

An Introduction to the Hermeneutics of Jesus and Paul

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When Christians talk about hermeneutics, what they are talking about how the Bible is to be interpreted. As you no doubt already know, what is considered “proper hermeneutics” is a matter of so many different opinions, all of them of course subjective. Frank Schaeffer aptly points this out in *Hellbound?*. If you have not seen that film, I highly recommend it.

For conservative Christians (i.e. fundamentalists), the Bible is to be viewed as the inerrant, capital W, “Word of God.” If you go to conservative “bastion-of-truth” *gotquestions.org*, you will find the following advice: “The most important law of biblical hermeneutics is that the Bible should be interpreted literally.”¹ In other words, according to them, a “plain” reading of Scripture is preferred—nay—mandated whenever possible. I guess the only exception is when something is an *obvious* analogy. But isn’t that even a matter of subjective opinion? But in the West, and in the conservative tradition I came from, this is the dominant opinion—emphasis on opinion. (As a quick aside, I had someone counter my interpretation of the “Parable of the Sheep and the Goats” in my book *All Set Free* by saying it is not a parable. And so, according to his opinion, my conclusion is false because it hinges on the notion that the parable isn’t in fact a parable. Do you see where this could go?)

Now, liberals on the other hand, have a different approach. They are the cherry-pickers of the Bible. And while this shouldn’t be viewed as the *slight* that it is often intended to be, this way of interpreting the Scriptures can be just as problematic, especially if the wrong cherries are picked. And various people within this camp will subjectively argue which cherries are the good ones and which are the spoiled ones. So, again, whose subjective opinion is correct? And how do we know?

Well, before answering those questions, I will just say that everyone cherry-picks the Bible . . . liberals and conservatives alike (although perhaps the conservatives won’t admit it). But it’s true. How do I know this? First off, and other than it being fairly self-evident, I know this because there is something like 30–40 thousand different Christian denominations so we can be fairly certain different groups place emphasis on different passages in Scripture. Second, and I ask this a bit tongue-in-cheek, and in a heretic-group such as this, but: If not everybody cherry-picks the Bible, then why aren’t all fundamentalists Universalists, for Paul *clearly* teaches that “one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for *all*,”² that God will “be merciful to *all*,”³ that “God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all* things,”⁴ and that “*all* will be made alive in Christ.”⁵ Now this isn’t my cut-and-dried argument for universal reconciliation (as if there is a cut-and-dried argument for anything), but rather, is simply to show that what is to be viewed as

¹ <http://www.gotquestions.org/Biblical-hermeneutics.html>.

² Romans 5:18.

³ Romans 11:32.

⁴ Colossians 1:20.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:22.

“literal” depends on who you ask.⁶ If you ask me, these cherries go in the “literal” basket, but if you ask others, they go in the “not literal” basket.

But I digress . . .

So, as I just asked earlier: “how do we know how to pick the right cherries?”

Well, that will be the goal of my talk today. Hopefully, by the end of our evening, other than perhaps having too much to drink, we will have a picture of how to properly interpret Scripture. But to do this, we need a guide. A Teacher. A Master. And since we are Christians, we will follow Jesus in all ways—as he commands on multiple instances⁷—even in the specific interpretive pattern he follows. Then I will show you just one instance where Paul followed suit.

What we will be doing now is approaching multiple passages that model how Jesus creatively quoted his Scriptures. In short, what we will notice is that, in a highly consistent fashion, he is always removing God’s vengeance and retribution. What I have done is that I have created imaginative readings of the various stories we will be exploring in an attempt to make this as interesting as possible. Take note that I do in fact take some creative license on the details of the events. (You do call this “Happy Heretics,” correct?) I’m just trying to fit in.

