Jewish Hermeneutics and Christian Preaching
Scriptural Hermeneutics and
its Homiletical Consequences

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Rudolf Bohren, Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology in Heidelberg, once wrote in his *"Predigtlehre"* (Homiletic), first published 36 years ago in 1971: "Only pride and ignorance could prevent the Protestant preacher [we are convinced that we could replace this adjective and say: "the Christian preacher" – AD/MN] from learning from the rabbi."[1] 36 years after these spirited and promising words, we want to pick up this sentence again and ask: what could homiletic learning from the rabbi mean to us?

First of all, of course, in order to answer this question and learn from 'the rabbi's preaching', we should ask *how* "the rabbi" preaches. There is obviously no simple answer to this question. We could turn to rabbinic times, to the Middle Ages, to the dramatic changes in 19th-century Germany, to the early 20th century, and to recent developments in Jewish preaching.[2] In our paper we confine ourselves to hermeneutical observations starting in rabbinic times and moving forward through the ages and thus try to get a rough overview of Jewish homiletical hermeneutics. Our main question will be whether there is something we, as Christian preachers, could learn from the ancient rabbis' ways of dealing with the sacred texts and of the subsequent hermeneutical developments.

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1   *Rudolf Bohren*, Predigtlehre, Gütersloh ⁶1993, 121.
2   Cf. as an overview *Alexander Deeg*, Predigt und Derascha. Homiletische Textlektüre im Dialog mit dem Judentum (APTLH 48), Göttingen 2006, 63–218.

1. Scriptural hermeneutics in rabbinic times

Of course, as Professor Stemberger makes clear in his paper,[3] it is a great challenge and somehow an impossible task to find valid data about the sermon in rabbinic Judaism. Whether the rabbis preached in synagogues at all, whether the texts we find in the socalled "homiletic Midrashim"[4] are parts of real sermons – all this we do not know exactly. But we must admit that we really like the idea that at least parts of the material in the homiletic midrashim could have been real sermons or at least sermon outlines. We know that "we really like the idea" is not an academic argument at all – but we enjoy imagining that at least the P*tihot* could have been synagogue sermons in rabbinic times.

According to a count made by Joseph Heinemann there are more than 2,000 *p*e*tihot* handed down in the rabbinic literature.[5] A P*tihah* ends with a biblical verse, from which we can assume that this was the first verse of the Torah reading for that particular Shabbat or feast day. But it begins with a completely different biblical verse – usually from the K*e*tubim*, the "Writings", or from the *corpus propheticum*. Between this "remote verse" with which the P*tihah* begins and the verse from the reading, the *Darshan* (the interpreter, preacher) describes an arc in which he puts together separate interpretations, parables, or short stories.

Joseph Heinemann influentially represented the thesis according to which these P*tihot* were the actual D*e*rashot* in the synagogues – and not only parts or introductions to the sermons.[6]

> If this was really the case, one could then picture this as something like the following: Jewish people came together to the service of worship. A fundamental constituent of the Shabbat morning service was the reading from the Torah – in *lectio continua* and in Palestine probably ensued in a

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3   Cf. Günter Stemberger's paper "The Derashah in rabbinic times" in this volume.
4   Cf. *Günter Stemberger*, Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch, Munich ⁸1992, 238; 284–308; *Idem*, Midrasch. Vom Umgang der Rabbinen mit der Bibel. Einführungen – Texte – Erläuterungen, Munich 1989, 143–185.
5   Cf. *Joseph Heinemann*, D*e*rashot baZibbur bitqufat haTalmud [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1970, 12; *Idem*, The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim. A Form-Critical Study, in: *Idem/Dov Noy* (Eds.), Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature (ScrHie 22), Jerusalem 1971, 100–122, here 101. – On the whole the "homilies" in the "homiletic *Midrashim*" are so structured that the P*tihah* (usually several P*tihot*) which are introduced in more detail in what follows are succeeded by the *Injan* interpretation (interpretations on several verses of the Shabbat-*Parashah*) before a – usually shorter – eschatological section (*Hatimah*) concludes the homily (cf. *Doris Lenhard*, Die rabbinische Homilie. Ein formanalytischer Index [FJS 10], Frankfurt/M. 1998, 54–69).
6   Cf. especially the literature mentioned above in no. 5.

three-year rotation.[7] If we assume that those attending the service had a relatively sound knowledge of the Torah, we can also surmise that the majority knew – at least roughly – what would be read on that particular Shabbat. Then the service took its course. Psalms were sung, the *Sh^ema Jisrael* read, the *Eighteen Benedictions* – shortened on the Shabbat – spoken. Subsequently the *Darshan* came forward and began his *D^erashah* – before the reading from the Torah. But he did *not* begin with the verse from the Torah with which the reading would later commence. On the contrary: he began and quoted an entirely different, far-removed biblical verse. But his listeners knew: it would be his task to come to the reading of the Torah scheduled for that Shabbat from this remote verse through the words of the *D^erashah*. A basic tension was provided and a way marked out for the *D^erashah*, a way within the textual space of the Hebrew Bible, the *Tanak*.

