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Christ Was Not an Inerrantist, so Christians Should Not Be Either: How Jesus Read His Bible

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Abstract: Jesus' interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures is skillfully eclectic, employing techniques of rejection, interiorization, prioritization, and synthesis. The eclectic nature of Christ's interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures specifically precludes any ascription of the contemporary strategies of rigorism or inerrantism to his hermeneutic. Instead, Christ's hermeneutic is best described as situational, agapic, and open—hence pastoral. It is situational insofar as no hermeneutical rule can predetermine how scripture will be applied to a situation. It is agapic insofar as all texts are interpreted in service of the divine love and repaired human relationship. It is open insofar as it: 1. is characterized by bricolage, hence open to experimentation with a variety of resources, 2. resists any rigidly predetermined interpretative outcome, thereby preserving openness to agapic outcomes, 3. valorizes the micronarrative, and 4. rejects totalization. Ultimately, Jesus' interpretation of scripture is pastoral, preferring human flourishing through scripture to blind obedience of scripture.

Keywords: Bible, Interpretation of; Jesus Christ; Historical Criticism; New Testament; Hebrew Scriptures

How Did Jesus Interpret Scripture?

How should Christians interpret the Bible? This question sparks internecine controversy amongst the followers of the Prince of Peace. It is also a pressing question, since our answer influences not only our theology, but our ethics and politics. To attempt an answer, in this essay I will analyze how Jesus of Nazareth interprets his own Hebrew scriptures. This investigation proceeds on the premise that Christ's method of interpretation is normative for Christians. If Christians want to know how to read, interpret, and enact scripture, then we should study how Christ reads, interprets, and enacts scripture, and our hermeneutic should imitate his. I will argue that, in his interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, is not a legalist, inerrantist, or rigorist. Instead, he uses a variety of hermeneutical approaches that allow him to express radical love in first century Judaea.¹

Fortunately, our investigation has plenty of data. Jesus' engagement with his Bible is almost exhaustive. According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus either directly quotes or alludes to 23 of the 36 books of the Hebrew Bible (if we count the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles as three books, not six). Jesus refers to all five books of the Pentateuch, the three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), eight of the twelve minor prophets, and five of the "writings". Jesus was a Jewish interpreter of

¹ I offer thanks to the anonymous reviewers of *Open Theology*, whose comments vastly improved this paper.

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scripture, engaged with other Jewish interpreters of scripture in passionate debates about how Jewish scripture should be interpreted.²

Before we begin, I must issue two disclaimers. First, in contemporary New Testament studies, there are many Jesuses: scholars distinguish Mark's Jesus from John's Jesus, the Jewish Jesus from the Greek Jesus, the historical Jesus from the scriptural Jesus, et al. So, as we ask how Jesus interpreted scripture, we also have to consider which Jesus we're talking about. Due to space limitations, this paper cannot address the vast literature on the subject. Instead, with a certain academic naiveté we will assume the *ecclesiastical* Jesus. That is, we will talk about the Jesus that churches talk about—the unified, composite character of all four Gospels, as presented in those Gospels. This Jesus—the Jesus of biblical literature, sermons, and prayers, not of academic historians—is the primary concern of most churchgoing Christians. He is the focus of their worship life, their moral exemplar, their teacher, and their savior.³

Second, this article will address multiple, generally conservative, interpretative strategies. Numerous adjectives describe these approaches—fundamentalist, evangelical, infallibilist, inerrantist, literalist, legalist, rigorist, etc. Individual scholars can offer precise definitions of these terms. For example, some evangelicals define biblical *infallibility* as without error in regard to religious matters, but not with regard to scientific or historical matters. More stridently, they can define biblical *inerrancy* as entirely without error on all matters, yet allow for occasional metaphorical or allegorical interpretation. Most stridently, they can propound biblical *literalism* and insist that the Bible should be taken as universally true without qualification.⁴

This paper will not distinguish between these interpretative strategies. Even if some scholars have precisely distinguished them, the academic community has not reached any consensus, and such scholarly precision has not reached the general populace.⁵ In any event, the thesis of this paper is that Christ used none of them, so Christians should use none of them. Our general term for these related approaches is “inerrancy,” but readers should interpret “inerrancy” in the broadest possible manner. When I assert that Christ is not an inerrantist, I am also asserting that he is not an infallibilist, literalist, legalist, or rigorist.

