

Teaching the Scripture Teachers: Education of Clergy for Jewish-Christian Relations

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Introduction

It's my privilege to share a few thoughts concerning Jewish-Christian relationships with you this evening. I'd like to approach the topic through three lenses:

1. My family of origin
2. My experiences of growing up in the Evangelical church context (Baptist)
3. My experiences in teaching the Scriptures to predominantly evangelical students

1. My Family of origin

If you read my short bio for this evening's meeting, you would have noticed that I have a Jewish heritage on my father's side of the family (he was one in a long line of Jewish Abraham's).

My mother is a *goy* and how they came to be married is a whole other story for another time. But pertinent to our discussion this evening is that I grew up in a context where Jewish-Christian relationships were modelled well between my mother's and father's sides of the family.

I think my mother and father were oblivious to this modelling as was I. But it became very formative in the way I viewed different people of different faiths relating to each other.

While my mother was the most articulate and vocal in the expression of her faith, my father's faith was one that I *felt* and *observed* rather than heard.

Clearly, they were both committed to God but believed in their own unique way. Interestingly my father never converted to Christianity and neither did my mother ever convert to Judaism. Yet the two faiths in my family seemed to happily co-exist. It taught me that people who believe in different ways can co-exist and flourish.

My reflection on this all these years later is that a person does not need to be Jewish *or* Christian in order to have faith in God. And so, one does not need to defend or attack the other as being in some way inferior.

Although implicit, the understanding I received from both my Jewish and non-Jewish families of origin was one of mutual respect and acceptance. For me, this has influenced my perspectives towards Christian brothers and sisters in denominations outside my own. It has also influenced the way I view those of other faith traditions.

2. My experiences of growing up in the Evangelical church context (Baptist)

The experience of Jewish-Christian relationships within my church context was quite different than that. There was no animosity toward Jewish people. I'd characterize it more as ignorance or perhaps confusion.

The church context I grew up in presented constant images of white Anglo-Saxon Bible characters. Abraham and Sarah looked like something from the palaces of Europe rather than the wilderness of the Ancient Near East. Of course, that wasn't limited to my Baptist church context but on this point we reflected images that the historical church had created centuries before.

When it came to Jesus, nobody in my church context really knew what to do with a Jewish Jesus so we didn't talk about it. Instead, they just imagined him to be a Christian (of a very particular kind) and apparently, God was too! I think as a young child I would go home from church sometimes and imagine Jesus looking like my dad, with olive-colored skin and amazingly black curly hair.

The corollary of these contrived images of Bible characters and Jesus and a lack of contact with Jewish people in my evangelical church context meant that the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures were treated purely as object lessons or, even more crassly, stories in which Jesus was hiding behind every bush. No one could have imagined a Bible without a New Testament. And in fact it became popular for a time for us to carry around a New Testament.

Despite this, I knew from my family that what the church called the 'Old Testament' was in fact the Bible of Judaism. It had an integrity of its own separate from any other sacred writings. I knew that members of my family studied Torah, used the Siddur and celebrated Pesach, among the other festivals. In my family this was understood and respected by both Christians and Jews. In my church this was not understood or misunderstood.

3. My experiences in teaching the Scriptures to predominantly evangelical students

For the past 25 years I have been teaching the Hebrew Scriptures and Biblical Hebrew language to students largely from an evangelical church context. I have noticed several themes in my classes when it comes to discussions about relations between Christians and Jews and because I teach in the area of Bible and languages most of the focus is on where Jews and Christians connect through sacred text:

- Many students view the Hebrew Scriptures as simply a prologue or precursor to the New Testament. I remind them that the Hebrew Scriptures form a discrete Bible that stands alone as a sacred text.
- Students are ambivalent about the importance of the Hebrew Scriptures for their faith. I remind them that roughly 25% of the New Testament cites or alludes to the Hebrew Scriptures. It follows that understanding what Christians call the New

Testament will be enhanced by an increased understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures.

- Jesus was Jewish and so were most of his earliest followers before the New Testament was even written. Hence, if we want to understand Jesus or the Gospel writers or Paul better then we need to read and understand their Bible.

I have found that exploring the texts that Jews and Christians have in common naturally leads to an interest in Jewish faith and Jewish people. I have found it to be an important way of building bridges rather than creating and maintaining walls between us.

In the academic world, I am thankful for the Jewish scholars who have engaged in New Testament studies such as Marc Zvi Brettler, Amy-Jill Levine and Robert Alter among others. They have opened a fresh way for Christians to view the Hebrew Scriptures and, consequently, the New Testament writings *through the lens of the Hebrew Scriptures*.

Not infrequently I have been asked by students over the years whether I am a Christian or a Jew. My response is always, 'Go figure it out.' Even more frequently I have been encouraged by students who say to me that the Hebrew Scriptures have come alive to them and that they now have an enlarged understanding of its Jewish background and context. This has led to some intentionally seeking out relationships with Jewish people, visiting a Schule or wanting to learn Hebrew language. Each contributes in its own way to better relationships between Christian and Jewish people.