At first sight this prescription appears purely formal. But naturally the *P^etihah lemmata* were not chosen in an arbitrary fashion but in such a way that a field of tension was opened up between the *p^etihah lemma* and the Torah *parashah*. To give only one example of one *p^etihah* and the field of tension that can be found in it: A *p^etihah*, cited for example in Midrash Sh^emot Rabba, began with a *lemma* from Ps. 11: "the LORD's throne is in heaven" (v. 4). But it issued in Ex. 3, in the story of a God who reveals himself in the lowliness of a thorn bush in the desert. The whole *p^etihah* asks for the place where God can be found, asks for God's topography, and moves between the transcendence and immanence of God – and on the way from Ps. 11 to Ex. 3 joins together different interpretations and relates stories and a parable.[8]

We do not know whether the *D^erashot* in rabbinic times really looked like this. But at all events the *P^etihot* show the kind of hermeneutics which is fundamentally characteristic of the *D^erashah* in the rabbinic period. In short: the *D^erashot* led into the Torah and involved the listeners in the words of Scripture. If one were to look for a term to characterize this hermeneutic we think that *scriptural hermeneutic* would be an obvious choice. The interpreter does not speak *about* Scripture; he does not investigate *one* statement in the text but opens ways into the scripture as "Sacra Scriptura".

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7   Cf. *Ismar Elbogen*, Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung, 2nd reprint of the 3rd improved edition, Hildesheim 1995, 155–174; *Dirk Monshouwer*, The Reading of Scripture in the Liturgy. A neglected Approach to Biblical Interpretation, in: CV 41/1999, 116–130, here: 119–128.

8   This *p^etihah*, the structure of which is sketched here, is transmitted e.g. in ShemR 2.2.

The famous statement of Ben Bag Bag in m. Av 5.22[9] sums up these scriptural hermeneutics strikingly. Ben Bag Bag says: "Turn it (the Torah) round and round, for everything is in it."

The expectation of finding "everything" in Scripture is the basis for a meticulously precise reading of the biblical text. Individual words, even letters are examined. Rabbinic interpreters ascribe the highest authority to the canonical text of the Torah. They read it convinced that every smallest particular is significant. This is justified right at the beginning of the *Midrash Tanchuma* in the exegesis of Gen. 1.1 on the grounds that even the smallest change in the consonant text of the Torah could destroy the whole world.

> Take, for example, Ps. 150.6 ("Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!"). If in the verb "praise" there were a "het " (ח) in place of the letter "he" (ה), there would only be one tiny line more but the text would now read "Let everything that breathes blaspheme the LORD". The world could be destroyed by such carelessness.[10]

Frequently apposite biblical passages are drawn in such a manner that the result is an interpretation which could be described using a catchword from 20th century Literary Studies: "intertextual". In investigating the biblical words and stories and in the intertextual intertwining with other texts, the interpreters recognize that the words of Scripture do not speak of things past but are concerned with the present of the People of God.

But here it is at the same time completely clear for rabbinic interpretation that the biblical texts do not make only *one* statement which can be transmitted once and for all. On the contrary (at least in haggadic interpretation!) they are convinced that the words of the Bible do not lose any of their importance by being interpreted in many ways – but always become richer. Thus, for example, Abaje in a well-known interpretation of Ps. 62.11 ("God has spoken once, twice have I heard this …") says: "[…] a biblical passage has several meanings, but one meaning is not to be taken from different passages" (b. San 34a). In the context of the Talmud we find immediately afterwards a quotation from the school of Rabbi Ishmael: Just as the Word of God is described as a hammer which breaks a rock in pieces (Jer. 23.29), so may the manifold interpretations be understood as the many sparks produced in the process. In the medieval Midrash BemR we read that the Torah has several faces and consequently in the end has infinitely numerous

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9   In the historical tradition we are dealing with an addition to the Mishna-tract *Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers); cf. *Günter Stemberger*, "Wende und wende sie …" (mAvot 5.22), in: BN 116/2003, 87–94.