Jesus Christ and Christlike Christians

Our thesis, that Christ is not an inerrantist, so Christians should not be either, opens to an objection: As the Son of God, Jesus possesses the authority to contest scripture; we ordinary mortals do not. Jesus may offer a new interpretation of his Bible, but Christians should simply submit themselves to this new interpretation—not challenge or revise it.

This objection raises complicated issues in Christology. Was Jesus re-interpreting his Hebrew scriptures in order to provide us with a new, revised, authoritative, and lengthened Bible? Or was he providing a perfectly human expression of the one God who is love, and instantiating that love through his interpretation of scripture? How we answer this Christological question will determine how we interpret Jesus' re-interpretation of scripture—as a one-time event, not to be repeated, or as the initiation of a new school of interpretation, never to cease. This essay interprets Christ in the second manner, as a crystallized, human expression of God as love, whose work the Christian community is called to continue, instantiating love in a human universe deeply in need of healing.

In this view Jesus is Son of God and Son of Man, teacher, healer, prophet, friend, and savior. But he is also a moral exemplar, an enactor of the divine love who invites us to enact the divine love.⁶ As such, Christians are called to the imitation of Christ (Philippians 2.1-18). Therefore, his interpretation of scripture is not a once-off that should cease, but a beginning that should never end. In the imitation of Christ, we should interpret scripture as lovingly as possible, repairing a broken world, alleviating human suffering, and healing human brokenness.

² Evans, “Why did the New Testament Writers appeal to the Old Testament?”, 37.

³ Keith, “The Narratives of the Gospels and the Historical Jesus,” 437-441.

⁴ Jelen, Wilcox, and Smidt, “Biblical Literalism and Inerrancy” (1990), 307-308.

⁵ Jelen, “Biblical Literalism and Inerrancy” (1989), 328.

⁶ Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, 114-115.

Now, let us analyze Jesus' interpretation of his Bible and the strategies he used to reveal love through scripture.

Strategies of Rejection

In his interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus at times uses strategies of rejection. These are not new interpretations of an unchanging and inerrant scripture. They are contradictions of established law in favor of a new disposition toward love.

A. In Exodus 31.15 the LORD ordains strict observance of the Sabbath, with capital punishment for any infringement thereof. But in the New Testament Jesus heals the shriveled hand of a man on the Sabbath (Matthew 12.9-14).⁷

Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. (Exodus 31.15)

[Jesus] left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. (Matthew 12.9-14)

B. Leviticus 13.40-46 prescribes the social ostracism of those with skin diseases, but in Matthew 26.6-12 Jesus dines with Simon the leper.

The priest shall pronounce [the leper] unclean; the disease is on his head. The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Leviticus 13.44-46)

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. (Matthew 26.6-7)

C. The Hebrew scriptures prescribe love of neighbor and condone (implicitly) hatred of enemies, but Jesus commands love of enemies.

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies. (Psalm 139.19-22)*

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5.43-48)

D. Deuteronomy 22.23-24 prescribes capital punishment for *both* male and female adulterers. But in John 8.1-11 Jesus rescues an accused female adulteress from stoning (her partner apparently did not need rescuing). Jesus violates a biblical prescription in order to show forgiveness and compassion.

⁷ All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deuteronomy 22.23-24)

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8.1-11)

E. Leviticus 24.17-20 prescribes proportionate retribution, but Matthew 5.38-42 prescribes unlimited mercy.

Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered. (Leviticus 24.17-20)

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." (Matthew 5.38-41)

Strategies of Interiorization

While much of the Torah functions as a legal code that organizes and preserves a polity, Jesus occasionally reinterprets these legal demands as internal, spiritual dispositions. Jesus, in his interiorization of these texts, makes internal experience as important as external behavior.

A. For example, Exodus 20.13 forbids murder, but Matthew 5.21-22 also forbids anger.

You shall not murder. (Exodus 20.13)

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." (Matthew 5.21-22)

B. See also Exodus 20.14, which proscribes adultery, and Matthew 5.27-30 which proscribes lust.

C. See also Mark 7.14.23, where Jesus rejects dietary laws derived from the Torah (Leviticus 11.1-8). He insists that what comes out of the mouth defiles, not what goes into the mouth. In so doing, he interiorizes and personalizes ethics, evaluating actions by their influence on human relations rather than legalistic rigorism.⁸

Strategies of Prioritization

At times Jesus favors one Hebrew principle over another, or one scriptural emphasis over another, ascribing greater value to the preferred principle or emphasis.