As we read the stories, we will bear in mind one contextual matter; which is that we will acknowledge that during the Second Temple period (the period Jesus lived in); there were various approaches to the Jewish faith and specifically to Torah. For instance, the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed on whether God gave Moses oral law in addition to the written law of Torah. A third group, known as the Essenes, believed one’s exegesis needs to be inspired. So, needless to say, these conversations and arguments have been going on for a long time. In fact, I’ll quickly mention that that is one key reason as to why the Hebrew Scriptures are so important, as they include the dissenting voices of their own faith (the prophets especially). As Richard Rohr says (I just cannot recall where), without these voices, we would have religious idolatry. Even with these voices, we had that but that is another topic for another time.

In this first reading, we will be imagining as if we are really present for Jesus’ very first lesson after his baptism and subsequent calling into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1–13). Keep in mind that this will be the first thing a Spirit-filled⁸ Jesus teaches after conquering his dark side.⁹ That is why I believe it is a good place to begin our journey.

⁶ For my most detailed exegetical argument for Paul’s “universalism,” see my essay entitled “Paul’s Inclusive Theology: a Consistent View Throughout the Pauline Corpus,” at: <http://www.preachingpeace.org/teaching-resources/articles/25-articles-ebooks/articles-by-friends-of-preaching-peace/335-paul%E2%80%99s-inclusive-theology-a-consistent-view-throughout-the-pauline-corpus.html>.

⁷ See Matthew 4:19, 9:9, 16:24; Mark 1:17, 10:21; Luke 5:27, 18:22; John 1:43, 21:19.

⁸ Luke 4:14.

⁹ *Ha satan*, or *devil* in Greek, is a label and not a “person.” It is my belief that Jesus, during his forty day venture into the wilderness, conquered his own “satanic potential” rather than a sort of quasi-person with its own metaphysical reality. That is not to say that the devil is not real, because it is. But, as my friend Brad Jersak has said

Imagine that you are living in first-century Nazareth. You are at the synagogue on a fine Sabbath afternoon when Jesus walks in. Nobody that you know has seen him since his baptism at the Jordan River. Forty days and nothing! But here he comes now. You think to yourself: “Where has he been? What has he been doing?” You look around and conclude that each person must have been thinking this same thing because everyone has that look of anticipation on their face.

After a time, it becomes Jesus’ turn to read. He stands up, and the attendant of the synagogue walks over and hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Without hesitation, Jesus searches for a passage. You notice that he seems to know exactly where he is going. But before you can even predict which passage, Jesus stops. He’s obviously found what he was looking for!

Jesus takes a brief pause, gathers himself, and reads:

“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.” (Luke 4:18–19)

Then Jesus rolls up the scroll and gives it back to the attendant.

You are befuddled: “hasn’t he forgotten something?” you think. “Surely, Jesus is aware that Isaiah 61:2 reads: “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God.” But no, he does not seem to think he has forgotten anything. Jesus concludes: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

on numerous occasions, “It is worse than you think!” So in this way, what Jesus conquers is much more profound in that he conquered something within his “self,” rather than in an “other.”

At this point, things begin to get contentious.¹⁰ One member of the crowd even sarcastically retorts, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:22) But Jesus is having none of it! He counters: “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:24–27).

Now things start to explode. You are at your wits end. Not only does Jesus come in here with his “creative exegesis” of Isaiah, but then he has the nerve to go on about how Israel’s prophets aided and comforted outsiders, heathens, hated-people of God. Thoughts are racing through your head: “How can Israel be delivered if God isn’t vengeful? How can a prophet suggest God has such care for our enemies, the Sidonites and the Syrians? Who does Jesus think he is! Some prophet he is!”

You are not alone in your rage. Everyone is starting to become irate and in doing so, begins to validate each other’s anger. Jesus takes quick action and backs away as you and the others close in on him. You drive this fool from the synagogue, as he stumbles his way toward the edge of a cliff. Now’s your chance! You go to reach for him but he slips from your grasp. In fact, somehow, he slips past everyone. Furious, you shove your way through the crowd and head back to the synagogue, where you are convinced blasphemy had just taken place in a most overt way.

