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Q&A#82 Richard Rohr on Scripture

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Today's question:

" I came across this post from Richard Rohr on how Jesus interpreted scripture (<https://cac.org/jesus-interpreted-scripture-2017-01-10/>). Here is a quote from the post:

'Jesus consistently ignored or even denied exclusionary, punitive, and triumphalistic texts in his own inspired Hebrew Bible in favor of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy, and honesty. He read the Scriptures in a spiritual and selective way. Jesus had a deeper and wider eye that knew which passages were creating a path for God and which passages were merely cultural, self-serving, and legalistic additions. That becomes self-evident once you know enough to see the "comparative meaning" of an incident or statement.

When Christians pretend that every line in the Bible is of equal importance and inspiration, they are being very unlike Jesus. This is precisely why Jesus was accused of teaching "as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:29, RSV), and why they hated him so much. Jesus even accused fervent and pious "teachers of the law" of largely missing the point. "Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?" he asked them (Mark 12:24, RSV). We cannot make the same mistake all over again—and now in Jesus' name.'

How would you respond to the idea that Jesus read the scripture in a spiritual and selective way and that he emphasized some while ignoring or denying others?"

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episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I'll leave the link for Richard Rohr's article below and it's worth looking through that. I'll respond to the article in full because it's a very short piece and I think it will help to explain some of the differences that are taking place here.

So he, Richard Rohr, begins by talking about the fact that although biblical messages sometimes proceed, generally proceed from some sort of historical incident, it doesn't really depend upon communicating those events factually with great accuracy. Rather, they're not primarily journalists, but it's about a deeper underlying message. And so he talks about the rabbis and scholars, Jewish scholars that use midrash to get to the underlying message.

Now, this is a way that encourages us to grow beyond just literalism and to get into the spiritual meat of a text. And today this has its correspondence in Christian circles in reflective reading upon scripture. There is a way in which the rabbis can be the sort of manic pixie dream girls of a certain form of popular Christian theologian.

It's a way in which the soulful Western theologian can find some sort of exotic identity that brings out some deeper identity within himself, some deeper truth in scripture. And he doesn't really have to pay that much close attention to what the rabbis actually say to actually acquaint himself with the tradition. Rather, you can have these vague and wavings of the hand in the direction of the rabbis and the rabbis can excuse a multitude of sins.

Now, the rabbis do have some helpful things that we can learn from them, just as the Christian theologians have some helpful things we can learn from them. But it's a very broad and generic group. You have to get into depth and you have to look at specific ones.

Specific rabbis are of help and others are of no help whatsoever. And so this idea of the rabbis and Jewish scholars is trading considerably upon a certain form of exoticism and Orientalism that is very popular within certain Christian circles. And we should be aware of this because a lot of it is just nonsense traded upon insight received from some quarter from which people of which people are not sufficiently aware.

And so as you trade on insight from that quarter, people don't have enough knowledge to be able to test it. And so this comes with some oracular authority. But really, if you know the Jewish rabbis, you'll know it's not that straightforward.

And so I think at the very outset, we should be very suspicious of these sorts of

rhetorical moves, which are quite popular in certain Christian circles. But while we should be reading Jewish authors and reflecting upon what they have to say, this general waving of the hand in the direction of the rabbis as if it gives us some authorization for all sorts of mischief with the biblical text, that's just not on. And we should have more responsibility and more common sense than to fall for that sort of thing.

The messages of scripture are not primarily about mere historical reporting. That's true in many cases. When you read through the biblical text, particularly the Old Testament, when you read through the New Testament, there's a lot of emphasis upon witness.

In the Old Testament, one of the striking things is there's not such an emphasis upon witness that these events actually happened. Now, we believe that the events happened, but that's not the primary point. The primary point is a more deeper theological import of the text.

And that should not be played off against the historical import. Although if we're treating the text merely as historical account, we're missing much of its meaning, most of its meaning arguably, which is more deeply theological, anthropological, teaches us about where we stand, these sorts of things. And when that is lost sight of, there's a problem.

