

Imagination and Meticulousness: *Haggadah and Halakhah in Judaism and Christian Preaching*¹

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Abstract: *The paper demonstrates how Christian preaching can learn from Jewish preaching and Jewish (esp. Rabbinic) Scriptural interpretation. The rabbinic concepts of Haggadah and Halakhah can justify a new enthusiasm for the creative and precise, imaginative and meticulous exploration of the biblical word in Christian sermons.*

Much has happened within the scope of Christian-Jewish dialogue in the last decades. More and more we have learned to see Judaism and Christianity as “twin-siblings.” With this change of view not only do old prejudices disappear, new possibilities for learning appear as well. This happens, for instance, when Christian homiletics does not merely explain again and again that Christian preaching has its roots in Jewish forms but instead accurately perceives how this Jewish homiletic foundation from which the Christian sermon developed came about, and, in addition to this, discovers how Jewish preaching and interpretation developed for hundreds of years up to the present alongside and with Christian versions. It is in this context – a context of exploration and discovery – that the following reflections should be received.² In order to make the contributions of Jewish preaching to Christian preaching clear, I will use two concepts which tend to provoke very different reactions: imagination [*Phantasie*] and meticulousness [*Akribie*].

Imagination is a concept which for many years, above all in the ecclesiastical context, has been identified as “Mirandum”³ – a word with predominantly positive connotations and a good reputation. If one searches the “Index theologicus”⁴ – the electronic directory of German theological papers – for articles on the theme “imagination,” sixty-five entries from recent years will show up. Titles such as “Being a Christian needs imagination: loosening-up exercises for the body of Christ” appear. Imagination is identified as the “oxygen of religious education,” and one can find reflections on “imagination and ethics,” “imagination and play,” and “imagination and education.” There are also quite a few monographs on the theme of Dorothee Sölle’s “Phantasie und Gehorsam”⁵ (*Imagination and Obedience*) which was translated into English as *Beyond Mere Obedience*, as well as on Hans-Günter Heimbrock’s “Imagination and Christian Belief”⁶ and Werner Ritter’s “Religion and Imagination.”⁷ Arnold Gehlen identifies humanity as

¹ This slightly revised lecture was first given on the occasion of the prize ceremony for the Hans-Werner Surkau Foundation, which was held on the 22nd of November, 2006, in Marburg, and first published in a German version as “Phantasie und Akribie. Haggada und Halacha im Judentum und die christliche Predigt,” in: PTh 96 (2007), 144–159. The “public address” style of this essay is mostly retained. It has been translated into English by Stephen James Hamilton (Erlangen 8/2008), and was presented at the Annual Meeting of the “Academy of Homiletic” in Boston, 21st of November, 2008.

² Cf. in more detail Alexander Deeg, *Predigt und Derascha. Homiletische Textlektüre im Dialog mit dem Judentum*, APTLH 48, Göttingen 2006; id., *Homiletische Zwillingbrüder. Predigen lernen im Dialog mit dem Judentum*, in: ThQ 186 (2006), 262–282; id./Walter Homolka/Heinz-Günther Schöttler (Eds.), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity. Encounters and Developments from Biblical Times to Modernity*, SJ 41, Berlin/New York 2008.

³ Peter Bukowski, *Predigt wahrnehmen. Homiletische Perspektiven*, Neukirchen-Vluyn ³1995, 85–87, 86.

⁴ Cf. www.ixtheo.de.

⁵ Dorothee Sölle, *Phantasie und Gehorsam. Überlegungen zu einer künftigen christlichen Ethik*, Stuttgart 1968. In English: *Beyond Mere Obedience* (revised edition), Cleveland, Pilgrim Press, 1983.

⁶ Hans-Günter Heimbrock, *Phantasie und christlicher Glaube. Zum Dialog zwischen Theologie und Psychoanalyse*, GT.P 22, München/Mainz 1977.