10   Cf. *Tan* Bereshit 1.

possibilities "to confront" present-day hearers and readers (BemR *Naso* 13.15).

Rabbinic (haggadic) interpretation is characterised by its reverence for the text, the plurality of interpretation, and the intertextuality of reading. As a consequence of these characteristics, rabbinic exegesis does not take the place of the text but constantly remains *con-textualization*. Put graphically: The text is central, and around this text are grouped the varied rabbinical interpretations which only make sense together with the text. The rabbinic exegetes only achieve the new *word* of their own individual topical interpretations in the continual interplay with the scriptural *text*.

Already in the rabbinical period this con-textualization was characterised by the two terms *written* and *oral Torah*.[11] Startingpoint and constant point of reference is the *written Torah*. This is read again and again in anticipation since what Ben Bag Bag says holds true: "Turn it round and round, for everything is in it." The result of the constant turning is the continually increasing, never-ending exegesis of the written Torah which can be called the *oral Torah*. The rabbis' ability to see the most varied and even contradictory interpretations of a scriptural passage as a sign of the richness and beauty of the biblical text rather than as a problematic exegetical jungle results from their trust that the written Torah can constantly become the living Word of God. A kind of theonomically-bound reception aesthetic of the Torah is a characteristic of rabbinic biblical hermeneutics – and gives them a calm, unassuming, and frequently amusing candour. This finds expression in e.g. PesK 12.25, an interpretation of Ex. 20.2. In the introduction to the Decalogue the *whole* nation is addressed in the second person singular (!), which surprises the rabbinic exegete: "I am the LORD your (sing.) God (אלהיך)." In the *Midrash* on this we read:

> "Rabbi Levi said: The HOLY ONE, praise be to HIM, appeared to them like that statue which has a face on every side. A thousand people look at this statue and it looks at all of them. So it was with the HOLY ONE, may HE be praised: When he spoke each individual Israelite said: With me speaks the WORD. What is written here is not 'I am the LORD your (Plural) God (אלהיכם)', but 'I am the LORD, your (singular) God'." Rabbi Jossi bar Khanina said: "The WORD speaks with each individual according to his strength. Do not be surprised by this statement, for it was also so when the manna descended upon Israel: its taste differed for each individual according to his strength. [...] And just as the taste of the manna differed

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11   Cf. *Peter Schäfer*, Das „Dogma" von der mündlichen Torah im rabbinischen Judentum, in: *Idem*, Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums (AGJU 15), Leiden 1978, 153–197.

for each individual according to his strength, so each individual hears the
WORD according to his strength."

The *Midrash* is a reading which combines an imaginative freedom of
interpretation and academic eros in the treatment of the text with an
unconditional commitment to this text, based on the expectation that
God himself will make his Word again to Torah, the Word that
addresses and guides.

And this is exactly what we would call *scriptural hermeneutics*. The
rabbinic texts impressively show us an interpretation which, full of
anticipation, meticulously searches the Torah and intertwines present-
day hearers/readers in manifold ways into the words and stories of the
Torah.

2. Scripturality and metascripturality in Judaism and Christianity

2.1 Metascriptural ways of Jewish hermeneutics and homiletics – and the recent fascination of Scripturality

We would suggest calling the opposite of *scriptural* hermeneutics
metascriptural hermeneutics. *Metascriptural* hermeneutics could be
characterised as a way of dealing with the text that does not lead *into
the text*, its richness and variety of interpretations, but moves outward
from the text to the interpretation derived from it. Of course this a rough
confrontation, but we hope that it can prove helpful as a heuristic, as a
way to orientate oneself in the large area of hermeneutical discussion.

Jewish hermeneutics are by no means *scriptural* all the times. In the
history of Jewish hermeneutics there is a remarkable shift from rabbinic
times to the Middle Ages and a tangible change in the way texts were
interpreted.[12] Above all, the Carian criticism of the manner of rabbinic
interpretation of Scripture and the influences stemming from the
adoption of elementary Aristotelian philosophy resulted in many
medieval *D'rashot* developing philosophical or ethical statements,
which they then substantiated with references from Scripture. Put
bluntly, the hermeneutical direction reverses in comparison to the
rabbinical period: *D'rashah* no longer leads *into* the Torah and the
inconsistent variety of different "sparks" which arise when the stones