⁸ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 51.

A. Generally, Jesus prioritizes the prophets' concern for social justice over the priests' concern for cultic worship. Indeed, he explicitly identifies himself with the prophet Isaiah's ministry to the suffering.

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. (Isaiah 61.1-3)*

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4.16-21)

B. Jesus prioritizes universalist ethics over exacting ritualism when he asserts that an active ethic of mutual regard epitomizes the Torah.

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7.12)

C. Jesus prefers Hosea's call to mercy over any rigorous observance of Sabbath law.

Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest. (Exodus 34.21)

*What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes away early.
Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets,
I have killed them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light.
For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6.4-6)*

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath." He said to them,

“Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’ [Hosea 6.6], you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.” (Matthew 12.1-8)

D. The Hebrew scriptures prescribe sacrifice through the priesthood (Leviticus 1.1-5) and honor of father and mother (Exodus 20.12, Deuteronomy 5.16). Yet Jesus prioritizes honor of father and mother over sacrifice through the priesthood by insisting that financial care of parents take precedence over temple support (Matthew 15.1-9).

If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish; you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the Lord. You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you. The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord; and Aaron’s sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (Leviticus 1.3-5)

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Exodus 20.12)

When the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

*‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’” (Matthew 15.1-9 (Isaiah 29.13))*

E. See also Mark 11.15-19, where Jesus goes to the temple in Jerusalem in order to participate in priestly, cultic worship. There, he expects to find the universal house of prayer envisioned by Isaiah 56.7. However, he is so distressed by the greed and mercantilism profaning the holy—already condemned by the Hebrew prophets (Jeremiah 7.11)—that he never makes it past the courtyard. Instead, he disrupts the commerce and earns the enmity of all who profit from it.

Strategies of Synthesis

When a Pharisee-lawyer asks Jesus to name the greatest commandment, Jesus instead named two—the commandment to love God (Deuteronomy 6.5) and neighbor (Leviticus 19.18), with a slight preference for love of God. These he declares to be similar but not identical (Matthew 22.34-40). This ascription of primacy to two commandments that conflict in certain situations generates an open hermeneutic resisting predetermined outcomes. Theism *and* humanism are valorized, placed into an unresolved relationship that demands interpretative discernment, not rigorist application.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6.4-5)

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19.18)

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” [Jesus] said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And

a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."
(Matthew 22.34-40)

Explicit Strategies of Interpretation

Jesus on occasion specifically addresses his hermeneutical strategy. Each of his statements allows for flexibility in interpretation.

A. Jesus refuses to *publicly* state the source of his own authority to earthly powers who challenge his earthly authority. Any such claimed authority would derive from human power structures in the present, rather than an openness to God's creativity in the future. For Jesus as the Christ, freedom from human standards of authority allows an agapic, loving interpretation of scripture that reveals the Kingdom of God but threatens the privileges of power.⁹

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."
(Matthew 21.23-27)

B. Nevertheless, *privately* Jesus claims that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matthew 28.18) Intriguingly, he asserts his authority in the passive voice. Nevertheless, we may reasonably infer that the source of his authority is God, not scripture. In so doing, Jesus places himself in line with the prophets, who also received their authorizations from God (see Isaiah 6.1-17), not scripture.

C. Elsewhere, Jesus explicitly identifies himself as having the authority of a prophet: *Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.'* (Mark 6.4) In first century Judaea both Sadducees and Pharisees considered the canon to be closed and the age of prophecy to be over. The Torah revealed the will of God, so to interpret God's will was to interpret the Torah. The divine authority of the Torah made scribes—lawyers, judges, and commentators on the law—the foremost human religious authorities.¹⁰ But Jesus rejects any limitation of revelation to scripture. By claiming the status of prophet Jesus asserts continuing revelation, new religious possibility, and a disruption of established religion.

D. Jesus claims that his status as prophet will be vindicated in the end by God: *And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.* (Luke 12.8, see also Matthew 10.32: *Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.*) Although Jesus derived no authority from any earthly source, God's future would bring a vindication of Jesus' ministry and teachings.

E. As noted above, Jesus claims for himself the title Son of Man (*ben 'ādām*), "one like a human being," or "the human one". (Mark 2.23-28) Others, such as Mary and Peter, refer to Jesus as the Son of God (Luke 1.35 and Matthew 16.15-17). Scholars disagree on the exact meaning of "Son of Man"¹¹ and "Son of God,"¹² and it isn't clear what applying both these terms to one person might mean.

