

**Gifts of Faith, Part 6:
A Gift of Judaism Through Christian Eyes
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Scriptures: Genesis 9:8-29; 2 Samuel 7:8-17

I. The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

When I was a child, my minister would go jogging each week with the local rabbi. Both brought dogs. The name of my minister's dog was Moses. The Rabbi's dog was named Jesus. Suffice it to say, my experience of Judaism as a child, largely mediated through my minister and a few Jewish friends in school, was one of openness and appreciation. Differences were not barriers but bridged with a touch of humor. Nevertheless, despite the warm affection for the Jewish people that grew in me as a child, my experience of the Jewish scriptures was altogether different. They filled me with fear and loathing.

My minister didn't teach me to loathe this portion of my Bible. In fact, it was his appreciation of Judaism that got me reading the Hebrew Scriptures on my own. Much to my dismay, what I found there were a lot of people who were held up as great heroes of the faith who didn't seem very faithful or godly to me. While my minister called the God of the Hebrew Scriptures "loving," I felt this God had way too many "anger management" issues.

I did suppose that, if I was God and all kinds of people were running around doing ungodly things in my name, I might have anger issues, too. Yet, if I were the Almighty God, then shouldn't I be held to a little higher standard than my creations?

Two years before seminary, while aboard a floating seafood processor in Bristol Bay, Alaska, waiting for the salmon season to start, I decided to finally face my fear and loathing of the Hebrew Scriptures by reading them from cover-to-cover. As the ship's Quality Assurance Manager, I enjoyed a comfy stateroom that was quiet and private – just the place where I could read the Bible for hours without anyone noticing and assuming I was a one of "those kind" of Christians.

One morning I nervously I grabbed my Bible off the shelf above my bed, opened it to Genesis 1, verse 1, and commenced what I thought would be a multi-week ordeal. The ordeal didn't last more than an hour. By the 9th chapter, Noah – supposedly the *holiest man on earth* at the time – disembarks from his ark after The Flood, plants a vineyard, makes wine, and gets so drunk he passes out naked in his tent. "This is how the 'holiest man on earth' acts?" I muttered in dismay as I continued reading.

According to the story, Noah's son, Ham, came across Noah while he was flat-out naked and went and told his two brothers about it. His brothers responded by pulling a garment over their shoulders, walking backwards to avoid seeing their father in his birthday suit, and covered him. When Noah awakened from his stupor, he somehow remembered that Ham had seen him naked and told his brothers. You would think that Noah would have been grateful for this courtesy. Yet Noah considered Ham's action so egregious he cursed Ham's son, Canaan, who had nothing to do with what happened, assigning Canaan to be a slave of Ham's brothers.

"This is a pile of crap" I spat as I found myself throwing the Bible against the wall. Thump! In my mind's eye, I remember the Bible hanging against the wall for a split second as if it was as horrified as I was that I'd just splayed it against the wall. It slumped to the floor and lay there looking hurt. I snatched the Bible up, set it on the far end of my bookshelf, and didn't pick up the Hebrew Scriptures again until I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Ironically, my very first class at Princeton was "Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures." My poor Bible was avenged! Given my history, you might find it odd, therefore, that I would leave seminary eight years later with both a Master's of Divinity degree and a Ph.D. in the very Scriptures I had loathed.

What happened? Finally having chance to study the Hebrew Scriptures with people who actually knew them well, I fell in love with these scriptures before the introductory course was even finished.

It's not that I suddenly became aware of so many other truly "godly" heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures that they tipped the balance from loathing to love. In fact, the opposite is true. As I engaged in academic studies of the Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets, priests, and political leaders – people like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, Moses, and King David – I found that the stories I'd learned in Sunday School had, like the paper wraps say on hotel toilet seats, been "sanitized for my protection." Scales seemed to fall from my eyes as I beheld the unvarnished truth about these biblical heroes and heroines: they were all deeply flawed. Every last one of them.

My Sunday School teachers never taught me, for instance, that Abraham had passed his elderly wife Sarah off as his sister on a trip to Egypt. He was afraid the Egyptians would find her so attractive that they'd kill him off just to take her for themselves. When Egypt's Pharaoh did, in fact, fall in love with her, Pharaoh made Sarah part of his harem! Because Pharaoh took care of his "in-laws" as well as his harem, Abraham became rich as a result. Yet when God sent a number of plagues upon Pharaoh, he somehow put two and two together and figured out the charade. He sent Sarah and Abraham away in disgust.

This story is strange enough, but Abraham and Sarah double-down on their folly when they move to southern Israel and once again pretend that they are brother and sister. This time, King Abimelech of Gerar falls for Sarah and takes her in. Thankfully, before Abimelech has a chance to consummate the relationship, God reveals the truth in a dream and Abimelech, like Pharaoh, sends the couple away in disgust.

So much for the “godly” heroes of the Bible. Abraham is even held up as the “father of faith” by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Other heroes are no better. Some are worse. For instance, Moses is said to have murdered an Egyptian officer before becoming a great hero of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jacob – the father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel – is said to have tricked his own brother out of his birthright. Jacob is later renamed “Israel” after wrestling all night with God’s angel. “Israel” literally means “One who strives with God.” Wouldn’t you expect a great patriarch of the Bible to be named, “One who *serves* God”?

Then there is King David, whom the Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly call the greatest king who ever lived. Yet some of David’s behaviors set such a low bar that it is almost inconceivable that none of his successors could surpass him. Like Moses, David once murdered a man in cold blood. Only, the man he murdered happened to be the husband of Bathsheba, with whom David was having a secret affair. Apparently, the first six wives David married weren’t enough for him. Of course, compared to David’s son Solomon, who had 1,000 wives and concubines, David was puritanical.