But that does not have to be played off against factual accuracy. And when you read Christ's words on the Old Testament, when he talks about scripture cannot be broken, as he refers to events in the Old Testament as factual events and persons within the Old Testament as factual persons, whether that's Abel or Noah or these other sorts of figures that many people would like to dismiss as mere myths or legends. Christ refers to these figures as historical characters.

And so we need to be very aware about playing off the spiritual meaning and the symbolic meaning of the biblical text over against its historical meaning. These things fit nicely together. They are not at odds with each other.

So that's the first thing to recognize. He then goes on to talk about the way that whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver. So as we come to the text, what we bring to the text, we will receive from the text in many respects.

So if we come with a defensive posture, then we'll receive certain things that follow from that. How we see is what we see. And what we bring to the text in the way of our personalities, in the way of our desires and instincts and these sorts of things, other sorts of things that we will receive from the text.

There is a great deal of truth to this. When you actually read the biblical text, you'll find that people's posture towards the text determines a great deal about what they find in it. Now, that does not mean that the text is merely up for grabs, that the text doesn't have anything to push back against us, that there isn't any approach that is right or wrong.

Now, he's arguing that there are some things that are right and wrong here, but it's very much you bring a sort of perspective of love to the text and that's what you receive back. Non-judgmentalism, mercy, these sorts of things. But when we approach the text, the primary posture that we should have is one of receptivity.

It's a very different thing from just coming to the text with a posture of mere love, because we are not sufficiently grounded in the reality of love. And that's often something that the scripture has to teach us. And so we come to the text with a posture of primarily receptivity, to learn from the text, to hear what the text has to say.

That's a very different sort of thing from coming with our questions, our concerns, our instincts, our values, these sorts of things. Now, as we read the text, there is a sort of hermeneutical spiral that you learn certain things from the text and then you bring that back to the text and then you learn more things from the text and you bring that back to the text. And at each point, at each iteration, there should ideally be a clarifying and a greater focusing of your vision of the text.

And that process of repeated iteration of returning to the text and the hermeneutical spiral by which our perspective upon the text is clarified, that's an important part of what it means to read the text. But if we come to the text with preconceptions, whether those preconceptions are a certain sort of, a certain set of theological beliefs that we impose upon the text or a certain set of values, even if those are supposedly positive ones about love and mercy and these sorts of things, it can be very difficult for us to see what the text has to say sometimes. And even if we come to it with orthodox assumptions, often what we need to do is shelve those things for a while, just put them to one side and listen to the text, hear what the text has to say, because even orthodox assumptions can get in the way of hearing what the text has to say.

Because if we bring up orthodox assumptions, for instance, about Christ's divinity, it's very easy to misread expressions like son of God, because son of God is not primarily talking about Christ's divinity. It's talking about a messianic title. It's talking about other things like that, that really do not directly relate to Christ's divine status.

They indirectly relate to it, but that requires patience. And when we come to the text with those preconceptions, often we can short circuit these things and fail to follow the text through to its proper conclusions. So there's a good point there that we do need to consider what we are bringing to the text and be receptive to the text above all else.

As I've been reading the text of the scripture over the years, one of the things that has been most formative in my reading of the text is the concern to stop bringing my questions, to shelve my questions, just put them to one side for the time being, and to just listen, to be attentive to the text. And the more attentive I've been to the text, the more I've found that the text has surprised me. It's given answers to my questions, but not in the ways that I would expect, not in the quarters that I was looking in.

And so this is something I'd highly recommend, receptivity to the text. Now, Roar's approach leads to the belief in part that everyone sees their own reflection in the text. And there is an element of truth there.

I mean, you think of Albert Schweitzer's argument about all the people who had done Jesus studies prior to him. It was as if they were looking down a deep well and seeing their reflection at the bottom. And often that can be the case.

When we read the Bible, we see our reflection. We see what we desire to see, and we see the presumptions, the preconceptions, and all these other things that we bring to the text. And what we're seeing is our own reflection rather than the text itself.

