

## HOW JESUS INTERPRETED HIS BIBLE

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Biblical Christians have always taken the Gospels as their trustworthy guide to the teachings of Jesus. There are today strong historical and literary grounds supporting that confessional commitment which enable one with considerable confidence to synthesize from the Gospels Jesus' views and teachings on a number of themes. They include (1) the identification of the books composing the Lord's Bible, (2) his attitude toward these scriptures and (3) the methods and emphases of his interpretation of them.

### I

About a hundred years ago a theory was popularized that the Jewish Bible--our OT--was canonized in three stages: the Pentateuch about 400 B.C., the Prophets about 200 B.C. and the Writings, including the Psalms and wisdom literature, at the Council of Jamnia about A.D. 90.<sup>1</sup> This theory left the content of the Hebrew Bible in Jesus' day an uncertain quantity as far as its third division was concerned.

While the three-stage canonization theory continues to be widely followed, in the past two decades it has been seriously critiqued by Jewish and Protestant scholars and, in my view, has been effectively demolished.<sup>2</sup> The theory failed primarily for three reasons. (1) It was

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<sup>1</sup> H. E. Ryle, *The Canon of the Old Testament* (London 1895) 105, 119, 183.

<sup>2</sup> E. E. Ellis, "The Old Testament Canon in the Early Church," *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (edd. S. Safrai et al.; Assen and Philadelphia 1974-, II i [1988]) 653-00. Cf. S. Z. Leiman, ed., *The Canon and Masorah of*

not based on specific evidence but rather on inferences, some of which can now be seen to have been clearly mistaken.<sup>3</sup> (2) For certain OT books it assumed a late dating, for example, for Ecclesiastes and Daniel, that can no longer be entertained. (3) It assumed without justification that the Council of Jamnia acted to canonize certain books, but the evidence suggests only that it reaffirmed books long received but later disputed by some.<sup>4</sup>

It is significant that the OT apocryphal books, received by Roman Catholics as canonical (or deuterocanonical), were never included in Jewish canonical designations and are never cited in the 1st century writings of Qumran, Philo or the NT. All the OT books appear at Qumran except Esther, a book that also is lacking in one early Christian canonical list, is not cited in the NT and was questioned by some rabbis and Christian writers.<sup>5</sup> To summarize briefly, one may say with some confidence that the Bible received and used by our Lord was, with the possible exception of Esther, the OT received today as sacred scripture by Jews and Protestants.

## II

Jesus' use of the OT rests on his conviction that these writings were the revelation of God through faithful prophets, a conviction that is decisive for his interpretation of scripture and that surfaces explicitly in a number of places in the Gospels. Let us look at five examples of this: Matt 19:4f., Mark 12:24, Matt 5:17f., Luke 4:3-12 and John 10:35.

Two examples of Jesus' attitude to scripture appear in his debates with rabbis of other Jewish religious parties. In a question on divorce posed by the Pharisees Jesus cites Gen 1:21 and 2:24 as the conclusive texts:

The one who created them from the beginning  
Made them male and female  
And said, “. . . The two shall be one flesh.”

Matt 19:4f.

*the Hebrew Bible* (New York 1974) 254-61 (J. P. Lewis); *ibid.*, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (Hamden, CT 1976); R. T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids 1985).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the testimony of Josephus (ca. A.D. 90; *Ag. Ap.* 1.38-42) to a long-settled, universally recognized Jewish canon of scriptures cannot simply be dismissed as a sectarian viewpoint.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Leiman, *Bible*, n. 2; R. C. Newman, "The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon," *WTJ* 38 (1976) 319-49.

<sup>5</sup> Lacking Esther is the list of Melito, Bishop of Sardis (ca. A.D. 170), cited in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.26.13f. For criticisms of Esther among the rabbis, cf. *Megilla* 7a;

Noteworthy for our purposes is the fact that, according to Matthew, Jesus identified the editorial comment of the author of Genesis as the utterance of God. That is, the word of God character of scripture is not limited to "thus says the Lord" passages.

