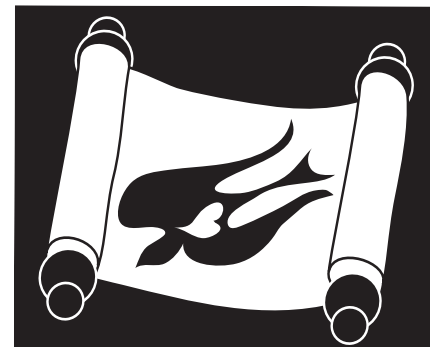


Archaeology of the Word



Traditional Jewish methods of Bible study for Christians
The Jewish biblical tradition is a rich source of insight and learning for Christians. This conviction was stated at Vatican II and has been reaffirmed in church statements down to our own day. Jewish approaches to the bible, such as those below, put us in touch with a tradition that was dear to the heart of Jesus, himself a Jew. Such methods, which have been honed over thousands of years via oral and written traditions, offer interpretative tools which are new to most Christians.

Archaeology of the Word

Excavation of a biblical text is like the work of an archaeologist digging into the ground. Clues on the 'surface' of the text direct the reader to a spot to 'dig'. As we dig we undertake a work of discovery, finding layers of meaning beneath the plain or literal meaning of the text. What are some of these clues? The examples below are taken from the *Akedah*, the Torah portion that tells the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-19.

Repetition. The phrase 'they went on together' in v.6 is repeated in v.8. To what is the author trying to draw our attention by this repetition?

Use of numbers in the text. 'On the third day...' is mentioned in v.4. What might be the significance of this day being mentioned by number?

Questions in the text are almost always meant to be answered by the reader. '...but where is the lamb for the offering-up?' In what way do I find myself asking a question like Isaac's in my own life? I identify with the questioner in the text.

Names can hold meanings which affect the interpretation of the text. The name 'Akedah' is the word for 'binding' in Hebrew. When we know that the binding of the sacrificial lamb was essential for the sacrifice to be carried out cleanly and successfully,

how does this knowledge affect our understanding of the text as a whole?

Structure. The *Akedah* finishes in v.19, just before the death of Sarah which is mentioned 7 verses later. What significance might we find in the proximity of the two stories?

Puzzling words, phrases, passages. 'Avraham...saddled his donkey,... he split wood for the offering-up...' (v.3) These phrases puzzled the sages. Abraham was a man of wealth, with servants. Why would he be doing the manual work himself?

Times. 'Avraham started-early in the morning' (v.3). Why the early start? Why might the time of day be noteworthy?

Rhythm. With the help of Hebrew-sensitive translations, we can find that the poetic rhythm of the text contributes to interpretation. In the *Akedah*, note the steady, almost robotic rhythm of Avraham's actions as he goes about a terrifying activity. What can we make of this?

Absence. Absence can also act as a clue. E.g., Abraham is a fearless negotiator in so many other Genesis texts, yet here he is silent and unquestioning. Why?

Echoes of other passages, cross-references. Compare the triplet in 22:1 with a similar triplet in Gen 12:1.

'Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion.'

- Pontifical Biblical Commission,
Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, 1995, IC.



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Rich young Man 1

Here we model some steps in the excavation of the Word, starting with one of the textual 'clues' from Jewish biblical interpretative methods. Our passage of focus is the Gospel account of the man who asked Jesus "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" in *Mark 10:17-31*. Often referred to as 'the rich young man', this is a text well known to Christians. As we shall see, Jewish perspectives help us to appreciate the text. Begin by reading the text aloud, in pairs (in havrutah), noting your reactions. Now: let's find a spot to dig...



Clue: Absence

Notice anything interesting about what is NOT said in the text? Any unusual omissions?

E.g., No further verbal reply to Jesus from the rich man is recorded. After v.20 no clarification is sought, no objection posed. This is surprising, given the intensity of the initial enquiry. The man ran and knelt before Jesus, interrupting his travel plans (v.17). There is nothing casual about this enquiry.

E.g., What does the rich man do when he departs? We don't know. Many presume that he rejected Jesus' invitation. But did he? The text reports on his emotional reaction, but not his practical intentions or final actions.

E.g., We might expect a rich man to be accompanied by a servant or two. Yet there is no mention of any. He is depicted as a sole character, arriving and departing completely alone. Why?

What the rabbis might have discussed

In the tradition of Jewish sages we can imaginatively ponder such questions. Surely the absence is for a reason. What hidden meaning can we uncover? In *havrutah*, probe and question the text.

E.g., The rich man, an observant Jew, faces a dilemma. He would be aware that riches are associated with blessing in Jewish thought. E.g., Abraham's prosperity is regarded as a sign of a faithful life rewarded by God. At the same time, true wealth is viewed in terms of a person's virtues, and power in terms of loving-kindness which overcomes all other powers, even death itself. In proposing a radical act of love for the poor as the answer to the rich man's desire to be totally oriented to God, Jesus stops the man in his tracks,

even silencing dialogue. The issues have been stated with terrifying clarity.

This Gospel sets up a lively point of debate, and not simply of intellectual interest. The brutal physical and social consequences of poverty were a subject of rabbinic comment. In renouncing wealth, the man's family would be exposed to risks previously eliminated. No wonder those listening to Jesus felt the tension. Can we too feel the tension? What do we risk when we renounce opportunities for material gain?

What new light does your discussion shed on the text ?

The Gospel describes an honest seeker confronted by a difficult truth. His shock and grief suggests that his self is deeply engaged by the challenge. Rather than being a sign of rejection, might not the rich man's sadness indicate that he has begun to embrace the choice to renounce his wealth and is appropriately grieving the material loss that is about to follow? Yes, he 'went away' (v.22), but Jesus had told him to 'go' (v.21) and sell his possessions before attempting to follow him. Perhaps the rich man leaves with that intention.