Now, Roar seems to want to respond to this by saying we need to bring love to the text, and then we'll see that in our reflection. But really what we should do is recognize the danger of merely seeing our reflection and learn attentiveness, of learning patience with the text, learning a deep attunement to the text. And that's a different sort of thing from merely coming to the text with what are supposedly positive preconceptions.

We need to have our preconceptions challenged. And that includes many of the beliefs that we hold about love and inclusiveness, inclusion, and about all these positive things that are virtues within our current day. We need to be a lot more critical of those.

Jesus teaches us how to see, he argues, what to emphasize, and also what can be de-emphasized or ignored. And again, there is an element of important truth here. Jesus does not treat each element of scripture as a detached atom of truth that stands in isolation from all the other elements of scripture and that can be treated on its own, and that each has equal priority.

No, when Jesus teaches about the law, for instance, he talks about the weightier matters of the law. He talks about summing up the law in two great commandments, a first greatest commandment, and then a second that's like it. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then love your neighbor as yourself.

And then the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith. And so this gives us a sort of hierarchy of truth, a way in which the truth hangs together. And it's not just isolated elements, that there is a grammar to biblical truth, that there is a logic to it, and that when we think about judgment, for instance, judgment needs to be understood within this broader paradigm and framework that is primarily about justice, mercy, and faith, and not just about detached words of judgment and condemnation.

When we talk about the law more generally in the New Testament, a lot of Jesus' teaching and a lot of the teaching of Paul and others is challenging an imbalanced way of approaching the law, a way of approaching the law that loses all sense of the grammar of scripture, all sense of the weightier matters of the law, all sense of the way in which

the law fits within a broader picture and broader paradigm that is based upon faith, justice, mercy, truth, God's goodness, and his faithfulness to his people. And when that's lost sight of, we end up with a very truncated and distorted and often legalistic understanding of God's truth. And so Jesus does teach a lot about this, but as he teaches about this, one of the things that he continually stresses is that he does not come to destroy the law or abolish the law, but to fulfil it.

And not one jot or tittle will fall from the law until it's all fulfilled. He teaches that the scripture cannot be broken, that what is wrong with the Pharisees and Scribes and the Sadducees is they do not know the scriptures or the power of God. The point is not that there is some sort of Procrustean bed of a hermeneutic that he can lop off all these unwelcome parts, but rather that when you put things together in the proper order, things take on a specific aspect.

Now I've seen this in a number of different examples. When we look at Christ in the New Testament, Christ brings a lot of the Old Testament into focus. And in some ways it's like looking at one of those magic eye pictures from the 1990s that you may have had when you grew up, that you look at these pictures and it's just a jumbled mass of different shapes and things like that and there's no order to be discerned in it.

And then you look at it in the right way and suddenly a 3D image emerges from it and it's weird and strange and bizarre, but yet it's there. And in the same way, if you look at scripture in the right way, in the angle that Christ gives us from the perspective of Christ, a lot of things come into clarity. Certain things jump out at us and we start to understand that this is what the text was about, that all these prophets and these texts spoke concerning Christ and that Christ can open our eyes to understand the scripture and then our hearts burn within us.

So there is a definite truth here that scripture is, there is not just figural reading but transfigural reading. As we read in the light of Christ, the text is opened up to us. And so Jesus does teach us what to emphasise, how things can be balanced, but this does not involve an ignoring of things.

And it's striking within the New Testament that you'll find some of the most shocking aspects of the Old Testament alluded to, repeated and emphasised in ways that can appal us, in part because, for instance, Christ is associated with the angel that brought them into the land, helping to destroy the Canaanites. Christ is associated with the destroying angel that killed the firstborn of the Egyptians. Christ is seen as this figure of judgement and condemn, who brings death and condemnation upon the enemies of the people of God.

Now this shocks many people because they have this vision of Christ as gentle Jesus, meek and mild and it's just not what we find. When we look in the New Testament, again we see through Christ's teaching, particularly in the prophecy of revelation, the spirit of

Christ telling what is about to come to pass, we see a vision of Christ as an agent of bloody judgement. And this is something that we see also in Christ's teaching concerning Jerusalem and the judgement that will fall upon Jerusalem.