In a debate with the Sadducees on the resurrection<sup>6</sup> Jesus identifies their error thus:

You err  
Not knowing the scriptures  
Nor the power of God

Matt 22:29 = Mark 12:24

Two points are to be observed here. First, since these trained scripture-scholars memorized the Bible by the book, Jesus is not ascribing their theological error to an ignorance of the words of scripture but to a lack of understanding of its meaning. That is, the "word of God" character of scripture, its divine truth, is not to be found merely by quoting the Bible but by discerning its true meaning. Second, the Sadducees' ignorance of the scripture is tied together with their skepticism about the power of God to raise those who have returned to the dust in death. Not unlike some liberal Christians today, they apparently allowed (Epicurean) philosophical dogmas to block their minds from the teaching of the prophets.<sup>7</sup>

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus contrasts his teaching with what his audience has heard before. For example,<sup>8</sup>

You have heard that it was said to those of old  
You shall not kill. ..  
But I say to you  
That everyone who is angry with his brother  
Shall be liable to judgment

Matt 5:21f.

*Sanh.* 100a; among a few Christian groups, cf. T. Noldeke, "Esther," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (4 vols.; ed. T. K. Cheyne; London 1899-1903) 2.1407.

<sup>6</sup> Matt 22:23-33 = Mark 12:18-27 = Luke 20:27-40. Assuming Luke's independence of Matthew, those two Gospels rely on a second source, a Q tradition, in addition to their (presumed) use of Mark. This is evident from the agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark in this episode.

<sup>7</sup> The rabbinic tradition associates the Sadducean denial of the resurrection with Epicurean philosophy. Cf. m. *Sanh.* 10:1; *Ros. Has.* 17a; K. G. Kuhn, ed., *Sifre zu Numeri* (Stuttgart 1959) 328 (Section 112 on Num 15:31); J. Neusner, ed., *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (Atlanta 1986) 47f. (ARN 5). Further, cf. M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (2 vols.; London 1974) 1.143; Str-B 1.885, 4.344. Pace E. Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ. New Edition* (3 vols. in 4; Edinburgh 1973-87) 2.391f., the Sadducean denial of resurrection was no mere retention of OT conceptions, not even of Ecclesiastes (cf. 12:14).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Matt 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43.

Jesus is thought by some to be setting his authority against that of scripture,<sup>9</sup> but several considerations exclude this understanding of the matter. First, (1) as we have seen in the illustrations above, Jesus never understands scripture as words of the Bible in the abstract but as the message in its true meaning and application. Thus, in the debate on divorce (Matt 19:3-9), which is also one of the antitheses in the Sermon (Matt 5:31f.), he counters the Pharisees' appeal to Deut 24:1, 3 by arguing that Gen 1:21 and 2:24 are the governing texts for the principle involved. In doing this, he follows good rabbinic practice, not denying the "word of God" character of either passage but arguing against the traditional use of Deuteronomy 24 as the regulative passage for the marriage relationship.<sup>10</sup>

So also in the command, "you shall not kill," Jesus argues not against God's command through Moses but against the traditional limitation of that command to literal murder. If someone objects, "But the text says 'kill,'" I shall reply as a certain rabbi once did to his pupil: "Good, you have learned to read. Now go and learn to interpret."<sup>11</sup>

A second objection to taking the antitheses in the Sermon to mean that Jesus opposed or transcended the scripture is (2) the introductory formula used to introduce the biblical texts: "You have heard that it was said to those of old." As far as I know, this formula is never used in Christianity or Judaism to introduce scripture as such, that is, in its true force as the word of God.<sup>12</sup> The words, "You have heard," point to the oral reading and interpretation of scripture that the audience of Jesus heard regularly in synagogue,<sup>13</sup> and they show that in the Sermon Jesus is contrasting his teachings with traditional interpretations of the Bible known to his hearers. This is a characteristic feature of the Lord's teachings which perhaps reaches its high-point in his accusation against certain Jewish churchmen and theo-

<sup>9</sup> So, apparently, R. A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco 1982) 182-85.

