

The Bible is the fundamental resource of the Israelite community God has gathered around it (Wyllen 16-17). Both Wylen and Holtz show us an inverted pyramid in which “Torah” in the narrow sense, the first five books on which the Bible centers and builds, both occupies the most basic stratum, and describes the entire structure. “Written Torah” is five books, the key subset of biblical texts. “Oral Torah” is a whole world, reaching far beyond *all* the biblical texts. (That, by the way, is quite like the way Jesus treats it in his career.)

A key distinction in oral Torah is “halakha” versus “aggadah” (Wyllen 20-21). The first form of interpretation determines rules for Jewish life. The fact that it is singled out among all forms of application, well developed in rabbinic tradition, and observed with great strictness, speaks volumes. Haggadah is the rest. The fact that it is freer, more playful, and wider ranging makes it, in a way, less serious – but never trivial.

Halakhic priority even extends to the weight given to different texts of Torah: “Why did the Torah not begin with Exodus 12?” As Protestant Christians, we are on unfamiliar territory. Paul, not Moses, is our “canon within the canon.” When Catholics pronounce on birth control, Protestants call them medieval, legalistic, and authoritarian. When fellow Protestants do it, we call them cults and control freaks! Against “Christian” anti-nomians, Wylen protests that all this work is to promote the peace and harmony willed by Israel’s loving God, “who tempers justice with mercy” (Wyllen 24).

Halakhic interpretation, then, takes laws handed down by God, and applies them to the infinite variations of community lives that stretch across millennia. Playing it safe, rabbis even before Jesus’ day were building “a fence around the Torah” which required either more, or less, than God required (Wyllen 21-22). “Five times I have received,” Paul writes, “the forty lashes less one” (2 Cor. 11:24). Yet the sages do not want to innovate. They want to conserve and deepen. They want to interpret so purely that they can know their interpretations too were given on Sinai (Holtz 15).

Wyllen summarizes nicely (23): “Torah provides mitzvot that are the basis of halakha. Halakha is based on the Talmud” which, in two canonical forms, complete the authoritative commentary already seen in the earlier Mishnah. “The Talmud, combined with custom [minhag] and the ongoing process of legal interpretation called responsa, is the basis for the Jewish way of life.” See the pyramid (cf. Holtz 25-28)?

The pyramid pulls all of Jewish life into it. It shapes life; it offers salvation; it worries over the greatest and smallest matters of faithfulness; it describes humanity; it narrates the cosmos (Wyllen 28-31); it is Israel’s home away from home (Holtz 17). Holtz has a great word for it: “reading” (16, 29). Envision all of life under God as *reading*.

(You may be surprised to find that Jews take allegory and other forms of “symbolic interpretation” (Akiba’s “seventy faces,” Wyllen 19) so seriously. Philo, a first century Alexandrian Jew, was reading Tanakh allegorically long before Christians adopted the fourfold allegorical method. And Jews who are otherwise modernists still indulge in allegory as they preach.)

The pyramid’s power also begets an attitude that formal study of the Word is exalted over the other forms of interaction, worship and good deeds (Wyllen 25, Holtz 11). This created a culture of literary and intellectual rigor that verged on the otherworldly. A modern backlash has directed this rigor into secular fields, creating the new problem of Jewish biblical illiteracy (Wyllen 32, Holtz 22).

The Christian backlash, driven by Jesus' criticisms of the Pharisees which forever ring in our ears, looks different. There the ethical and intentional overshadow the legal and practical. However, we should remember that Jesus was doing something "Pharisaic" in arguing against the Pharisees: engaging in a debate with fellow students of Torah over the Law's nature and purpose. He is not against oral Torah, not in the least. He is a rabbi working within its world. His pyramid looks different, but it is still a pyramid. I don't want to turn this into a class on Christianity here, but I do want to leverage your knowledge of each tradition to improve your appreciation of the other.

Holtz is right to condemn the Christian propensity to malign, or at least discount, the Bible's life in rabbinic Judaism (23-24). As the Jewishness of Jesus and his first disciples has been newly appreciated, the modern-postmodern renaissance in Jewish biblical interpretation that Holtz joyfully presents for us has been enriching Christian biblical studies.

The big difference between the two schools is *not* that Jewish schools are coldly legalistic, sterile, or superseded, but that Jesus is our *ultimate* rabbi. At the resurrection, the fundamental debate is over. We argue only over what is most faithful to Jesus' school of halakha, not whether "the law is according to Jesus." In Judaism, that hasn't happened so decisively. Thus the authoritative boundaries of biblical interpretation are defined in terms of the schools of authoritative rivals (resembling those of Shammai, Hillel, Rashi, etc.). The breach between Christian halakha and Jewish halakha is over the issue of Jesus as the normative rabbi, versus Jesus as the father of a discredited school of interpretation.

Interestingly, because the renewal of Jewish biblical interpretation is happening outside yeshivas as well as within them, I suspect that the old dominance of rabbinic halakha over aggadah is faltering. Other forms of textual interpretation are asserting their importance over the traditional work of applying Torah to new life settings. As this happens, the Jewish tradition opens up in unpredictable ways, which are helping to reframe the traumatic dialogue between Jews and Christians over God's Word. Let's hope that their fruit is sweet.