“essentially imagination,” and Wolfhart Pannenberg takes up this theme at length in his “theological anthropology.”⁸ In his “Doctrine of Preaching” (“Predigtlehre”), Rudolf Bohren dedicates eight pages to a chapter with the title, “On the importance of imagination for the preacher.”⁹ And even Karl Barth approaches the theme positively in his *Church Dogmatics* – as an important way of speaking which transcends the boundary of the historical and factual.¹⁰ It is not surprising that articles about this theme can be found in all the major theological lexica – and as well in John McClure’s book *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics*.¹¹

The concept of imagination is quite popular. People gladly speak of it in theology and in church – something we could hardly say of the concept of meticulousness. One meager reference was all I found, after searching for this term (“*Akribie*”) in the online database,¹² and only the Catholic “Lexicon for theology and church” has an article about “Akribie”, in which the concept was relegated to a principle of canonical law interpretation.¹³

Imagination and meticulousness – they do not fit so easily together. And yet I believe that imagination and meticulousness both belong together, especially when dealing with biblical interpretation and Christian preaching. And I would like to show just how these two things belong together by examining the rabbinical method with which scripture and tradition are handled, and by joining imagination and meticulousness to yet another pair of concepts: *Halakhah* and *Haggadah*.

1. *Halakhah* and *Haggadah*

Jews will sometimes speak of the “sea of interpretation.” And it is certainly true that when one begins to work with Jewish scriptural interpretation, he or she plunges into a large sea of *Midrashim* und *Talmudim* as well as newer sources which date right up to the present. One reads and reads – yet realizes after much reading that only a teaspoonful of water has been taken out of this ocean. If one tried to gain a little bit of direction in the sea of Jewish tradition and interpretation, then this sea would divide itself into two large oceans: the ocean of *Halakhah* on one side and the ocean of *Haggadah* on the other. Two oceans, two ways of interacting with the Bible and the previous tradition, two ways of interpretation through the centuries. My first step will be to attempt to provide a rough overview of both these oceans; the second will be to show what we as Christian preachers can learn from this exploration into rabbinical Judaism.

1.1 A jug on the footpath, or: the *Halakhah*

Behind the word *Halakhah* is the Hebrew word *halakh*, which means “going” or “strolling.” *Halakhah*, then, is a kind of exegesis and interpretation which relates to the goings-on of life, to religious law, to the concrete art of living, to commands and prohibitions.

⁷ Werner H. Ritter (Ed.), *Religion und Phantasie. Von der Imaginationskraft des Glaubens*, BThS 19, Göttingen 2000.

⁸ Cf. Birgit Recki, Art. Phantasie I. Philosophisch, in: RGG⁴ 6 (2003), 1259f.

⁹ Cf. Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre*, Gütersloh ⁹1993, 272–279.

¹⁰ Cf. Karl Barth, CD III/3.

¹¹ Cf. John S. McClure, *Preaching Words. 144 Key Terms in Homiletics*, Louisville (KY)/London 2007, 59–61.

¹² Cf. Roland Fritsch, *Zwischen akademischer Akribie und kirchlicher Diplomatie. Der Streit um die „Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigung“* geht weiter, in: MdKI 49 (1998), 19–23.

¹³ Cf. Ernst Christoph Suttner, Art. Akribie, in: LThK³ (1993), 294.

In order to not get too abstract, I think it is necessary to look at a concrete example. I will randomly choose one, reverting to a question that was brought up in the Mishna (mBQ III, 1), the earliest rabbinical collection (dating from 200 CE), and was then discussed further in the Babylonian Talmud.

The theme, as is often the case in the Mishna and Talmud, is very concrete. The rabbinical theologians were not ashamed to think about everyday events. Fascinated by this, Jonathan Rosen writes: “The rabbis in the Talmud speak in one moment about God, in the next about sex and right afterwards about business.”¹⁴ All these things belonged in rabbinical training and in addition belong to theological training as well. In the example I chose, the story is about someone who is placing things on a footpath that do not really belong there, for example a jug. Someone else comes along, stumbles on it, and the jug breaks. Now an argument may break out between the owner of the jug and the stumbling pedestrian. Who is guilty? Who replaces the spilled wine or the expensive olive oil that was once in the jug but has now oozed out into the dust of the road. Or conversely: who pays for the damage if the stumbling traveler drops his own shopping tote or simply injures himself by tripping on the jug? In the Mishna the description of the incident, as well as the statement of the legal consequences, are very succinct:

“When one person places a jug in an open area, and another comes and stumbles over it and breaks it, then he is free [from compensation]. And when he is injured because of this, then the owner of the container is guilty [and must compensate].”