<sup>10</sup> It is not that one passage is right and the other wrong but that both are right in different senses. The permission of divorce (Deut 24:1, 3) was God's word to a particularly evil situation, because of "the hardness of your hearts;" but to employ it as a regulative principle for marriage was a misuse of the text.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London 1956) 428ff. He notes a number of sayings that are similar to this although not the one that sticks in my memory and that I cannot now locate.

<sup>12</sup> The term, "it was said" (ἐρρήθη) at Matt 5:31 is so used elsewhere (Rom 9:12) but the preceding clause, "you have heard that" makes clear that here the word is only an abbreviation for the longer formula. Cf. Daube, (n. 11) 62.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Daube, (n. 11) 55: "In Rabbinic discussion *shome'a ani*, 'I hear' 'I understand,' or rather 'I might understand,' introduces an interpretation of Scripture which, though conceivable, yet must be rejected."

logians: "For the sake of your traditions you have made void the word of God."<sup>14</sup> This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the quotations in the Sermon sometimes include an explicit non-biblical interpretation, for example,

You shall love your neighbor  
And hate your enemy

Matt 5:43

The second command is not found in the OT but is part of the interpretation of the Bible at Qumran.<sup>15</sup>

A third and perhaps the most important objection to the proposed interpretation is (3) the passage at Matt 5:17f., which is prefaced to this section of the Sermon:

Do not suppose that I have come  
To annul the law and the prophets  
I have not come to annul (καταλῦσαι)  
But to fulfil [them]  
Truly I say to you  
Until heaven and earth pass away  
Not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law  
Until all things be accomplished

Matthew doubtless knew that some readers could misunderstand the antitheses in the Sermon as setting Jesus over against the holy scriptures. To preclude that, he includes this explicit declaration of the Lord on the inviolate character of the biblical teaching. This verse is very similar to Christ's word in the exposition at John 10:35: "The scripture cannot be broken of its force" (λυθῆναι).<sup>16</sup>

"The law and the prophets" represent here, as elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> the whole OT. Jesus is revealed not only as the proclaimer of God's word but also as the proclaimer of himself as the one in whom that OT word is to find fulfilment.

Jesus fulfils the OT in two ways. By his interpretation of it he unveils its true and final (eschatological) meaning. In his person and

<sup>14</sup> Matt 15:6 = Mark 7:13. Possibly (but not likely) Jesus here also rejects a view expressed by some later rabbis that the oral tradition originated at Sinai and thus was a divinely sanctioned interpretation of Scripture. Cf. W. D. Davies, "Canon and Christology," *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament* (ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright; Oxford 1987), 19-36, 30f.

<sup>15</sup> 1QS 1:3f., 10.

<sup>16</sup> The term "broken" (λυθῆναι, John 10:35) has this significance. Cf. Str-B 2.542f (n. 7); C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London 1956) 319f.  
<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rom 3:21 with 4:7; "The law" can refer to the whole OT (cf. Rom 3:19 with 3:10-18; 1 Cor 14:21); so also "the prophets" (cf. Acts 13:27; 26:27).

work he fulfils the true intention of its prophecies and the goal of its history of salvation.

### III

The great rabbi Hillel (ca. A.D. 10), who taught scripture about a generation before our Lord's ministry, established seven rules or principles for interpreting the Bible. Some of them, for example, interpreting according to context (Rule 7), come down to us today virtually unaltered. Hillel's Rules drew inferences and analogies from scripture, and some of them were used by Christ in his interpretation of his Bible. Consider the following examples:<sup>18</sup>

Rule 1: קָלָּ נְחוּמָּר, inference from minor and major, *a fortiori*.

Consider the ravens they neither sow or reap. . .  
And God feeds them (Ps 147:9)  
Of how much more value are you  
Than the birds

Luke 12:24

Is it not written in your law  
"I said you are gods" (Ps 82:6)  
If [God] called "gods" those to whom the word of God came. . .  
Do you say, "You blaspheme"  
Because I said, "I am 'the Son of God'" (Ps 2:7)  
John 10:34ff.

From the biblical verse teaching that God cares for the least of his creatures, Jesus infers *a fortiori* that the passage also applies to his disciples. From the verse addressing as "gods" the whole people of God, he infers *a fortiori* that the title "Son of God" is appropriate for the One God has sent into the world.<sup>19</sup>

Rule 2: גְּזֵי־רֵחַ שְׁוֵה, an equivalent regulation, an inference drawn from a similar situation (words and phrases) in scripture.