However, the co-designations seem to imply some synthesis of humanity and divinity. Indeed, we can note that for Jesus theism is humanism. Hence, his interpretation of sacred scripture is humanistic. Concern

⁹ Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 55-57.

¹⁰ Barr, "Interpretation, History of," 305.

¹¹ Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 571-573.

¹² Montague and Hardwick, "Son of God."

for God is concern for people, and concern for people is concern for God. God and humans do not compete for our attention; they unite to sacralize our earthly work. Since God desires the flourishing of humankind, scriptural interpretation should produce human flourishing. Jesus, the one who unites divinity with humanity, manifests the divine concern for humanity in all earthly situations, including biblical exegesis.

F. At this point, given the extensive analysis above, we should note an inconsistent passage in which Jesus asserts that the Hebrew scriptures should be perfectly preserved and not amended or emended.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I [Jesus] have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5.17-19, see also Luke 16.17)

This passage is frequently cited by fundamentalist Christians as support for an inerrantist interpretation of the Bible. If Christ argued for the preservation of scripture, then Christians should preserve scripture.

Yet this passage presents multiple problems of interpretation. First, we can note that most New Testament scholars believe Paul wrote his letters before the author of Matthew wrote his Gospel. Problematically, Paul’s letters are thoroughly antinomian, “against law,” arguing that Christ’s agapic disposition has replaced legalistic rigorism. Matthew, perhaps in an attempt to assuage his primarily Jewish audience, reacts to this diminishment of the law by re-asserting its permanence.¹³ Faced with these two conflicting perspectives (Matthean and Pauline) on the early Christian community and its relationship to the Jewish law, we may prefer Paul’s both as earlier than Matthew and as more in keeping with Jesus’ own antinomian teachings.

So pronounced is the conflict between this passage and the tenor of Jesus’ teachings that some scholars doubt its authenticity. Most famously, The Jesus Seminar categorized Matthew 5.17-19 as unlikely to have been spoken by Jesus: “Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.”¹⁴ To justify this claim, they point out that this passage “nullifies Jesus’ relaxed attitude towards the Law, the centrality of the love commandment in Jesus’ teaching, and Jesus’ repeated distinction between the qualitative fulfillment of God’s will and the formal observance of the Law, especially the ritual Law.”¹⁵

Moreover, the absolutism of Matthew 5.17-19 conflicts with the eclectic strategies described above in which Jesus accepts some commandments, rejects others, prefers one to another, etc. It contradicts the immediately following antitheses of Matthew 5.21-48: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . .” Matthew 5.17-19 may prescribe preservation of the law, but everywhere else Jesus revises the law. Given the conflict between the claimed strategy and the implemented strategy, we should prefer the implemented theory as most representative of Jesus’ true reading of his Bible.

Jesus’ interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures employs strategies of rejection, interiorization, prioritization, and synthesis. When asked to name the authority by which he preached and healed, Jesus publicly refused to point to any one authority, but privately claimed all authority in heaven and on earth. Based on this analysis, we can make several observations about Jesus’ scriptural hermeneutic.

Jesus Rejects Fundamentalist Interpretative Strategies

Jesus was not a biblical inerrantist. His revision of scripture establishes that he did not deem it inerrant or unerring or free from error. Nor was Jesus a biblical “infallibilist”. In English, the term “infallibilism” derives from the First Vatican Council’s assertion that papal *ex cathedra* teachings are without error.¹⁶ A few decades later, American Christian fundamentalists applied it to the Bible, asserting that the Bible is

¹³ Sim, “Matthew 7.21-23,” 325-326.

¹⁴ Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*, 36-37.

¹⁵ Ibid, 140-141.

¹⁶ Lawlor, Ford, and Heft, “Infallibility,” 449-450.

uniformly inspired by the Holy Spirit, should be interpreted as literally as possible, and is applicable to all realms of human life, including history and science.¹⁷

Within fundamentalism, the terms “inerrant” and “infallible” hold a spectrum of definitions and ascribe to the Bible varying arenas of authority.¹⁸ For a relatively recent, widely distributed, and broadly accepted statement of biblical inerrancy we will use the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). In abbreviation, its authors assert:

