, but much more. Torah embeds law and instruction in story, a story which accents the grace of God. Torah—or its Greek equivalent *nomos*—always combines *haggadah* (a story that gives the community its identity and *halakah* (instructions which help the community to know how to respond to a gracious God). For this reason, I tell my students that Torah is a Story, a Liturgy, and a Way of Life. That is how Israel took it. Jesus himself came to implement the "law and the prophets" to the fullest extent, not to get rid of it. Should not the Church follow Jesus' lead?

Israel as a Figure of the Church

Just in case Jesus' attitudes toward his scripture are not enough to convince you about revising your attitude to Jesus' scripture, the Christian Old Testament, I have one final argument. I appeal first to an angel's pronouncement—a named angel at that—and then two metaphors that St. Paul used to articulate his take on the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles.

Let's deal with the angel first. When reading a biblical narrative, the implied narrator is always right. A character in the story might not be truthful, but the narration itself is always truthful. On occasion, a

narrator may speak through a character. That's what the Gospels do with Jesus—Jesus is always as truthful as the narration itself. What about other characters? It depends, of course. Some are dependable; others are not. Context will let you know. In the Gospels, besides Jesus the narrators sometimes use the words of angels as their mouthpiece. When the angel is named, that doubles down on an angel's truthfulness. Angels with names are a big deal.

The angel to whom I am referring is none other than Gabriel. He once visited a woman named Mary. You may have heard of her. She was astonished by the angel's greeting, in which he called her a "favored one." He also assured her that the Lord was *with* her (Lk 1:28-29). Then, sensing her fear, Gabriel informed her that she had found favor with God, that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit, and that she would bear a son, who she was to name Jesus (1:30-31, 34-34). But Gabriel had more to say. He went on to announce that this Son

Will be great, and will be called The Son of the Most High; And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end (1:32-33).

This Jesus, this Son of the Most High, will reign over the house of Jacob for all time. Whatever else we claim about Jesus as presented in the New Testament, it includes his being a king, like his ancestor David. A king, of course, must have a people over whom to rule. The people whom Jesus will rule over is the *House of Jacob*, that is, Israel, the elected people of God. Gabriel leaves no doubt whatsoever that Jesus came to rule as king over Israel. Remember the issue of Jesus' royal status in the various trial scenes in the Gospels (Matthew 27:11, 29, 37, 42; Mark 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32; Luke 23:2-3, 36-38; John 18:33-37, 39; 19:2-3, 12, 14-15, 19-22).

Well, perhaps Jesus was destined to be Israel's king, but how do Gentiles participate in that reality, especially since the Church has become almost exclusively a Gentile religion? Two of Paul's most impressive metaphors answer this question. The first metaphor is a botanical one. Paul imagines Israel as an olive tree. By grace, Gentiles have been grafted on to that tree, thereby becoming part of Israel. Granted, Paul agreed that some of the tree branches were broken off due to Israelite disobedience. But even these broken branches can be grafted on to the tree again, just as grafted Gentile branches are not immune from being broken off either (Romans 11:13-24). But neither of these possibilities obviate the fact that Gentiles have become part of the Israelite olive tree. Israel is Israel. By this grafting procedure, Gentiles are Israel, too.

The second metaphor is a legal one. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul stresses that Gentiles are part of the Israelite family through adoption (4:1-7). As adoptees, Gentiles enjoy all the privileges of any son or daughter. In short, there is absolutely no distinction between "biological" children and adopted children. Sons are sons, adopted or not. Daughters are daughters, adopted or not. Adoption erases any distinction whatsoever. This explains Paul's insistence that Gentiles in Christ have become Abraham's offspring (3:29). Abraham and Sarah, you will recall, is where God began this whole Israel thing, something that was not for the benefit of their ancestors only but of "all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3). Through adoption, Gentiles may claim Abraham and Sarah as their ancestors. If God is able to transform rocks into the children of Abraham and Sarah, God will have no trouble in doing that with Gentiles (Matthew 3:9).

Jesus is Israel's king. And, Gentiles are part of Israel, over whom Jesus reigns. This is good news. Just as God elected Israel, so God elects Gentiles in Christ. Everything God did for Israel God did for Gentiles in Christ. That is no cause for boasting, either on Israel's part or on the part of grafted and adopted Gentiles, since all this was achieved by God's lavish grace. Israel was not merely an ancient Near Eastern nation described in either TANAK or the Old Testament, it is the elect people of God. Gentiles have in Christ become part of Israel's drama. Precisely because Israel is a figure for the Church, the Church is theologically indistinguishable from Israel.

When Christians read the Old Testament, therefore, they are reading not about someone else, but about God's involvement with Israel, of which they are through Christ an integral part. Israel is a light to the nations; the Church through Christ is too. Israel was elected not only to be blessed but to be a blessing for everyone else; ditto for the Church through Christ. Through Israel, God set out to redeem, reconcile, and restore the whole created order; that holds for the Church through Christ as well. God performed a *righteousness* in calling Israel. Subsequently, He effected other righteous acts in Israel's behalf, such as the Exodus. What God did in Christ was yet another righteous act. Through that righteousness, God insured that we Gentiles were grafted on to Israel's tree and adopted as children.^[6] It is high time that the Church deals with its identity crisis in thinking about itself as somehow separated from Israel. If Jesus is your lord and your Christ/Messiah, that only makes sense if you are part of Israel, the elect people of God. Happily, God has included us Gentiles into Israel's story. Let's get with the program.