<sup>18</sup> For Hillel's Rules and their exposition by the rabbis cf. Tosefta, Sanh. 7:11; JAbot R. Nat. 37, 10. Cf. *The Tosefta*, ed. J. Neusner (6 vols., New York 1977-86); Neusner (n. 7); M. Mielziner, *Introduction to the Talmud* (New York 1968 [<sup>1</sup>1894]) 123-29; H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York <sup>5</sup>1959 [<sup>1</sup>1887]) 93-98. For other NT examples, cf. Ellis (n. 2); *ibid.*, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids 41985) 41f.

<sup>19</sup> That Jesus had (reportedly) identified himself as "the Son of God," that is, the Messiah, is also presupposed by the high priest's question at Mark 14:61f. = Matt 26:63f. Peter's confession of some similar teaching of Jesus to disciples had apparently become common knowledge. Cf. S. Kim, *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Tubingen 1983) 1-6.

On the Sabbath. . . [Jesus'] disciples plucked and ate grain. . .  
 The Pharisees said, "Why do you do that which is not lawful" (Exod  
 20:10) . . .  
 Jesus said, . . . "[David] took and ate the bread of the Presence  
 And gave to those with him (1 Sam 21:1-6)  
 Which is not lawful to eat except for the priests (Lev 24:9) . . .  
 The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath"  
 Luke 6:1-5

David, who received a kingdom from God (1 Sam 15:28), was blameless when he and those with him violated the Law in eating the bread of the Presence; the Son of Man, who has also received a kingdom from God (Dan 7:13f.), is equally blameless when those with him violate the Sabbath law in similar circumstances.

Rule 3: **אָחַד אֶב מִכְתוּב אֶחָד**, constructing a family from one passage, a general principle inferred from the teaching contained in one verse.  
 Moses showed that the dead are raised. . .  
 He calls the Lord "the God of Abraham" . . . (Exod 3:6, 15)  
 He is not the God of the dead but of the living  
 Luke 20:37f.

God is not the God of the dead, yet he affirmed his covenant relationship with the dead Abraham. Therefore, Jesus concludes, he must intend to raise Abraham out of death. From this one passage one may infer the resurrection of all the dead who have a similar covenantal relationship with God.<sup>20</sup>

Rule 7: **דִּבְרֵי הַלְמִד מֵעֲנִינּוֹ**, an interpretation of a word or a passage derived from its context.  
 He who made them from the beginning  
 "Made them male and female" (Gen 1:27)  
 And said, . . . "[A man] shall be joined to his wife  
 And the two shall be one flesh" (Gen 2:24)  
 Therefore, what God has joined, let no man separate  
 [The Pharisees said], "Why then did Moses command  
 That he give her a bill of divorce. . ." (Deut 24:1-4)?  
 [Jesus said], "For the hardness of your hearts. . .  
 But from the beginning it was not so"  
 Matt 19:4-8

At the creation God established marriage as an indissoluble union. This context, Jesus concludes, takes priority over the later provisions for divorce.

<sup>20</sup> Further, cf. E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids<sup>5</sup>1987) 234-37.

We have given no examples of a general principle derived from the teaching of two verses (Rule 4), of an inference drawn from a general principle to a specific example and vice versa (Rule 5) or of an inference drawn from an analogous passage (Rule 6). But the above are sufficient to show how Jesus employed, for the most part implicitly, Hillel's Rules in his exposition of scripture. Not all of Hillel's Rules are clearly attested in the Gospels and the Rules in Jesus' usage appear less stylized than in the later rabbinic writings. But they are present and do form a part of the hermeneutical framework for our Lord's interpretation of scripture.