Okay, so I realize that I took creative liberty on some of the details of the story. But the truth of it remained. What I wanted to do is paint a picture of the anticipation people would have likely had prior to Jesus’ first (recorded¹¹) post-baptism teaching. I wanted us to envision the disappointment they would have felt after having heard such a “creative” reading of such a popular passage from Isaiah.¹² And lastly, I wanted us to taste the rage they would have felt if

¹⁰ In Luke 4:22, the phrase “all spoke well of him” is actually from the Greek phrase *kai pantes emartyroun auto*, meaning “all bore witness to him.” Translators have decided to interpret the phrase positively (*all spoke well*) rather than negatively (*all spoke ill*). Because they have done this, they have in turn caused Jesus’ sarcastic retort—“no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown”—to not make any sense. A better interpretation would be for the people’s “bearing witness” to be a dative of disadvantage (*all spoke ill*). With this interpretation, it would then make sense for Jesus to declare that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” (Luke 4:24). (Hardin, *Jesus Driven Life*, 60–61)

¹¹ Prior to Jesus coming to Nazareth, Luke 4:14–15 tell us that he had been teaching in Galilee and that he was “praised by everyone.” But there is no mention of what he had been teaching.

¹² Michael Hardin makes an analogy between Isaiah 61:1–2 and John 3:16. In essence, the importance of Isaiah 61:1–2 for Jews is akin to what John 3:16 is for Christians. (Ibid.)

some “prophet” came into their synagogue to challenge their theology and to strip them of the only thing they had over and against the Romans; namely divine retribution.

Jesus is going to do something similar when addressing some of John the Baptist’s disciples. In fact, for this next story, we will be stepping into John the Baptist’s sandals,¹³ in order to “experience” what Jesus is creatively, yet consistently, doing here.

You are now John the Baptist and it has been some time since King Herod has imprisoned you (Luke 3:20). You just couldn’t help but speak out against the Herodian family system and Herod had had enough.¹⁴ From your jail cell you wonder whether Jesus is “the one who is to come” that you have spoken of (Luke 3:16–17). You are perplexed because Jesus just didn’t quite fit the description you and most all others had in mind. To be frank, we all know you are still stuck in the mindset that vengeance can be found in the divine.¹⁵ You invoked such a view in Luke 3:7–9. But there was something about Jesus and you have to find out the truth. So you send some of your disciples to Jesus in order to ask him the burning questions that you just need answered.

When your disciples find Jesus, they ask him if he is the one. Instead of a “yes” or “no” answer, he offers the following: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:22–23). But you know this about Jesus already. You are aware of the miracles. Isn’t that a part of why you would be sending your disciples to Jesus in the first place? So what is Jesus really saying?

You start to think. As you reflect, you fix your mind on the Scriptures. You list everything Jesus says of himself and the subsequent Hebrew scriptural reference he is using:

The blind receive their sight (from Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 61:1–2)

The lame walk (from Isaiah 35:6)

The lepers are cleansed (from 2 Kings 5:1–27)

The deaf hear (from Isaiah 29:18; 35:5)

¹³ To use a (Brian) “McLarenism.”

¹⁴ Hardin, *Jesus Driven Life*, 63.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The dead are raised (from 1 Kings 17:17–24)

The poor have good news brought to them (from Isaiah 29:19)

After pondering for some time on what Jesus could possibly be doing here, it dawns on you. Every quote from Isaiah that Jesus makes has an attached passage that invokes the “vengeance of God” that you yourself hold on to. By leaving that part off, Jesus is giving you clues into the nature of God! Isaiah 29:20: “~~And those alert to do evil shall be cut off.~~” Isaiah 35:4: “~~Here is your God. He will come with vengeance.~~” And Isaiah 61:2: “~~And the day of vengeance of our God.~~”

Then the clincher comes, when Jesus says: “And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:23). Surely, this offense that he is causing is the same one he caused in the people at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18–30). This is the offense of a non-retributive God. This is the scandal caused by a God who blesses both the righteous and the wicked.¹⁶ This is the problem almost all seem to have when others suggest divinity transcends borders—religious and national—in order to bless everyone. But Jesus wants you to take comfort and be blessed by not taking offense at this reality, this divine truth.