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12 This change is described, for example, by *Moshe Idel*, Preface, in: *Betty Rojtman*, Black
    Fire on White Fire. An essay on Jewish hermeneutics from Midrash to Kabbalah,
    Berkeley (CA)/Los Angeles (CA)/London 1998, ix–xii, esp. ix.

of the words and letters are carefully hewn but leads *out of* the Torah to prove a philosophical or ethical statement. Alongside this philosophical or ethical interpretation a third important direction of hermeneutics develops in the Jewish Middle Ages: the mystical interpretation. Its hermeneutics can, according to our opinion, also be described as metascriptural to the extent that mystical interpreters sought to push forward through the words of Scripture and the variety of interpretations to the real basis of the Torah hidden behind the letters, to the *unio mystica.*

We cannot go into detail concerning the Middle Ages and their hermeneutics here – this is too broad a topic for this short lecture. But we want to give another prominent example of metascriptural hermeneutics in Jewish sermons: the movement of Jewish reform – at least in its first years. Jewish reformers saw the sermon in the national language (no longer Yiddish) as an appropriate means to accomplish two urgent tasks – internally: Judaism had lost the classical plausibility structure of Jewish life as it had previously existed in Jewish communities which were relatively fenced off from their surroundings; it had to be led to an up-to-date and consequently reformed Judaism.[13] The aim was to make "Jews by fate" – as many Jewish people felt themselves to be, particularly in the cities – into "Jews by faith".[14] Outwardly, it was felt necessary to seek contact both in regard to content and form with the greater part of society which was Christian. The sermon in German appeared to be a suitable method of achieving both goals. The early sermons in that period were frequently fashioned to represent generally accepted philosophical-theological ideas or basic ethical values metascripturally from the Torah and Jewish tradition. And here again one has the typical paradigm of *metascriptural* hermeneutics. We refer to Eduard Kley as an example:

> Kley preached on the last day of the Passover Feast 5586 (1826) in the Hamburg Temple on *"Der Auszug aus Mizrajim, auch für das Alltagsleben"* ("The Exodus from Egypt – also for everyday life").[15] The title points to the basic aim and hermeneutics of the sermon: Kley wants to show how the 'old' story of the Exodus from Egypt can (still) be significant for everyday

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13 Cf. *Michael A. Meyer*, Jüdische Identität in der Moderne, Frankfurt/M. 1992, esp. 45 n. 10; *Shulamit Volkov*, Die Erfindung einer Tradition. Zur Entstehung des modernen Judentums in Deutschland, in: *Eadem*, Das jüdische Projekt der Moderne. Zehn Essays, Munich 2001, 118–137.

14 Cf. *Ismar Schorsch*, Emancipation and the Crisis of Religious Authority: The Emergence of the Modern Rabbinate, in: *Werner E. Mosse et al.* (Eds.), Revolution and Evolution. 1848 in German Jewish History (SWALBI 39), Tübingen 1981, 205–247.

15 *Eduard Kley*, Predigten in dem neuen Israelitischen Tempel, Zweites Heft, Jahrgang 5586. Zweite Hälfte, Hamburg 1820, 65–76.

life in the present. Kley develops his sermon in three points (note the dependence on the 'pedagogical' form practiced in Christian preaching at that time!) and makes the listeners aware that the Feast of the Passover needs an everyday shape so that (1) one does not lose sight of the Feast Day, (2) one practises moderation, and (3) one remembers one's neighbours. Where this happens – thus Kley at the end of his sermon – everyday life could already become a "foretaste of bliss".[16] Three points and a conclusion – all of this based on some – relatively loose – reference to the biblical text!

This is a typically metascriptural way of hermeneutics – and its result is a thematically-oriented sermon which takes the text as a starting point and which talks about two or three points that the preacher finds important in the text.

It was striking and interesting for us to see that nowadays an impressive rediscovery of scriptural hermeneutics can be discerned, especially in the USA, but in the meantime also in other parts of the world. The pre-modern scriptural hermeneutics of the Midrash, with its emphasis on precision, intertextuality, and the plurality of readings, has again been increasingly taken into consideration and seen as a stimulating precedent for the present post-modern situation. On the theoretical level authors like Susan Handelman, David Stern, Norman Cohen, and many others[17], as well as the whole academic group of "Textual (and Scriptural) Reasoners" in the context of the "American Academy of Religion"[18], are looking for such combination of pre-modern midrashic hermeneutics in post-modern times. And there are also steps towards an altered practice in the congregations through observation of the Midrash – pursued e.g. by the "Institute for Contemporary Midrash".[19] Poems are written, films produced, plays performed, and pictures are painted to open up new levels of Torah study for present-day people.