Much of the older form criticism of the Gospels assumed that Jesus uttered pithy pronouncements and that the scriptural references and expositions almost always represented postresurrection creations of the church.<sup>21</sup> In this respect it read the historical development precisely backwards. In part this reflected a mistaken dichotomy between Jesus the apocalyptic prophet and Jesus the teacher; in part it simply lacked an understanding of the Jewish context of Jesus' ministry. For example, Jesus' teaching against divorce would have no force with his hearers unless it could be established from scripture and could, thus successfully counter the traditional interpretation of Moses' teaching on the matter. Deut 13:1-3, with its requirement that succeeding prophets agree with Moses' teaching,<sup>22</sup> was too much a part of Jewish consciousness for a prophetic personality to gain a following wandering about the country uttering pronouncements or even quoting isolated biblical texts. What was required was a midrash, an exposition, in which various scriptures were called upon to aid in understanding a particular text.<sup>23</sup> That Jesus did this and did it with an authority that exceeded the usual scribe or "Bible teacher" evoked

<sup>21</sup> For example, R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Oxford 1963 [11921]) 46-50; cf. 16f., 26f., passim. Cf. J. W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts* (Assen 1954) 178: "[The] classifications used by Dibelius and Bultmann . . . are not cognate to the material. For they are derived from the Greek world and not from the Jewish. . . ."

<sup>22</sup> Deut 13:1-5 and the judgment on false prophets invoked there is reproduced in the Temple Scroll (11QTemple 54:8-18) and referred to in CD 12:2f.; *m.Sanh.* 7:4 and applied to Jesus in *Sanh.* 43a; cf. Justin, *Dialogue*, 69. Cf. Str-B 1.1023f; A. Strobel, *Die Stunde der Wahrheit* (Tubingen 1980) 81-94; W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King* (Leiden 1967) 47-57. The demand by the Jewish churchmen for "a sign" from Jesus (Mark 8:11) also presupposes a suspicion or conviction that he is a false prophet and his miracles the work of demons (Mark 3:22). Cf. W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids 1974) 277f.

<sup>23</sup> Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 115f. (n. 19): To the Jewish mind it "is not the detached passage, the separate text, that has weight, that proves something. . . ." "The word becomes a testimonium for something or other after one has brought out its meaning with the aid of other parts of Scripture."



the astonishment of his hearers.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it is, for example, the exposition at Matt 19:3-9 that represents the authoritative foundation of Jesus' teaching on divorce which the pronouncement at Matt 5:31f. summarizes and on which it depends. The biblical expositions of Jesus elsewhere are likewise the bedrock of his teaching and of the Synoptic tradition,<sup>25</sup> and from a critical perspective they cannot be regarded as creations of the Gospel traditioners.

Two commentary patterns found in rabbinic writings also appear in expositions of Jesus which are, in fact, among the earliest extant examples of this form of exegetical discourse. They are the *proem* midrash and the *yelammedenu* midrash.<sup>26</sup> An example of the former type appears at Matt 21:33-46:<sup>27</sup>

33-- Initial text: Isa 5:1f.

34-41--Exposition by means of a parable, linked to the initial and final texts by the catchword λίθος (42, 44, cf. 35; Isa 5:2, לִקְוֹ); cf. οἰκοδομεῖν (33, 42).

42-44--Concluding texts: Ps 118:22f.; Dan 2:34f., 44f.

The opening (*proem*) text has been reduced to an allusion and the key word ("stone") omitted, but the reference to Isaiah 5 is clear. In Mark one of the concluding texts (Daniel 2) has been omitted but is retained from the Q *Vorlage* as an allusion by Matthew and Luke. The pattern is looser than in the later, more stylized *proem* midrashim in the rabbinic writings, but this common root is quite evident.

The *yelammedenu rabbenu*<sup>28</sup> midrash is similar to the *proem* pattern except that the opening is formed by a question and counter-question. An example is found in Matt 12:1-8:<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Daube, "Rabbinic Authority," 212-213 (n. 11).

<sup>25</sup> A number of Christ's expositions are found in both Mark and in Q traditions, for example, Mark 4:10-12; 12:1-12; 12:18-27; 12:28-34; 12:35-37.