Obviously, I am speculating on many of the details of this. I have no idea whether John the Baptist ever accepted Jesus as “the one who is to come.” Perhaps Herod executed John without him ever really knowing the truth. Perhaps not though! My point then was to simply model what Jesus was doing when he creatively answers John’s disciples. Like his creative reading of Isaiah 61:1–2 (from Luke 4:18–19), Jesus is offering clues into how he views his heavenly Father. And he offers insight into the fruit that one reaps when they can accept this non-vengeful understanding of God . . . “blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

In the next section, we will head on over to Matthew 5, where Jesus will offer what is undoubtedly one of the most radical teachings in all of the New Testament. It is also a place where Jesus continues his creative interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, remaining consistent in his framing of a new picture of both God and of the human being.

There is a buzz in the air. You have caught word of a man named Jesus, who has been “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23). No doubt, you have heard, even seen some things in your life, but there is something different about this man. So you go to the mountain where he is preaching in hopes to listen in.

¹⁶ See Matthew 5:45.

Immediately, you are drawn to his teachings. They resonate deep within you and so you cannot help but be intrigued. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, and the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5:3–10). But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on, offering profound teaching after profound teaching concerning such things as anger, adultery, divorce, making oaths, retaliation, and enemy love. You think to yourself: "Yes! What amazing things this man is saying. This is what we've been waiting for!"

Amidst your excitement, you also notice something interesting: which is, that Jesus is using a certain tactic in his teaching. You see, over the years, you have become quite adept at memorizing large portions of the Scriptures. So you take note, that on multiple occasions, Jesus begins a teaching from Torah, and then follows that by putting a unique interpretive "spin" on it. The parts you really gravitate toward are his commands on radical non-violence. You smile to yourself as you bear witness to this teacher boldly preach to disavow the "eye for an eye" mindset,¹⁷ even though the Scriptures clearly state justice is defined as such in Leviticus 24:19–21. You hear him teach people to "love thine enemy,"¹⁸ even though many of your religious brothers and sisters, following in the footsteps of many of your forefathers, assuredly refused to do so. And you hear this Jesus teach of a God who "sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous,"¹⁹ even though this is a direct contradiction of what most have taught, which is that God's "curse is on the house of the wicked" (Proverbs 3:33).

After Jesus concludes his teachings, you head home blessed and inspired. The more he spoke, the more his words resonated with you. They were parabolic, full of mystery and intrigue, and contained enough depth to keep any seeker of God busy their entire life. You can't help but think: "What kind of prophet is this?" A part of you even believes that he could be "the one," but it was far too early to tell. Plus, predictions aren't your thing anyway. Not only that, but what Jesus was teaching was not exactly normal for most messianic expectations.²⁰ Yet, you knew that this man was something to behold and that

¹⁷ Matthew 5:38–42.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:44.

¹⁹ Matthew 5:45.

²⁰ Hardin, *Jesus Driven Life*, 65.

people should probably pay attention to him regardless. Your only fear then, based on how radical he seemed, is that certain people eventually would.²¹

As you can probably tell, my purpose in highlighting what I did, was to elucidate the continuity in how Jesus exegetes the Hebrew Scriptures. In Luke 4 and 7, Jesus omits any portion of a passage that mentions the alleged “vengeance of God.” He will even stop a quote midsentence if he has to, as he does when he quotes Isaiah 61:2. And then in Matthew 5, Jesus changes our entire thinking about God when he argues that the perfection of the Heavenly Father is defined by a love for enemies and a blessing of both the wicked and the righteous.²²

I contend that all of this reframing is done because many Jews in the Second Temple period had certain dualistic theological expectations. That is to say, they believed that God blesses Israel (that is, when they are obeying God) and punishes her enemies. In most people’s minds, “God is for ‘us’ and against ‘them.’” But, in stark contrast, highlighted in Matthew 5, Jesus announces that God is for us and that there is no “them.”