- A. We affirm that the written Word in its entirety is revelation given by God. (Article III)
- B. We affirm that God’s revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive . . . We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. (Article V)
- C. We affirm that the whole of Scripture and all its parts, down to the very words of the original, were given by divine inspiration . . . We deny that the inspiration of Scripture can rightly be affirmed of the whole without the parts, or of some parts but not the whole. (Article VI)
- D. We affirm that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Biblical authors were moved to speak and write. (Article IX)
- E. We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses. (Article XI)
- F. We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. (Article XII)
- G. We affirm the unity and internal consistency of Scripture. (Article XIV)
- H. We affirm that a confession of the full authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture is vital to a sound understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. (Article XIX)
- I. Holy Scripture, as the inspired Word of God witnessing authoritatively to Jesus Christ, may properly be called *infallible* and *inerrant*. These negative terms have a special value, for they explicitly safeguard crucial positive truths . . . *Infallible* signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being misled and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters . . . Similarly, *inerrant* signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.¹⁹

Scriptural Interpretation in Jesus’ Day

In order to compare and contrast Jesus’ own interpretative method with contemporary inerrantism as summarized in the Chicago Statement, we must first orient ourselves historically. Of course, first century Jewish scriptural interpretation offers no precise equivalent to the Chicago Statement. But both offer high doctrines of scripture, and due to this shared valorization they also share a practice: biblical commentary is their main form of theological reasoning.²⁰

Canon

Some groups in first century Judaea, such as the Samaritans, limited revelation to the five books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But Jesus seems to have shared his concept of scripture with that of the Pharisees—a broader concept that includes the five books of Moses, the writings of the prophets, the histories, wisdom literature, and Psalms. This canon was more or less settled by about 200 BCE and was inherited by Christianity as the Old Testament.²¹

¹⁷ Gray, “The Inspiration of the Bible.”

¹⁸ Beale, “Can the Bible Be Completely Inspired?”, 4-7.

¹⁹ “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.”

²⁰ Barr, “Interpretation, History of,” 305.

²¹ du Toit, “Canon,” 102.

Dictation

The Hebrew scriptures themselves provide some support for dictational theories of revelation in which God says the words and a scribe writes them down. For instance, Exodus 20.22 states: “The Lord said to Moses: Thus you shall say to the Israelites: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I spoke with you from heaven.’” The non-biblical Book of Jubilees, which antedates Jesus by at least 100 years, depicts God dictating scripture to Moses (33.17). And the apocryphal Fourth book of Ezra, composed around 100 CE, depicts God dictating scripture to Ezra.²²

Heavenly Pre-existence of Scripture

The Book of Ben Sira, otherwise known as the Wisdom of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, antedates Jesus by approximately 175 years. That book associates the Torah with Wisdom (15.1) and maintains that Wisdom pre-existed Creation (1.1-5, see also Proverbs 8.22 and 3.19). By way of inference, the Torah pre-exists the world.²³

Similarly, the Mishnah was compiled in 217 CE, well after Jesus’ ministry, but collects the Oral Torah prevalent throughout the Second Temple Period (536 BCE – 70 CE), within which Jesus lived. The Mishnah asserts that the Torah is from heaven (Sanhedrin 10.1). It also celebrates Moses as a hero who brings the Torah from heaven to earth for the benefit of humankind (Shabbath 89a).²⁴

Legalism

Practices similar to fundamentalist biblical interpretation also existed. The law was an important part of the covenant between God and humankind, and God gave it directly to Moses in a unique historical event. Hence, correct interpretation of the law became paramount. This necessity developed into an exacting style of legal exegesis characterized by close attention to the text and strict rules of reasoning. As always, shared rules of exegesis did not produce the same exegesis: Jesus’ contemporaries, Hillel and Shammai, differed in their interpretation of scripture, perhaps due to class differences. The Pharisees and Sadducees debated the authority of Oral Torah, which the Pharisees asserted came from Moses but the Sadducees denied.²⁵ After Jesus, in the Rabbinic Period, strict legal exegesis became codified into the practice of *nimmuqim*, “reasonings” or “explanations” from the Torah. The reliability of these arguments and their conclusions was explicitly dependent on the reliability of the Torah itself, necessitating a high doctrine of scripture.²⁶

Literalism

Some Jewish schools of scriptural interpretation also preferred literal interpretation over allegorical interpretation. By 300 CE literalist interpretation became known as *peshat*, but Midrashic interpretation, as well as the Oral Torah, presaged this formal expression. Like contemporary fundamentalist interpretation, this literalism was sensitive to the use of metaphor and allegory, when metaphor and allegory were undoubtedly in use. Otherwise, a literal approach was preferred.²⁷

²² Jaffee, “Torah,” 9231.