David’s other sons weren’t exactly models of propriety, either. His son Amnon is known for sexual immorality and Absalom for murder and armed rebellion. Despite the fact that David and his family would make even the Kardashians seem like the Brady Bunch by comparison, God stands by David’s side in the Bible. True, God gets angry and punishes David for his improprieties occasionally. But God also pledged eternal loyalty to David and his royal line, promising that David’s house would rule in Israel forever. Apparently, God never read of David’s exploits in the Bible ...

II. From Mess to Miracle

You’d think God would prefer making heroes out of saints, not sinners. Yet Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses, and King David are simply the most notable in a long line of people whose moral standing is severely compromised at times. They make mistakes that hurt both themselves and others. They often act as if they have no awareness of God or faith in what God has told them. Nevertheless, these are the very people through whom God worked wonders.

Through Abraham and Sarah, God created a people through whom the world would be blessed. Through Jacob, these people were turned into a nation of twelve tribes. Through Moses this nation was liberated from slavery in Egypt. And through David this nation was finally united and brought to the peak of its power. God's Messiah would even spring from his family line.

Are you starting to detect a theme here? Every hero is an anti-hero in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet God chooses to work miracles through each and every one – miracles that bless them and others. Miracles that continue to bless the world to this day.

Don't get me wrong. The central message of the Hebrew Scriptures is not "Anything goes!" or "Do unto others and God won't care." God definitely does care. When these people made mistakes or hurt other people, they hurt themselves in the process. There is a great deal of pain in their stories, much of it self-inflicted. Yet there is also a great deal of awakening – awakening to the harm they have done, awakening to their need to turn back to God and recommit to living a life worthy of repentance, awakening to God's willingness to forgive. It is their experience of God's amazing grace that gave them the strength and courage they needed to make amends for their actions and fight the good fight once again.

In other words, there are always consequences for bad behavior in the Hebrew Scriptures. But bad behavior and its results are not the end of these people's story with God. They regularly stumble and fall on the path God sets before them, yet when they own up to their mistakes, they discover a God who loves them more than they love themselves; who believes in them more than they believe in them; a God who prefers relationship to perfection. They discover a God who believes in second chances (and third and fourth chances), who sets them back on their path and continues to work wonders through them which bless them and many others.

This is why I fell in love with the Hebrew Scriptures in seminary even after my Sunday School naivete was long gone. I realized that if these Scriptures offer an accurate reflection of God's eternal nature and character, then flawed people like you and me have reason for hope. For, if God could love and even make heroes out of fundamentally flawed people, then surely God could love and work through the likes of flawed people like you and me.

God's "anger management" issues in the Hebrew Scriptures would continue to disturb me for some time, however – and still do. At times, God's anger stands in stark contrast to God's love for these misfit heroes and the people who follow them. Yet, as I studied the history and culture of the ancient Near East, I began to realize that the authors of Scripture were importing their own prejudices and cultural biases into God's holy book.

When God appears all-too-human in Scripture, it is important to remember that Scripture was not written by God. It was written by human beings. While these people may have been inspired by God, divine inspiration does not erase human imperfection, as the biblical literalists seem to think. Just look at the heroes of the Bible if you have any doubt! In this respect, the authors of Scripture are simultaneously heroes and antiheroes themselves. They are just as much a part of God's message of Grace as those they write about.

It is possible to claim that the scriptures as a whole are divinely inspired, but only if you take them *as a whole*. Meaning, the entire arc of the scriptural story of God's relationship with humanity reveals what God can do with a hot mess: God can take a flawed set of writings, about flawed human beings, written by equally flawed authors, and show clearly that love wins; that our next mess can become the starting point for God's next miracle.

Are you starting to see the beautiful gift that Judaism offers me as a Christian? Years ago, I thought it was only Jesus who brought a message of God's love and grace for critically flawed human beings like us. I thought it was only Jesus who taught us that God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves. When the apostle Paul wrote about how nothing whatsoever can separate us from God's love – nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture (Romans 8:31-39) – I had assumed he had only Jesus to turn to for proof that he wasn't out of his mind. Yet I discovered that proof is found in each and every page of Scripture – the old scriptures and the new ones.

The Bible may be a "hot mess"; those who wrote it may be just as flawed as those who star in it. Yet these imperfections cannot erase the indelible mark that God's love and grace has stamped on the Bible. As a result, nothing has been able to erase the indelible mark God's love and grace has stamped on me.

Every time I experience God's love and grace directed at me, in the midst of my own messes, and doubt creeps in about whether or not this love and grace is real, all I have to do is open my Bible to be reminded that God's love for me – and you – is no greater and no less than God's love for everyone else in this dirty little holy book.

I once threw my Bible against the wall in anger thinking it was irredeemably flawed. Little did I know that this very Bible would eventually bounce back, hitting me with the best evidence I have that my experiences of God's love and grace, and yours, are real. I've been in love not only with these scriptures, but with this God, ever since.

How about you? If you knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the real God loves you far more deeply than your ability to comprehend, believes in you far more deeply than

you believe in yourself, and has no "anger management" issues with you regarding your shortcomings but is more like a caring friend who steadfastly stands with you even while prodding you at times to seek a better way – if you knew that *this* is the real God – would you bow to this God, entrusting your life into God's hands? If so, why not turn aside from those other gods that keep demanding your loyalty and try it? Tell God, "If this is who you really are, then I'm yours. And if you guide me, I'll follow."