Now, this final imaginative reading will be based on Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Allow me set the stage for the letter. First, the Galatian churches were founded by Paul. He has deep love for these people. What has happened is that false teachers have infiltrated and begun teaching a false gospel (Galatians 1:6–7). So Paul is sending this letter to clarify a few things. And you know what, he is pissed!

Imagine now that you are in your home church in Galatia. You have just received a letter from Paul and in the back of your mind; you know what this is about. And knowing Paul, you know it isn’t going to be pretty. You don’t blame him though. You understand Paul’s gospel. You understand the grace. And you despise the law, which in the end, leaves no room for grace. But it seems many in your church have been seduced by a false gospel, one that places emphasis on the law and specifically Torah interpretation and holiness codes, rather than on the Risen Christ.

“Been there, done that!” you think.

Then the church gets into the letter. As it is read, you grow more and more excited, albeit somewhat apprehensive. Paul is really giving it to the false teachers, going so far as to call those who fall for their trap: “foolish Galatians!” (3:1) (I actually like my friend Michael Hardin’s translation of “you stupid shits!”)

²¹ I am referring to both the Romans, and the Jewish authorities.

²² In Luke’s version (the Sermon on the Plain), the Father’s perfection is described as mercy. Luke 6:36 tells us to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

As Paul continues in his letter, you notice something. You see, you have always been sort of a hermeneutics nerd. Interpreting Torah was always “your thing.” So when Paul writes: “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,” your curiosity is piqued. You cannot help but let loose a wry chuckle, because you know that Deuteronomy 21:23 clearly states that “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” But not according to Paul. No way! And you are right there with him in knowing that it is in fact the law that is a curse. That is why you cannot stand the false teacher’s message. It was cancerous. It was death, just as Paul would later state in Romans 7:9–10. A little circumcision here (Acts 11:2–3, 15:1–2), a little kosher meal there (Galatians 2:11–12). “Enough!” you thought. The gospel was about trusting the faith of Christ, not about which laws to keep. It was about a God who was only for people, not a God who is seen to have cursed those who end up hanging from trees.

The traditional view of God—in Judaism and outside of it—was that God blesses “his people” and curses others, that he blesses those who “are righteous” and curses those who “are wicked.” The problem with this, then, is that anyone whom the religious authorities deemed “wicked” would end up hanging from a tree. Because of Jesus, this was exposed as false, a mythology. So when Paul gets to something like Deuteronomy 21:23, he knows that just because someone ends up hanging from a tree, doesn’t mean they are “cursed by God.” In fact, quite the contrary, as in 1 (as opposed to 2²³) Corinthians 12:3, Paul clearly states that “no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’” Thus, in Galatians 3:13, the “of God” is dropped from the curse of Deuteronomy 21:23.

Okay, so that was four unique instances where both Jesus and Paul omit certain theological assumptions people had. What both attempt to do is change the notion that God A) is vengeful and B) sends curses. Jesus creatively exegetes the Hebrew Scriptures in order to paint a picture of the Father that he would then model when he goes to the cross—non-violently and forgiving of those who send him there. Paul would then follow suit in understanding God as one who doesn’t curse those who end up hanging from a tree. Rather, both vengeance and cursing is something humans do.

My main goal tonight was to show that while Jesus and Paul quoted the Hebrew Scriptures, they did so “creatively.” I could never understand why my pastors would say “Because Jesus quoted the Old Testament that means he validated it.” That is like saying because I cite something from a book it means I agree with everything the author is saying. That just isn’t going to fly when it comes to Jesus’ or Paul’s hermeneutics. We have to think about these things. After all, when Jesus says to love God with “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength

²³ This is a reference to Donald Trump’s nearly infamous “two Corinthians” blunder.

and with all your mind,” he is creatively exegeting Deuteronomy 6:5, which says nothing about one’s mind. So, I hope I offered something that satisfies your minds tonight. Thanks.

Shalom and let’s drink!