The Mishna appears unequivocal: the stumbler receives no guilt, on the contrary: when the stumbler is aggrieved or injured, the one who placed the jug so carelessly in an open area is responsible for the compensation. In the Talmud, however, this case is resumed – and from the original two sentences in the Mishna arises an exceedingly large discussion which takes up a good four pages in the German translation.¹⁵ I cannot impart the entire thing in detail, but I will refer to two characteristics which are paradigmatic for the rabbinical *Halakhah*-discussion: firstly the meticulousness and secondly the imagination of the *Halakhah*-discussion.

(1) First, one encounters a *meticulous reading* through Talmudic interpreters. By virtue of this reading a contradiction is discovered in the Mishna’s text. Upon closer inspection, a curiosity reveals itself which can also be seen in the German and English translations: namely, the text begins with a “jug” (the sixth word in the above quotation), and only about 30 words later at the end it is called a “container.” In Hebrew, the text begins with *kad*, jug, and ends with *havit*, container, which is reason enough for the interpreter to concern himself for a while with the question of these differing objects within the realm of law and business – a discourse which I cannot dwell upon at this moment.

“Meticulous” not only describes how the text is read in the precursory rabbinical tradition, but also how the attempt is made to relate life’s questions to the words of the Torah, the text of the Bible.¹⁶ For ultimately the *Halakhah* is about nothing other than discussing ways to apply the Torah to everyday life. A rabbinical teacher with the name Ben Bag Bag put the fundamental hermeneutical principle into a well-known sentence: “Turn it [the Torah] round and round, for everything is in it” (mAv 5,22). Everything – every life experience, each every-day

¹⁴ Cf. Jonathan Rosen, *Talmud und Internet. Eine Geschichte von zwei Welten*, Frankfurt/M. 2002, 74 [English: *The Talmud and the Internet. A Journey between Worlds*, London et. al. 2000].

¹⁵ Cf. bBQ 27a–27b.

¹⁶ Cf. Jay M. Harris, *How do we know this? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism*, SUNY Series in Judaica, Hermeneutics, Mysticism, and Religion, Albany (NY) 1995.

situation – can, according to rabbinical knowledge and experience, be placed in relation to the will of God which is recorded in the Torah. And conversely, in every situation of life it suffices to conduct oneself in a way that corresponds to the will of the Creator – and correspondingly to meticulously search out God’s will. In this way the Talmud always seeks to relate real-life situations to the situations depicted in the Bible, which in our case is discovered in the book of Exodus (21.33f). Here, in a casuistic legal rule, a person is depicted digging a cistern which is not properly covered, causing a cow or a donkey to fall in. It is noteworthy that both cases can be questioned with regard to their analogies. And this is exactly what the rabbis in the Talmud do – but here as well I must neglect to give all the details.¹⁷

(2) Meticulousness is one side of the coin, *imagination* is the other. Both coalesce in the halakhic discussion: for instance, when the rabbis who are discussing the case of the jug on the footpath naturally ask, “Why is the stumbler acquitted? Shouldn’t he watch where he is going?” and then one poses the hypothesis – completely imaginary – that the situation depicted by the Mishna perhaps only suffices for the case in which someone is intentionally obstructing the path with jugs and containers in order to make someone stumble. Or, says another, for the case in which it was night and the traveler could not see where he was going. Or, says a third opinion, for the case in which the jar was placed directly behind an intersection where it could not be seen and consequently was destined to be tripped over. No, a teacher with the name Ula says at the end: “It is not the manner of man to always be looking around while walking on the street.” Therefore, he explains, one should not have to beware of possible jars, because it is a basic assumption in life that a footpath is a footpath and not a storage room.