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16 Ibid., 76 (emphasised in the original).

17 Cf. e.g. *Susan A. Handelman*, The Slayers of Moses. The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory, Albany (NY) 1982; *Eadem*, Fragments of the Rock. Contemporary Literary Theory and the Study of Rabbinic Texts – A Response to David Stern, in: Prooftexts 5/1985, 75–95; *David Stern*, Midrash and Theory. Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies, Evanston (IL) 1996; *Norman Cohen*, The Way into Torah, Woodstock (VT) 2000.

18 Cf. *Peter Ochs/Nancy Levene* (Eds.), Textual Reasonings. Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century, Grand Rapids (MI)/Cambridge 2002.

19 Cf. www.icmidrash.org; cf. also the periodical "Living Text" which was published by ICM between 1997 and 2000.

2.2 Are we Christians born metascripturalists?

Having collected some observations in Jewish hermeneutics and having tried to arrange the hermeneutical world by distinguishing two approaches – the scriptural and the metascriptural – let us now turn to Christian hermeneutics.

There are more than a few authors who see the Christian approach to scripture as characterised by the tendency to reduce the plurality of meanings to *the one* meaning which corresponds to the one and unique truth revealed in Jesus Christ. About ten years ago Jochen Hörisch, who teaches German literature in Mannheim, published a striking treatise on hermeneutics: "*Die Wut des Verstehens*" ("The fury of understanding").[20] He stigmatises early Christian efforts to understand the Jewish Holy Scriptures (that soon would be called by Christians "Old Testament") their way. The person he mainly aims at is Apostle Paul. According to Hörisch he is the first Christian ancestor of what, with young Schleiermacher, he calls "the fury of understanding".[21] Jesus himself still esteemed the letters of the Scriptures: "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all this is accomplished" (Mat. 5.17). In contrast Paul would soon establish an inverted way of putting letters and spirit: "Our competence is from God, who made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (1Cor. 3.5f.). Here we are, says Hörisch. This is the starting point of a long and dominating tradition that in complicity with Aristotelian philosophy banishes the plurality of literal meanings in favour of the one and only meaning given by the one Spirit of God. Plurality of meanings is now regarded as a defect to be overcome rather than an outstanding quality. What is said here about Christian interpretation of biblical texts may be said in general about western interpretation of any text. That "fury of understanding" can be diagnosed as a cultural pattern rather than a specifically religious or theological one.

Let us stop here. It may be enough to mark the starting point. For the following centuries we have to recognize that Hörisch's argument well captures a major stream of western interpretation of the Christian Bible. The Protestant Reformation, at least in its beginnings, may be regarded as a counterpoint to this way of unifying interpretation.

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20   Cf. *Jochen Hörisch*, Die Wut des Verstehens. Zur Kritik der Hermeneutik, Frankfurt/M. 1988; ²1998.

21   Cf. *Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher*, Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern (1799) (*Günter Meckenstock*, Ed.), Berlin/New York 1999, 120.

Martin Luther fought a lifelong struggle in favour of the literal sense of the biblical texts. From Luther's times up to now others may be mentioned who tried it this way. But the Protestant mainstream of interpretation has always followed the pattern stigmatised by Jochen Hörisch. This is what we call metascripturality.[22]

2.3 Metascripturality and its homiletic consequences – or: the interrelation of homiletics and hermeneutics

It may not be astonishing that Christian preaching has been highly influenced by the metascriptural way of reading the Holy Scriptures. The way to preach the Bible and the way to read it are intrinsically tied to each other. We call it "change steps" ("*Wechselschritte*"), i.e. one cannot do the first step without doing the second one, vice-versa, and so on.[23] Homiletics and hermeneutics, indeed, are intertwined.

In modern times, the dominating western model for Christian sermons has been the three-point-sermon. The same procedure as every Sunday: the preacher starts with the biblical text, captures something in it that corresponds to ordinary dogmatic theology, and then outlines it by means of the traditional three-point-model. The biblical text turns out not to be the space to get in but the springboard to get off. Metascriptural hermeneutics have generated metascriptural homiletics and vice-versa.

This has been an admittedly rough drawing. One may no longer find the pure unadulterated model of a three-point-sermon. Real sermons ordinarily mix up metascriptural attitude with some bright spots of what may be accepted as scriptural. We quote two examples, the first one for a metascriptural attitude and the second one for a bright spot of scripturality.