Patristic links

What did the Church Fathers say about this parable?

Interactive

Write a *midrash* about the struggle within the rich man as he later converses with his wife/family.

Survey the scene

Take stock of your findings. How has my appreciation of the text grown; my grasp of discipleship enlarged?

Continue looking for clues

What other clues of absence can you find in this text? Explore them.

From the Old Testament

A rich man's wealth is his citadel of strength, but poverty is the ruin of the impoverished. (Prov 10:15)

Better to be poor and walk in integrity than be crooked in one's ways even though rich. (Prov 28:6)

From rabbinic teachings

#299. Poverty is like death. A poor man is like one dead. (B. Ned 7b and 64b.)

#249. R. Assi said: Charity equals in importance all the other precepts combined. (B. BB 9a)

#266. R. Judah used to say: Ten strong things have been created in the world. ... Death is stronger than all, yet charity delivers from death, as it is written, "Charity delivereth from death" (Prov.10: 2). (B. BB 10a)

#348. R. Judah said: When a man denies the obligation to loving-kindness, it is as though he had denied the Root [of Being]. (Eccles. R. 7:1)

(See Bialik and Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends*)

From Church Fathers

St Augustine: 'The apostles were the first to follow in the practice of this complete self-giving. One who gives up both what one owns and what one desires to own, gives up the whole world.' (Letter 157, to Hilarius, 53)

St Augustine: '[the rich man] did not follow. He just wanted a good teacher, but he questioned who the teacher was, and scorned the identity of the One who was teaching. "He went away sad," bound up in his desires. "He went away sad," carrying a great burden of possessiveness upon his shoulders.' (Tractate on John 34.8)

Rich young Man²

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Clue: Repetition

Where in the text do we find repetition?

1) Three times we read that Jesus 'looked' and 'said'. Jesus looks at the rich man (v.21), at the disciples (vv.23, 27). Each time his 'look' precedes a strong statement about discipleship.

2) Jesus' statement about how hard it is, especially for the rich, "to enter the kingdom of God" appears in three successive verses (vv.23, 24, 25).

3) There is a repetition of words describing emotions: 'loved him' (v.21), 'shocked', 'grieving' (v.22), 'perplexed' (v.24), 'greatly astounded' (v.26).

Why these repetitions?

The Jewish sages pondered and discussed recurring images, words, phrases. Surely the text repeats itself for a reason! What hidden meaning can we uncover? In *havrutah* (pairs), probe and ask questions of the text.

Rabbinic-like discussion:

The three repetitive statements in (2) above appear in the centre of the Gospel passage, with exactly six verses on either side. The number three in itself has symbolism in Jewish biblical interpretation, denoting the entrance of divine power. Here, at the start of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, on the road to the cross, do we find an especially graced teaching moment? Are we being alerted here to what we might deem 'the heart of the matter'? A difficult teaching—its difficulty highlighted by the emotional responses of the characters—is reinforced by the three-verse repetition. Here, at the centre of the drama, we find the closest disciples of Jesus in a deliberate confrontation with the full truth about the kingdom of God.

Entering into the story, we might wish to deflect the focus back to Jesus' earlier interaction with the rich man who, by now (v.23) has left the scene. Instead, we find ourselves standing in the inner circle of disciples with nowhere to hide and the eyes of Jesus fixed upon us as he repeats his teaching. The final repetition is intensified by an incongruous image of a camel and a needle. Yes, we have heard correctly: the rich (self-reliant, controlling) face humanly insurmountable obstacles in seeking the fullness of God's reign. Even the most faithful tremble at the cost of discipleship.

What new light does this interpretation shed on the text?

Can we better appreciate the almost despairing question of v.26, 'who can be saved?' and Jesus' response in v.27? The trust in God required of a law-abiding Jew is not a religious achievement but sheer dependence on divine mercy.

What new questions does it raise about the characters?

Besides Jesus, who is the central character of this story? The rich man, or the circle of disciples? Are the disciples heroic followers of Jesus, or reminders of the vulnerability I recognize in myself?

Interactive

Gaze into the arresting eyes of Jesus in Rembrandt's portrait of Christ.

Patristic links

Visit patristic commentary on this text.

Survey the scene

Having emerged from your excavation, take stock of your findings. How has my appreciation of the text deepened?

Continue looking for clues

What other clues of repetition are found in this text? Go back and explore them.

A Midrash sample

It is related of Monobazus, King of Adiabene* who lived in the first century of the present era and became a convert to Judaism, that during a period of famine he gave away all his wealth to the poor. When his relatives upbraided him for squandering his riches in this manner, he replied to them, 'My ancestors store up treasures for below, but I have stored up treasures for above; they stored their treasure in a place over which force can prevail, but I in a place where force is powerless. They stored up treasures that yield no fruit, but mine will be productive. They stored up treasures of money, but I of souls. They stored up treasures for others, but I for my own good. They stored up treasures in this world, but I for the World to Come' (Tosifta Peah 4.18).

(See Bialik and Ravnitzky,

The Book of Legends, #225, p.665)

Old Testament links

If you treat gold like dust, and gold of Ophir like the stones of the torrent-bed, and if the Almighty is your gold and your precious silver, then you will delight yourself in the Almighty, and lift up your face to God.

(*Job 22:23-26*)

From the Church Fathers

Salvian the Presbyter: "Note what kind of riches it is that God loves. Note what wealth does he demand that we should store up for children. Note what possessions he especially orders us to guard: faith, fear of God, modesty, holiness, and discipline. Nothing earthly, nothing base, nothing perishable or transitory."

(*The Four Books of Timothy to the Church* 1.4.6)