²³ Rabinowitz and Harvey, “Torah,” 40.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Louis and De Vries, “Halakah,” 254-255.

²⁶ Fishbane, “Bible Interpretation,” 8.

²⁷ Longenecker, “Biblical Exegesis,” 14-15.

Permanence

The Torah itself claims that certain statutes cannot be abrogated: *All fat is the Lord's. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, in all your settlements: you must not eat any fat or any blood.* (Leviticus 3.16-17) Most Jewish scholars in first century Judaea believed the entirety of the Torah to be nonabrogable—incapable of being surpassed, revised, amended, or emended. The canon had closed and new revelation had ceased. For this reason, by the time of Jesus, the moral charisma of the prophets had been replaced by the legal authority of the scribes.²⁸

Jesus and Retroactive Inerrantism

Within his historical milieu, Jesus had options for interpreting the Bible that are similar to contemporary, fundamentalist, inerrantist approaches. But if we accept the Chicago Statement as a thorough declaration of biblical inerrancy, then if we apply it retroactively to Jesus' own interpretation of his Bible, we find that Jesus was not an inerrantist.

As we have seen above, Jesus does not submit to scripture in its entirety, nor does he declare it thoroughly absolute in truth value, nor does he construct theological arguments through the accumulation of relevant biblical texts. Jesus' one declaration of Biblical immutability, in the gospel of Matthew, is not preceded or followed by any unconditional advance of Biblical passages. He does not proof-text by offering isolated scriptural verses as evidence in support of his position. He rejects certain texts, interiorizes ethical commands, prioritizes some passages over others, and replaces a number of laws with his own radicalization thereof. These are not the practices of contemporary inerrantists, who vaunt the entire Bible as the infallible Word of God, equal in truth value, always useful for teaching and without error.

Moreover, Christ does not practice rigorism, "extreme strictness in interpreting or enforcing a law, precept, etc."²⁹ He rejects the blunt application of black and white texts to a kaleidoscopic world. Jesus gleans and heals on the sabbath, dines with tax collectors and lepers, chooses a heretical Samaritan as the hero of his most famous story (The Prodigal Son, Luke 10.25-37), saves a woman about to be legally stoned, and has a father *run* to his stubborn, rebellious, profligate son (Luke 15.11-32) who was also, according to a rigorist interpretation of the law, due to be stoned:

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid. (Deuteronomy 21.18-21)

To kill a child for disobedience and misbehavior seems rather harsh. In fact, Jesus considers it so harsh that he dismisses it. In place of unconditional obedience of scripture, Jesus reads the Bible with unconditional love.

Jesus Introduces Agapic Scriptural Interpretation

Christ's interpretation of his Bible was not inerrantist or rigorist. Instead, Christ's interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures is best described as agapic, situational, and open.

²⁸ Barr, "Interpretation, History of," 306.

²⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, "rigorism".

Agape (Unconditional Love)

Jesus does not treat all texts equally nor obey any text unquestioningly. Instead, a *principled selectivity* characterizes Jesus' hermeneutic, and the principle is *agape*, or unconditional love.³⁰

When asked to name the most important commandment, Jesus answers, '*The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.*' (Mark 12:30-31) Of the innumerable commandments in the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus chooses the two that urge love. In so doing, as he selects his top two, he rejects many other candidates— holiness regulations, ritual prescriptions, sexual restrictions, temple ordinances, wisdom sayings, dietary proscriptions, factional supplications, etc.

Thus, Jesus' interpretative strategy is agapically relational—it promotes *love* between persons, including between human beings and the person of God. He lifts up the commandments to love God and one another, lending his interpretation of scripture a moral direction while preserving its situational freedom. With regard to method, his interpretation of scripture enacts the law of love, even as the law of love is derived from scripture. Although this interdependence may be derided as circular, it can more charitably be interpreted as internally consistent and faithful to God, who is loving relationality.³¹

Jesus' interpretation of scripture is relational insofar as it heals the relationship between persons. Scripture is concerned with the quality of human relationships, both individual and social. Yet in the Hebrew scriptures we can find a tension between legalists and prophets, between those who sought to follow the letter of the law and those who sought to establish justice. Jesus firmly places himself in the prophetic camp, aligning himself with social critics such as Isaiah who prioritizes righteousness over fasting (Isaiah 18:1-9).

