

# Biblical Scholarship, Jesus, and Religious Education

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COMMENTARY BY MICHAEL GIBSON

What should Friends in the unprogrammed tradition teach about the Bible? About Jesus? I often hear these questions asked. Certainly, we should teach the classic narratives and poetry and the discursive passages which have spoken powerfully to people in every generation for thousands of years. The really big question, I believe, is not *what* to teach, but *how*. Friends have long said we should read scripture in that Light in which it was written. I believe this means reading prayerfully with deep honesty, integrity, and compassion, and with vulnerable humility. If we so read scripture, I think we would be surprised with each new reading. The Bible contains words about the Word, but is not that Word itself. Friends are clear about this. But God can use those words like a marvelous trickster to open up new places within us. The religious educator helps provide environments for this opening and offers opportunities for others to share with the community the measure of Light, or Truth, given them through their prayerful engagement with Biblical texts.

In many cases, though not always, it helps to embark on scholarly study, or at least to benefit from the scholarship of others. This is both a *what* and a *how*. With any given passage, it frequently helps to understand the context, the audience, and the author's perspective and purpose. Just because we read with our hearts doesn't mean we read with empty heads. I sometimes hear Friends say we should only teach that in the Bible which can be objectively verified as historically accurate. This, I think, misses the point of scholarship and the point of scripture, as well. To only teach objective truth in scripture would save a lot of time, particularly when it comes to Jesus, but we would lose infinitely much. Even if we were to attempt to teach what scholars believe is objectively true of Jesus, which scholar's truth list would we teach? The Jesus Seminar, for example, has done admirable work, but even they are not in agreement among themselves. Should we teach only the 18% of the sayings attributed to Jesus which the majority of people in the Jesus Seminar ("scholarly consensus" by vote) considers to be Jesus' own words?

The informed person knows that scholarly consensus does not equal the Jesus Seminar or any school of thought. Each scholar has his or her "take" on Jesus, arguing convincingly that Jesus was a social revolutionary, rabbi, failed prophet, spirit person, or something else, based on research and subjective personal experience and theological biases and worldviews. There are scholars who point out that the only things we can know for certain about Jesus is that he lived in Palestine, was crucified by the Romans, and was the focus of a religious movement considered a cult at the time. Our RE lessons on Jesus could be reduced to a ten-second blurb! Regardless of one's personal Biblical politics, I believe it is helpful to explore all the far edges from time to time to benefit from the full range of scholarship. I believe it is also important, however, to keep in mind that the point of scripture is NOT objective history, but something else, something very dear to Quakers: human experience of the Divine.

Interpreting scripture is as ongoing a process as interpreting ourselves. We may not always be conscious of it, but do we not all rework our own life stories and memories, our own self definitions, our own communities' stories? Similarly, we reinterpret scripture in every generation (and who knows how many times within the life span of one generation!), yet it remains alive and vital and relevant- and when we engage scripture with our whole selves open to God and to each other, the Spirit may use the text to open up new places within us. As someone once said-I wish I knew who-all stories are true ...and some actually happened! One of the Bible educator's main jobs is to listen for Truth in any given story (at home) and then invite others into that story (in the classroom).What the Spirit opens for each person fits that person's condition at the time. We each hear as much of the Truth as we are ready to receive.

Even as we focus on the liberating and healing Truth in scripture, the religious educator is wise, I believe, to be aware of, and sensitive to, how scripture has been used as a weapon, how the scriptures have been used to repress and suppress Jews, Blacks, women, sexual minorities, and others. We may need to remind ourselves and others that the shortsightedness and failures of others, even of the Biblical writers themselves, need not prevent us from discovering anew truths about ourselves, our relationships, and God which can be opened up to us through the texts. In a sense, we can view all Biblical narratives as stories which attempt to express felt spiritual realities. The educator is challenged to help readers read beyond the cultural baggage of the ancients (and our own!), feel safe enough to engage in open and honest exploration, and focus on the Word which the words of scripture *point to*. When this happens, I believe those spiritual realities shine through. And let us always be attentive to the activity of the Spirit in our reading, for if any are to read with understanding, if any are to hear the Word in the words, there must be Light.

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