The first example comes from Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. He once published an inspiring treatise on preaching: "Finally Comes the Poet. Daring Speech for Proclamation".[24] In this text he applaudably points at the poetic power of various texts in the

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22 Cf. *Alexander Deeg*, Skripturalität und Metaskripturalität. Über Heilige Schrift, Leselust und Kanzelrede, in: EvTh 67/2007, 5–17.

23 Cf. *Martin Nicol/Alexander Deeg*, Im Wechselschritt zur Kanzel. Praxisbuch Drama-turgische Homiletik, Göttingen 2005, esp. 13–20.

24 *Walter Brueggemann*, Finally comes the Poet. Daring Speech für Proclamation, Minneapolis (MN) 1989.

Hebrew Bible and encourages Christian preachers to get inspired by
biblical poetry for shaping their own sermons.

As a preacher, however, Brueggemann does not seem to be as
daring as he once proposed. In the subsequent sermon[25] after about 30
seconds he reaches the sentence that has figured out to be one of the
most prominent signals of metascriptural preaching:

> "All quarrels [...] are about land. It is so in rural families that endlessly
> quarrel about the estate. If not land then turf, power, control, security, all
> about scarcity. So divide it up and make sure I get mine. That's what the
> text is about."

"That's what the text is about." – This sentence seems to be incidental,
but it is not at all. It signalizes a preacher who feels able to sum up a
plurality of meanings into a short statement. He requires the authority
to be the spokesman of the biblical text. Instead of preaching from
within the text he takes up a position outside of it.

Our second example: the preacher is Harold Kushner, a famous
American rabbi. His entire sermon[26] may not be regarded as
intrinsically scriptural. Yet in the beginning he shows what rabbinic
scripturality could be. In the well-known story of Adam, Eve, and the
forbidden fruit he discovers a question which usually is not asked:

> "The story [...] is the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. As
> long as I can remember that story has bothered me. Even as a child I had
> this feeling that there is something fishy about this story, that doesn't come
> together. For one thing, it sounds like a set-up, doesn't it. Any time you
> have a story that begins 'Don't eat the fruit!', 'Don't open the box!', 'Don't
> go in the locked room!' you know what's gonna happen. You gonna do,
> because otherwise there is no story. The Bible would have been three pages
> long. If God didn't want them to eat the fruit, so don't make the fruit, I
> mean He is God. More than that – when they do eat the fruit [...], it
> bothered me, that God came down so hard on them. I remember as a child
> saying to myself: 'Boy if this is what God does to Adam and Eve when
> they did one thing wrong, what's he gonna do to me for all the things that I
> have done wrong?' But what bothered me about the story more than
> anything else, was the name of the fruit. You remember, it's not just the
> fruit you are not supposed to eat. How was it called? The fruit of the tree of
> the knowledge of good and evil. And that I could never understand. I
> would assume acquiring a knowledge of good and evil is a good thing.
> How can you be a moral person, if you don't know what's right or wrong?
> Why is the story told to make it seem that learning about good and evil

25 *Walter Brueggemann,* Videotape in the "Great Preachers" Series, Odyssey Productions,
    Worcester (PA).

26 *Harold Kushner,* Videotape in the "Great Preachers" Series, Odyssey Productions,
    Worcester (PA).

was the worst thing anybody could ever have done. But I said: 'You are a kid, you are not meant to understand this stuff. When I get older, it'll make sense.' But it never did."

The setting of the story is well-known, and well-known is the tree in the midst of the garden. It is hard to get inside a story that anybody knows so well. The rabbi, however, has the courage to ask a question he had always asked himself since he was a child: Why is this fruit called fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"? That is what he had never been able to understand. It does not make sense that God punishes Adam and Eve for what they had done. Why is it regarded as a sin what we have always required our own children to be able to do, i.e. to identify and to discern good and evil? And so on. A well-known detail of a well-known story bothered the preacher, he didn't stop asking, but there seems to be no sense in it at all. 'Wonderful', says the homiletician. The well-known story is now open. We may pass the door, get inside the story and make discoveries, our own as well the preacher's ones.

3. Learning from the homiletic twin

3.1 Theoretical perspectives

We are convinced that in present-day homiletical and hermeneutical reality we could profit a lot, if we learned from the old, pre-modern way of Jewish midrashic scriptural hermeneutics. If we took Scripture seriously as the word given to us in order to search, search again and again – because everything is in it. If we went a way into Scripture – and not only sought ways out of it to *the* true interpretation or *the* valid message.