<sup>26</sup> For rabbinic examples of these two types of midrash, see *Pesikta de Rab Kahana*, ed. W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein (Philadelphia 1975) xf., xxviii-xxxvii, xlix, passim; *Pesikta Rabbati*, ed. W. G. Braude (2 vols; New Haven, CT 1968) 1.3-5, 17, 26, passim. Although collected later, these midrashim are largely the work of 3rd and 4th-century rabbis. Cf. S. Maybaum, *Die ältesten Phasen der Entwicklung der jüdischen Predigt* (Berlin 1901) 1-27; E. E. Ellis, "Quotations in the New Testament," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Revised Edition* (4 vols.; ed. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids 1979-1988) 4.18-25.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew and Luke (20:9-19) utilize both Mark 12:1-12 and a Q tradition, as their agreements against Mark show.

<sup>28</sup> יְלַמְּדֵנוּ רַבֵּנוּ 'may our rabbi teach us.' For a discussion of the origin of the pattern cf. J. W. Bowker, 'Speeches in Acts: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form,' *NTS* 14 (1967-68) 96-111.

<sup>29</sup> The parallels at Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5 have lost a part of the commentary pattern, indicating that Matthew is (or has retained) the earliest form of the

- 1-- Theme
- 2-- Pharisees' biblical question (Exod 20:10, allusion)
- 3f.-- Jesus' counter-question (1 Sam 21:7[6]) and commentary
- 5f.-- Jesus' second counter-question (Num 28:9) and commentary
- 7a-- Concluding text (Hos 6:6)
- 7b-8-- Application

Summarized here, using the *yelammedenu* commentary pattern, is an elaborate and complex debate between Jesus and other Jewish churchmen about the true meaning of scripture for present conduct. Although it cannot now be elaborated, (1) the eschatological and christological hermeneutic of Jesus (Matt 12:6, 8) is at the center of the conflict between his views and the traditional interpretation of scripture by the Pharisees. At the same time (2) Jesus defeats the Pharisees on their own ground by showing, exegetically, that the subordination and relativising of ritual laws vis-a-vis the moral law was recognized by scripture even for the OT time (Matt 12:4f., 7).

#### IV

Jesus' interpretation of his Bible proceeds from his recognition of the canon of sacred books accepted by the main-stream Judaism of his day and from his settled conviction that these writings, rightly understood, were the expression of the mind of God through faithful prophets. The exposition of the received scripture is, then, the sum and substance of Jesus' message, both in teaching his followers and in debating his opponents. This is true even when the Gospel traditioners and Evangelists, because *inter alia* of the limits of space, have summarized, compacted or omitted the express biblical references that originally formed the basis of Jesus' teachings.

Contrary to some misguided modern interpreters, there is never any suggestion in the Gospels of Jesus opposing the Torah, the law of God, the OT. It is always a matter of Jesus' true exposition of scripture against the misunderstanding and/or misapplication of it by the dominant scripture-scholars of his day. This becomes apparent in Jesus' encounters with such rabbis in numerous debates, a number of which the Evangelists are careful to retain.

tradition. For further examples cf. Matt 15:1-9; 19:3-8; Luke 10:25-37; E. E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic* (Tubingen and Grand Rapids 1978) 158f. For rabbinical examples cf. Pesiq. R., 1.3 (n. 26) and the Piskas cited. In the Gospels the pattern is usually employed in Jesus' debates, with opponents, but it can also be used, as in the rabbinic writings, in Jesus' instruction of his hearers; cf. Matt 11:7-15.

The Judaism of Jesus' day was a Torah-centric religion. To gain any hearing among his people Jesus' teaching also had to be Torah-centric. Thus it was necessary, not only from his own conviction of the Law as the word of God and of himself as the fulfilment of that Law but also from practical considerations, that our Lord show by his teachings as well as by his acts that his message and his messianic person stood in continuity with and in fulfilment of Israel's ancient word from God. It is in this frame of reference that one finds the meaning of Jesus' interpretation of his Bible.

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Jesus interpreted His words about eating His flesh and drinking His blood in verse 63 of chapter 6, where He said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life." In other words, Jesus was telling disciples who were offended after hearing His words about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, "Hey, guys, don't be so literal. I'm talking spiritually here, not literally" (SRV--Standard Rhetorician Version). Evidently, the disciples had missed the main point of the teaching