What these rabbinical discussions, as well as countless others, reveal is what I call the “narrativity” of the *Halakhah*. The rabbis in halakhic discourse always tell the briefest stories. They imagine what a real-life case could be, imagine its possible context, and take today’s readers along with them into the street – perhaps at night – where a jug sits on a pathway. A good hundred years ago, the cultural Zionist and poet Chajim Nachman Bialik discovered his fascination for this narrative-epic quality of the *Halakhah*, writing: “From beginning to end it [the *Halakhah*, AD] is composed almost completely of colorful images, big and small, of concrete Jewish life in the course of more than a century.” It lets us smell and taste and see. “Only a tiny bit, a humble amount of inspiration, and then the *Halakhah* changes into an epic in [...; our] hands.”¹⁸

The *Halakhah* speaks of life. And what’s more: the *Halakhah* takes today’s readers not only into its own imagined world, but also into the world of rabbinical schools at the time of the discussion’s inception. For in the rabbinical tradition, both in the Talmud and Midrash, it is not only the results which are passed down, but all the argumentation, the theses, and the objections leading up to them. One can imagine how they sat there and brooded over these problems – how one of them first suggests a solution, then the next objects, then a third offers another hypothesis. And as a reader one can join in, follow the threads of the discussion, sit at the table in the school and discuss and argue further.

The *Halakhah*, which for hundreds of years has been branded by Christians – often pejoratively – as a typical Jewish rule-book, is a narrative, is full of imagination – yet at the same time is strictly meticulous.

1.2 Angels, Stones, and Jacob’s Ladder, or: the *Haggadah*

¹⁷ Cf. bBQ 28b.

¹⁸ Chajim Nachman Bialik, *Halacha und Aggada*, in: id., *Essays*, Berlin 1925, 82–108, 99.101.

We now move to the second ocean in the sea of rabbinical tradition, to the *Haggadah*. In short, the term *Haggadah* delineates everything the *Halakhah* isn't.¹⁹ Hence the *Haggadah* encompasses "stories, sayings, legends, anecdotes, fables, parables, miracle and wisdom stories, jokes, riddles and much more."²⁰

Here as well I'll use a short little example to give a hint at how *Haggadah* functions as scriptural interpretation and randomly choose the biblical story of Jacob's ladder (Gen 28.10–19) in its rabbinical interpretation. The story is famous. Jacob is fleeing from a messy family situation. He has been gone a day. In the evening he lays down, puts a rock under his head and rests for the night. And this night he dreams he sees a ladder reaching to heaven, as well as angels all around it. He hears God's voice, which gives him the promise. The waking Jacob shutters and recognizes that God is present in this place. He names it *Bethel*, "God's house."

It is a dense, exciting, and multilayered story. If one looks up a classic Christian "scholarly" commentary on the text, the following sentence can be found: the story "wants to explain how Bethel, which later became so famous, had become a cultural center and how the holiness of the location had first been established." A "cultural legend," in other words (Gerhard von Rad).²¹ That is certainly not false, but it is also not very much either, and it is quite abstract.

The rabbinical scholars read it differently, not asking what the text originally meant or means overall, but making discoveries *in* the text. Because of this, they become aware of little things such as in verse 12, when Jacob sees the ladder and how the angels "ascend and descend." "Ascend and descend" – that is remarkable, say the rabbis.²² Shouldn't one expect the exact opposite? Shouldn't the angels come "from above," from the heavens, and then come downward to the earth? Does this detail not mean, then, that the angels were along the way with Jacob the whole time? And that the angels are now there during this flight into an unknown land? It would be an assertion not without meaning for moral blemished individuals such as ourselves! Yes, it can mean exactly this, say the rabbis.