In our Christian tradition there are quite a lot of *scriptural* traces to be found. Martin Luther is a prominent example. In his *Kirchenpostille* of 1522 – a work which today one could perhaps most easily describe as a collection of sermon-aids or sermon-meditations – Martin Luther states that the aim of his interpretations is to carve a way to Scripture so that Scripture itself can speak. He writes:

"Therefore go right in, right in, dear Christians, and let my interpretations and those of all teachers be simply a scaffolding to the true building so that we comprehend, taste and remain at the pure, unadulterated Word of God itself; for God alone dwells there in Zion. AMEN."

("Darumb hyneyn, hyneyn, lieben Christen, und last meyn und aller lererausslegen nur eyn gerust seyn zum rechten baw, das wyr das blosse,

lautter gottis wort selbs fassen, schmecken unnd da bleyben; denn da
wonet gott alleyn ynn Zion. AMEN.")[27]

In learning from Jewish interpretation and preaching an exegetical and
homiletic treatment of Scripture might suggest itself anew at the
present time. And this could be seen as "a scaffolding to the true
building" and not as beginning with the text to reach a metascriptural
message which leaves the text somewhere behind.[28] Preaching would
then be an aid for reading the text itself. It would perceive its goal as
being to lead those who hear it to read the text for themselves. To do so
it must keep the text alive during the whole sermon and consequently
could be described as a sermon with an open Bible. The *P*e*tihah*
presented above as a possible form of a rabbinic *D*e*rashah* which leads
from a text in the words of the *Parashah* could, we believe, provide,
even from a formal homiletic perspective, a stimulating potential for
the shaping of a scriptural Christian sermon.

At the same time such a sermon would be anticipatory – as Jewish
preaching and exegesis in dealing with the Torah was and is. In the
Second Vatican Council a goal was formulated that one should prepare
the "table of God's Word" more richly for the faithful and open the
"treasury of the Bible" wider.[29] The two metaphors in the Council's
declaration describe the expectation that there is in the Bible something
wonderful to taste and valuable to look at. Such an expectation would
make the biblical text central in the sermon and not depart from it all
too quickly with metascriptural statements. It would not only show
what lies on the table but would also allow the congregation to taste for
themselves. It would not only talk about the treasury but would also
open its doors wide. It would see its goal to be that of making the
listeners expectant readers.

3.2 Practical consequences

Which practical consequences for our preaching result from this
scriptural perspective? First of all, there is a problem to be pointed at:
we live in a culture marked by the metascriptural pattern! In this

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27 WA 10,1,1,728, 18–22.

28 The exegete Jürgen Ebach, taking up what he has seen in Judaism, is also of this
opinion. He calls for an interpretation "which does not look for the sense of the text
behind it but *in* it, in its words and letters" (*Jürgen Ebach*, Gott im Wort. Drei Studien
zur biblischen Exegese und Hermeneutik, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1997, here: VII).

29 Die Konstitution des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils über die heilige Liturgie.
Lateinisch-deutscher Text mit einem Kommentar von Joseph Lengeling (RLGD 5/6),
Münster² 1965, 112 (=No. 51).

culture scriptural efforts may appear undetermined and far away from everyday experience, as somewhat clumsy and ridiculous. Academic colleagues may turn up their nose at questions without at least a tempted answer. And listeners in the pews may remain unsatisfied for they miss, towards the end of the sermon, the preacher's summary of what the sermon has been about, of what they should do next week and of what politicians all over the world have to do for peace and climate. We all are not accustomed to recover ourselves at the end of a sermon after having been thrown into the biblical text and its letters, instead of being elevated by the preacher's good ideas.

We think it might be thrilling for both Christians and Jews to rediscover the biblical text as a space to get in rather than a springboard to get off. We give only three examples of how such a scriptural approach to preaching could be arranged in our sermons.

3.2.1 Discovering and filling gaps

We already quoted Rabbi Harold Kushner asking a question which we had not been used to asking. He discovered a gap within the biblical text and marked that gap by his question. This is good rabbinic practice: discovering gaps and filling them playfully and seriously at the same time.

Take, for example, the awful story of Abraham offering his son Isaac (Gen. 22). It seems to be a story without Sarah, Isaac's mother. We only see two members of the family acting: father and son. But where is Sarah? This question leads us to a remarkable gap. Sarah must have played a role. But which one?

Arthur Strimling in his poetic re-narration of Gen. 22 sees Sarah acting, too. She observed her husband's preparations. But she did not ask anything. Quite the contrary, she stays in bed while father and son are climbing up to Mt. Moriah:

"[...]
For three days, Sarah stays in bed
Endures alone
While father and son meander to Moriah which means 'seeing'.
And Sarah sees.
[...]"