He brings woes, not just blessings. Christ is one who uses imprecatory psalms. Christ is one who curses symbolically the temple and that curse is not just an impotent curse.

It's a curse that will be fulfilled in not one stone being left upon another and thousands of people being killed. Now this is something that we don't like to talk about in certain polite Christian circles but this is what we find in the New Testament. And people like Richard Rohr are cutting off a lot of Jesus' teaching.

When Jesus sends his disciples out two by two to different villages and towns and he says that some of the Chorazin and Bethsaida and places like that, that the judgement upon them will be more severe than that on Sodom and Gomorrah, we need to recognise what's going on there. That the angel of the Lord met with Abraham and there were two angels with that angel of the Lord. The angel of the Lord being associated with Christ and those two angels are sent, those two messengers are sent to that town, to that city and they bear witness concerning its wickedness and bring about its destruction.

Christ sends out his disciples two by two to different towns and cities. He is the angel of the Lord. He sends out his messengers to test and the test again is one of hospitality.

Will they be received? If they are not received, they are to brush the dust off their feet and the judgement upon that city will be severe, greater even than that previous judgement. And when we read these sorts of texts, we should recognise what is going on. Many people look at, for instance, Jesus' teaching in the in the synagogue at Nazareth when he misses out certain parts of the, he talks about the spirit of the Lord being upon him and anointed to preach the good news etc.

and that he's, misses out the reference to the days of vengeance and he talks about the acceptable year of Argo. He brings jubilee themes but he lops off the days of vengeance themes. But then you come to the end of the book and you see Jesus talking explicitly about the days of vengeance that will come about.

Luke 21 20 following, but when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies then know that its desolation is near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance that all things which are written may be fulfilled.

And so Jesus is referring to the days of vengeance, the judgment that's about to come. And he talks about this in terms of things being fulfilled. The scripture, the words of judgment.

These words of judgment from the judgment upon the blood of Abel to the blood of

Zachariah, it's all going to fall upon that generation. And Christ's teaching is very clear on this. Christ teaches more about judgment and hell and this coming conflagration that's going to face Jerusalem.

He teaches about it far more than anyone else. He teaches about it far more than the New Testament authors apart from Revelation, which is his revelation, and more than the Old Testament. And so Jesus was very clearly a teacher of judgment.

He's also a teacher of exclusion. Many will say, Lord, Lord, he's the one who teaches about the bridesmaids, and the ones being left outside. He's the one that teaches about the sheep and the goats.

He's the one that teaches about the narrow way. These are teachings about exclusion. Jesus teaches about those who will be cut out of the kingdom.

And there are a great many teachings like this. And so this hermeneutic ends up being not just about cutting out certain parts of the Old Testament, but cutting out certain parts of Jesus' teaching too, because they're inconvenient. They don't actually fit our perspective of what Jesus should be teaching.

And so eventually what you have is this hermeneutic that cuts up so much of the New Testament and the Old Testament that we're left with this mere rump that fits our preconceptions about what Christ should say, what Christ should believe. Now, Jesus clearly challenges a lot of the beliefs of his day, a lot of the beliefs about certain forms of punishment, about certain forms, what the triumph of Israel's God will look like, what the future of Israel will entail. He challenges a lot of the certain forms of exclusion that take place in Israel.

But yet he is not without teachings on exclusion. Very much of his teaching concerning the last days, for instance, or the coming judgment is about exclusion. And so when we read in this sort of way, I think it's quite clear what is going on.

And this is not excluded by comparative reading or deep reading of the text and moving beyond the literal sense. When we actually move beyond the literal sense, what we see a lot of the time is Jesus teaching in ways that echo these judgments of the Old Testament, that recapitulate them, that allude to them. And if you know your Old Testament, you should see this.