Jesus is never narrow for scriptural reasons. Whenever there's a conflict between law and compassion, Jesus prefers compassion over law. He goes to the temple where the priests are, finds greed and corruption, and overturns tables. He exalts financial care of parents over Torah demanded temple giving. He never sacrifices anything, except his own life. His concern is for the marginalized, not for the preservation of a corrupt social order. In the end, Jesus breaks any rule that does not foster human flourishing. He functions not as a priest functions in the temple, but as a prophet functions in society, a rabbi functions in community, and God functions in humanity.

By rejecting rigorism Jesus frees himself from any limitations that scripture might impose on his compassion. He does not appear overly concerned that this particular agapic act contradicts this particular Hebraic law. Instead, in whatever situation he finds himself, his interpretation of scripture enacts the divine invitation to think, act, and feel lovingly.

Situational

Jesus' scriptural hermeneutic is situational because he refuses to define it outside of any particular context.³² Hence, the meaning of scripture only arises within a situation. Abstraction renders scripture meaningless and insignificant because scripture was not created for abstract persons in abstract situations. Human realities and human relationships offer scripture its reason for existence, so it must be related to these realities in order to gain meaning. There, in dynamic relationship to dynamic contexts producing dynamic interpretations, scripture gains its dynamic significance.

As Jesus moves from situation to situation, he illustrates the divine love while always leaving play in his interpretation. Unchained from legalism and rigorism, he preserves the freedom to spontaneously express agape in his next encounter. Each interpretation is provisional and no interpretation is normative. Aristotle argues that plot twists should be surprising but, after the fact, seem obvious. Similarly, Jesus' interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures is always surprising but, after the experience, seems self-authenticating, as if that

³⁰ Sydnor, *Rāmānuja and Schleiermacher*, 17-18.

³¹ Chang, "The Love Commandment," 275-276.

³² Ballard, "The Scriptures in Church and Pastoral Practice," 38-39.

is the way the passage should always have been read. On the ground, his disciples could never know exactly how he would express the divine love next. They only knew that it would be expressed again, freely and variably, as elicited by the particular situation.³³

For example, Jesus does not obey the law prescribing the shunning of lepers, nor does he expect Simon the leper to obey that law. In an expression of loving relationality, Christ dines with Simon to express the Kingdom's inclusion of the excluded. He teaches women and prioritizes their religious education over their traditional duties. (Luke 10.38-42) He heals on the sabbath, despite capital prohibitions against working on the sabbath. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus provides an explicit justification for his approach, stating, "*The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath.*" (Mark 2.27) In other words, his hermeneutic is humanistic, not legalistic, intended to increase human well-being in every situation. As noted above, for Jesus theism is humanism and humanism is theism.

Jesus' own use of parables suggests a preference for multiple micronarratives (accumulating "little stories") as a superior mode of communication than any one, totalizing metanarrative (the one "great story"). His parables are some of the greatest stories ever told. For example, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan to answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" This micronarrative provides a certain insight into the term "neighbor," opening up the potential for a universalist ethic in which one chooses to become a neighbor who treats everyone as neighbor. Having presented this ethical and experiential possibility, hearers are invited to enact it in their own micronarratives. Thus, Jesus offers a transformation of our collective stories by infusing them with moral significance and universalist hope. He does not compel their absorption into a master story. Agapic love, as Jesus practices it, resists exhaustive explanation. Instead, as love thirsts for life it rejects resolution and moves forward, always seeking to express itself in new ways and new situations as we become new people.³⁴

Open

Jesus' interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures cannot be reduced, predicted, or systematized. It eludes capture because Jesus is constantly introducing the Kingdom of God into a world that uses the concept of God more than it loves the person of God. Just as the Kingdom exceeds what we could imagine or would dare to hope for, so Jesus' scriptural interpretation exceeds what we would anticipate. Hence, Jesus' interpretation of his Bible is *open*—open to the manifestation of agapic relationality, open to the disclosure of God in that particular situation, open to a future that the past deems impossible. We cannot anticipate how Jesus will interpret the Bible because we cannot imagine how the Kingdom will manifest itself.