When Christians read their Old Testament fully conscious of their identity as a Church figured by Israel, they will need to embrace both positive and negative textual features. The positives are easier to absorb. When we conjugate the verbs of God's activity and decline the nouns of God's presence—again, using James Sanders' wonderful language—we enjoy all the things God did in Israel's behalf: electing them in the first place, remaining committed to the ancestors even when being laughed at, disobeyed, or being blithely faithless, rescuing the people from slavery, tending to them in the wilderness, providing turf, incorporating outsiders, not abandoning the community during the depressing period of the judges, establishing a prophetic ministry, acceding to the people's stupid request to appoint a king like all the other nations, sanctioning a temple, and not allowing judgment to be the final word when God found it necessary to send Israel into exile. These are the narrative positives. But there are others. We have Psalms to pray, proverbs to live by, difficult questions to deal with via Job and Ecclesiastes, and appropriate prophets with their deft ability to combine judgment and restoration in one message. This is a short list. The actual list would have to be much longer.

These positives lead to one major negative, which may turn out to be not in the final analysis negative at all. That negative involves divine judgment. By what conceit does the Church excoriate Israel for its many sins and even cheer God on for judging them justly while exempting itself from God's judgment for the commission of equally grave sins? Such arrogance is more than unseemly if, indeed, Israel is a figure for the Church (as it is, by the way, for Judaism). Modern Christians have identified as individuals and therefore make personal confessions. But as a Church we belong to a community. That requires us to be honest about our communal sins. It is entirely proper that we confess our individualistic sins but that should not make us blind to sins which the Church has committed collectively and in which we have been all too complicit.

I am neither a prophet nor a son of a prophet but one does not have to be either to remind the Church of at least two sins which are as serious as any of which Israel has been guilty. One is anti-Semitism, which has plagued the Church for almost two millennia. It is one thing to say that Christianity and Judaism disagrees theologically. No problem on that score. But we have not simply argued with Jews. Far too often we have vilified them. There is too much history of mistreatment of Jews to absolve ourselves by hiding behind our profound theological disagreements. The Church's anti-Semitism is even more regretful in that it has been a family affair. Judaism and Christianity are, to use Daniel Boyarin's phrase, joined at the hip.^[7] These are our siblings and most certainly our neighbors, but we have disgraced ourselves by our historic shabby treatment.

The other major sin on the Church's ledger is racism. In the context of the American Church, this is a sin so egregious that we continue to be plagued with it. For James Wallis, racism has been America's *original sin*.^[8] As with Israel, judgment is never God's last word. One would have thought that what we believe about Jesus the Christ made us so very aware of that grand hope. If Israel was judged by God for its constant flirtation with other gods, for exploiting the poor, for not attending to the needs of widows or orphans, for demanding a king like all the other nations, what makes the Church believe that it is not liable to judgment as well?

Conclusion

But I do not want to conclude on that note. In the biblical tradition, no matter how great the sin, God's final word is a gracious one. If God always concludes with grace, I need to follow suit and end on a positive note. So, whether you turn afresh to the Old Testament because in its Jewish version it was Jesus' own personal Bible or you do so because you realize that you are part of Israel, I promise the text will ultimately bless you. I already know what you are thinking. "I know just enough of that damn text to know that there are many sections in which there is not a single blessing." There are outrageous stories, hopeless contradictions, strange phraseology, maddeningly bad characters, a frightening God, impossible demands, a text that refuses domestication, a God that will not be managed, thundering prophets, arcane rules, ridiculous rituals, and many more difficulties that belie the possibility of blessing. Who are you kidding?

You're right, of course. The text is all this, and more. But why are you surprised? Jesus' Bible—the Christian Old Testament—describes a God that involves God's self in all of life's messiness, contradictions, ambiguities, highs, lows, victories, defeats, the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, death and life, sinful saints, and saintly sinners. I could go on, and on, and on. Think of it this way. The biblical text is just like that strange man with whom Jacob wrestled one dark night. Jacob would not let go until he received a blessing. He wrestled all night. He limped after the encounter. But he got a blessing—at least he thought so. In fact, he thought he had seen the face of God. Was he right? Who knows? But when you are desperate for a blessing, you are willing to wrestle all night. The Church should try a little wrestling itself. That story, as you well know, is in Jesus' personal Bible.

[1] The Church had long recognized the canonical status of the Jewish scripture. Until Marcion in the second century called into question the Jewish scripture, those who believed in Jesus—this includes the New Testament authors—were trying to show that what God had done in Christ was biblical, that is, in accordance with (Jewish) scripture. See James Sanders, “Torah and Christ,” in *Scripture in Its Historical Contexts* (Volume I: *Text, Canon, and Qumran*; Craig A. Evans, ed; Forschungen zum Alten Testament, 118; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018): 265. This essay was first published in 1975.

[2] The one exception is in 2 Peter 3:14-16, in which the writer implies that Paul’s writings are equivalent to “the other scriptures.” While 2 Peter is fully canonical, it reflects having been written no earlier than the second century C.E. when some in the church were beginning to acknowledge Paul’s letters as on a par with scripture, that is, the Jewish scripture. In any case, this epistle did not type Paul’s writings as part of a *new testament*. The New Testament list is not acknowledged until the fourth century, according to extant literature.

[3] There may have been a small Samaritan community that survived.

[4] James Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (2nd ed; London: SCM Press, 2006).

[5] The Torah and Former Prophets had been proto-canonical for a long time. The variation came with the Latter Prophets and the K^ētubîm/Writings, which were varied not only in Greek but in Hebrew Manuscripts.

[6] Non-Israelites had been part of Israel virtually from the beginning. See Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). The Gentile project to which I am referring occurs in the prophetic text about Israel’s destiny in the post-Exilic era and in the Gentile response to Jesus of Nazareth.

[7] Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 5.

[8] James Wallis, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).