It's not hard to see on the surface. It may not be on the immediate surface, but if you look a bit more closely, Jesus alludes to these things throughout. He goes on to say that there is this approach of treating every line in the Bible as of equal importance and inspiration with being very unlike Jesus.

Yes, in some senses we are. And I hope we're not treating the Bible like that because the Bible isn't just a set of detached verses. The modern format in which we encounter the

Bible with chapters and verses can encourage us to read the Bible in that way, as discrete promise texts or something like that, or texts that we need to memorize.

But it's not like that. Rather, the text is a unified body of revelation and a narrative and these sorts of things. And it hangs together in a particular shape and with a particular center of balance and that sort of thing.

And when we read the Bible like that, we are being like Jesus. But if we're reading it just in an atomized way, clearly we're going against what Christ's approach to the scriptures was. Christ clearly had a sense of the scriptures as not just isolated texts.

When Jesus is accused of teaching as one who has authority and not as the scribes, it's not just because he's holding, that he's challenging certain teachings of scripture. Jesus does not challenge teachings of scripture. In fact, he is very explicit on the authority and the infallibility of scripture.

The scripture cannot be broken. Every word will be fulfilled. Not one jot or tittle will fall that he does not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

And every single one of these respects, Jesus draws attention to the authority of scripture and the way that it bears witness to him throughout. And we see Christ's life as a typological fulfillment of many of the themes of the Old Testament. Christ transfigures the Old Testament.

The Lord dies and is raised again in Christ. And so there is not a denial of scripture. There is a transformation of our hermeneutical perspective upon the scripture.

But this is a very different sort of thing from just lopping off certain parts that are inconvenient. And when we do come to look at the teaching concerning the judgment on Jerusalem, when we come to see the way that the Old Testament is used in a way that connects it with the ministry of Christ, when we see the ministry of Christ, for instance, in the book of Acts, as judgment is brought upon people like Ananias and Sapphira upon the sorcerer, upon these other figures throughout the book. We could, Herod, for instance, being struck by Christ's angel and being eaten by worms and dying.

This is Christ. This is gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This is the child who doesn't cry and who lies in the manger just looking sweet and nice.

This is the same figure. And we've tended to sanitize this figure, to pretend that this figure is without judgment, without condemnation. But as you look through the New Testament, it's there throughout.

It's not hard to see if you're paying attention. And this can be difficult for us to understand, but we need to be faithful to the text. And so this begins not with just taking a hermeneutic of love that takes our preconceived notion of what God should be like and

imposes upon the text, and anything that does not fit gets removed.

Rather, it's about being receptive for what God has to say, being faith, having the faith that God will prove himself. We will find some of these teachings hard to understand. And one of the things that receptivity involves is wrestling with that text and say, I will not let go of this until I'm blessed.

And that is an approach that is not about removing that text, dismissing or avoiding that text because it's challenging, but wrestling with it, because we know that God is to be found in it, that this angel of the Lord is the same one who destroyed Sodom. This angel of the Lord is the same one, is the same Christ who destroyed Egypt and killed its firstborn. This angel of the Lord is the same Christ who led Israel into the promised land.

And he's the one who brings judgment, but he's also the one who brings deliverance and blessing. He's the one who brings the acceptable year of the Lord and the jubilee and life and restoration, deliverance from slavery. He's also the one who brings the downfall of the tyrants, who kills his opponents and brings the enemies before the ones who would not attend the marriage feast and executes them.

These are all images of Christ that we find in the New Testament. Christ is the one who's associated with judgment, with hell even and condemnation. He teaches about that repeatedly.

And this is so hard for us to accept within modern sensibilities, but it's there throughout. And so Richard Rawls' teaching, although it has certain important points about not everything being of equal weight within the Old Testament and the need for us to consider the posture that we have towards the text, all of that is important, but where he takes it is very dangerous. And it departs quite considerably from what we do find within the New Testament, which is a challenging teaching.

But the teaching that if we wrestle with it and if we tarry with it, and if we do business with it seriously, we will find that it blesses us. Thank you very much for the question. And if you have any further questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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