When Sarah sees what happens on Mt. Moriah, when she sees Abraham raising the knife, she starts crying:

"'Avraham!'
[...]

> Her lungs gasp for air.
> 'Avraham!'
> [...]
> Sarah's cry carries all the way to heaven,
> Passes through the throat of the angel/messenger,
> Then back down to Mt. Moriah.

> And Abraham freezes.
> Abraham listens to Sarah."

The story ends as it ends in the Bible (cf. Gen. 23.1f.):

> "Sarah sees, and Sarah dies."[30]

This way of locating Sarah within the well-known story is fascinating. Sarah prays, her prayer raises up all the way to heaven, it comes backwards down by the angel – and prevents Abraham from offering Isaac, her and his son.

This is not a new biblical text. This is only one way to get into the story by filling a gap. Others may fill it in a different way. Others may discover other gaps. But this time a gap was filled this way. And listeners may have been invited to get into the text through this gap as if it was a door opened by the preacher.

3.2.2 Biblical words in sermon context

The second example focuses on the difference between biblical words and the preacher's own speech. The mysterious story of Moses pleading for a glance at God's glory is well known (Ex. 33.18–23). Manfred Josuttis, Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology in Göttingen, in one of his sermons established an intriguing contrast between the demand of Moses and everyday situations in Göttingen:[31]

> "Next week the people in our city, partly in the cinema, partly on TV, will be able to see about 100 films. Crime movies, love stories, westerns, adventures in the outer space. Scenes of horror, porn pictures.
> *But 'Mose said: I beseech thee, show me your glory'.*
> Next week the 13 departments of our university will continue their research work. Deciphering a manuscript, interpreting a work of art, confirming a diagnosis, mapping the human genome, decoding atomic structures.

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30 *Arthur Strimling*, Sarah Sees: A Shofar Story, in: Living Text. The Journal of Contemporary Midrash, No. 8/2000, 8–12.

31 *Manfred Josuttis*, Offene Geheimnisse. Predigten, Gütersloh 1999, 88–92, here: 88. Cf. *Martin Nicol/Alexander Deeg*, Im Wechselschritt zur Kanzel. Praxisbuch Dramaturgische Homiletik, Göttingen 2005, 111f.

> But 'Mose said: I beseech thee, show me your glory'.
> Next week people will eye someone suspiciously who rang at their door.
> Men and women who don't know one another will watch each other full of
> expectation. Some will have a look at old photos. Others will draw up
> visions of future.
> But 'Mose said: I beseech thee, show me your glory'."

We regard this way of establishing a contrast between the biblical text
and the preacher's own speech as a good way to get into a text, for
preachers as well as for listeners. Within the polarity of everyday
impressions and strange biblical words people may take first steps and
more into that mysterious story.

3.2.3 Telling the Story. Preaching from within – not preaching about

Don Wardlaw, Professor Emeritus of Preaching at McCormick
Theological Seminary in Chicago, once gave the following advice for
preachers: "You should not preach *about* a text. You should, however,
preach *from within*."

Preaching from within – how is this possible? Don Wardlaw
himself cultivated narrative preaching as a way to get into the biblical
text. In what follows we quote the beginning of a sermon on Mat. 4.13–
22, titled "Jesus comes calling by the sea".[32] The very first words leave
no doubt that we already are within the biblical story.

> "We're just back from fishing in the night, as the dawn's glow stretches
> across the horizon. You and I pull our boat up on the beach alongside the
> boat of James, John, and Zebedee, their father. Peter and Andrew are close
> by offshore, making one more pass with the nets in the shallows as
> shrieking gulls dip and dive above. They're good with the nets in the
> shallows."

"We are back from fishing ..." – the first words establish a scene to
which we (as present-day hearers) belong. There is no gap between us
and the 'old' text. We can stand on the beach with the fishermen – and
see, what happens. This narrative kind of sermonic shape seems to us
to be an effective way of "preaching from within", but it is of course
not the only one.

At any rate, a scriptural pattern should be aimed at. This pattern is
for us a vision for preaching. As Christian preachers we could learn a
lot from rabbinic scripturality. In our metascriptural culture it may be a
task for both Christian and Jewish preachers to discover and to test
ways to get into the texts. It is quite easy to get out of them but hard to

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32 Private recording from 1994.

get in. Getting into the texts, however, fascinates. Exploring the space of a biblical text we may be able to do what Don Wardlaw once called "Preaching from within".