By way of consequence, Jesus' disputes with the Sadducees and some Pharisees reveal a rejection of the rigid, totalizing code that the Torah had become in certain legalistic schools. The human quest for comprehensive systems seeks climax in totality, stability, and order. However, such totality limits potential, conforming the future to an unchanging norm inherited from the past. In contrast, Christ preaches the Kingdom of God, an unfolding future that replaces our despondency with anticipation. The bitter past cannot determine this wondrous future, nor can a totalizing interpretative strategy constrain it.

For Jesus, humans co-create the future with God through the enactment of God's imagination. Once God's vision captures us, the universe has a goal and human existence has a purpose. This purpose is difficult. It demands physical effort, faithful perseverance, intellectual exertion, and persistent hope.³⁵

It also demands that we forego mastery. Openness to the Kingdom of God precludes any hermeneutic of control, any hermeneutic that claims ownership of the text. It forbids any utilization of the text to preserve one's own advantageous position in a stratified society. Indeed, it insists on the transformation of society as we know it into society as God intends it. Openness to the Kingdom demands that we live more deeply than we can think. It demands faith.

³³ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 75-77.

³⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 67.

³⁵ Rhodes, *Co-Creating*, 53-55.

The Kingdom always exceeds expectations. As Christ leads us toward God's future, the journey becomes the destination. Reflecting this, Christ's leadership valorizes sojourning and its emphasis on locality, dynamism, and spontaneity.³⁶ Our law along the way is not a totalized law that grants us certainty but a new law that thrives in freedom—the law of love: “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” (John 13.34)

As open, free law, Jesus' hermeneutic is *antilegalistic*, rejecting any mechanistic process by which a certain and foreordained interpretation can be reached. The details of the situation, married to the love of God, elicit his scriptural interpretation as a spontaneous response to the circumstances at hand. Jesus is both a situation ethicist, expressing God's love within the infinitely complex panoply of situations that he faces, and a situation exegete, providing the most loving interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures within the details of the moment.³⁷

To apply a twentieth century term to his practice, Jesus unites his hermeneutic to the situation through the practice of *bricolage*. He improvises within the moment and tinkers with his resources, making use of the materials at hand in order to instantiate agapic love. Just as Christ unites the divine love with a human person, his hermeneutic unites sacred scripture with a particular situation, lovingly. Whether the situation involves a woman accused of adultery, a hospitable leper, a man with a withered hand, hungry disciples, local agricultural practices, parents in need of support, or legal polemicists, Christ uses the immediate situation as an opportunity to express universal love in a local context. As the Kingdom of God unfolds, his interpretation of scripture unfolds with it.³⁸

Good Scriptural Interpretation Is Pastoral

For scripture to be life-giving it cannot become a Procrustean bed into which human social existence is jammed. Instead, it has to be capacious, as capacious as the Kingdom it commends. Alas, algorithmic interpretations of the Bible such as rigorism and infallibilism curve in on themselves. They enervate a book that was meant to give life. No algorithm can cage Jesus' Bible, just as no tomb can hold Jesus' body.³⁹

Situations always exceed our pre-existing thought about them. Language is finite and imprecise relative to the infinitude of human stories, the complexity of moral circumstances, and the freedom of conscious agents. By its very nature language inclines us to interpret continua as polarities, to think linearly about dynamic, webbed realities, and then to confuse our linguistic shorthand for actual reality.

But Jesus' interpretative strategy overflows the language that conveys it, because it is an *applied* hermeneutic, not an abstract one. Scripture serves the human good, not languaged norms, in every situation. Just as all good theology is pastoral theology, all good scriptural interpretation is pastoral scriptural interpretation.

And what does a pastor do? A pastor meets the person where they are, in their context, helping them in the situation at hand. Pastors help and heal. Pastoral theology is theology that arises from life, from human experience of God and neighbor. Pastoral theology then returns to Christian communal experience. It is pragmatic since it concerns itself with outcomes such as healing, reconciliation, and inclusion. It attempts to move the situation from more suffering to less suffering, or from meaninglessness to purpose, or from anxiety to calm. It helps and heals.⁴⁰

Christ's scriptural interpretation is pastoral. It helps the person in their situation—it heals, it forgives, it includes. Christians' scriptural interpretation should do the same—heal not hurt, love not fear, include not exclude. To the extent that Christians do these things, we are interpreting scripture as Christ did.

³⁶ Phan, “Woman and the Last Things,” 207-210.

³⁷ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 27.

³⁸ Ermarth, “Postmodernism.”

³⁹ Schneiders, “The Bible and Feminism,” 51.

⁴⁰ Scheib, “Love as a Starting Point,” 715-716.

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