I'll only mention one more small detail in the text which catches the rabbis' eyes. When the Hebrew text is read closely, then something quite astounding happens as Jacob dreams of the ladder that night. Namely, that evening he took some of the *stones* in this area and lay on them (Gen 28.11), but in the morning he took "*the stone* which he set at his head" (v. 18). Between verses eleven and eighteen, over the course of one night in Bethel, only one stone remains from many. "Why is this?" ask the rabbis. And they give a whole range of answers. One of them says:

"Then the stones began quarreling among themselves. One said, „Let the righteous one put his head against me,“ and the other said, „Let him put it against me,“ until finally the stones coalesced one with the other and became one stone."²³

Neither the special night of visions and auditions from Beth-El, nor the special nearness of God in this location can tolerate the stones' argument of who the greatest among them is. A kind of eschatological peace takes place during this night; where God speaks, there the fighting ends – and if it is an argument among stones, then creation will arrive at its peace.

¹⁹ The word *Haggadah* is derived from the root *ngd*, meaning "to tell," "to narrate" in *hifil*.

²⁰ Heinz-Martin Döpp, Art. Aggada, in: Neues Lexikon des Judentums, 25.

²¹ Cf. Gerhard von Rad, Das erste Buch Mose, ATD 1, Göttingen 1953, 249.

²² Cf. BerR 68,12 and see Rashi's interpretation.

²³ Cf. Chajim Nachman Bialik/Yehoschua Hana Ravnitzky, The Book of Legends. Sefer ha-Aggada. Legends from Talmud and Midrash, New York 1992, 45.

Both of these short examples make clear that, in the *Haggadah* as well, imagination and meticulousness concern themselves with particulars. Discussions are open and full of imagination – even those of stones that argue with each other; but this is only possible because the *Haggadah* refers to an exact reading of the words and letters in the written Torah. The slowness of this reading, which does not look for what the story could mean overall or used to mean, but instead remains by single irregularities and difficulties in the text, creates the free space for imagination, and effectively opens the playing field for a free narrative.

Important, then, for the rabbis is the fact that there is not *one* correct solution to the set of problems discovered in the meticulous reading. On the contrary: the scripture becomes all the more richer, lovelier and larger when haggadic interpretations are discovered. The Torah has “seventy faces” (BemR 13.15f), according to a later statement of the Midrash – and therewith endless possibilities for today’s readers to see something surprisingly new every time they look at it.

That was only a tiny glimpse into the sea of rabbinical tradition, only a teaspoon. To make use of these reflections on meticulousness and imagination in *Haggadah* and *Halakhah* I now turn in the following to Christian preaching and homiletics, where I will formulate three theses and shortly explain each.

2. In dialogue with Christian homiletics

2.1 Adherence to the word – Meticulousness as precondition to homiletic imagination

The first thesis is: *From the rabbis, Christian preaching can learn an expectant adherence to the word and discover this meticulousness as a precondition to homiletic imagination.*

Expectant adherence to the word belongs – so one could argue – to the trademarks of protestant/Lutheran church life and accordingly should be reflected in the structure of the sermon as well. In the church of the word it should be expected that the word take center stage; it should be expected that Luther’s change of perspective from the single subject and the church authority, respectively, to the *verbum externum* of the scripture also results in homiletic consequences.

In contrast, it is astonishing that a phenomenon I call *homiletic loss of the text* appears so often in Protestant churches. The biblical text, the biblical pericope, plays an important role as a point of departure for the sermon; then, in the course of sermon, the biblical text increasingly disappears, so that after the reading of the passage the Bible is slammed shut – both in a literal and metaphorical sense – and scarcely plays a role. One does not have to search long for homiletic grounds for this loss of the text. According to Emanuel Hirsch in his influential homiletic primer, the biblical word is the “past, historical form” which must be translated for the present.²⁴ And that means: the “essential meaning” (136) must be presented as being freed from the “old historical casing” (65). In Wolfgang Trillhaas’ later writings one encounters the formula that the text is nothing more than a “language-fence” that has formed around “the truth.” The preacher must reach through this fence in order to be able to speak the actual “message.”²⁵ The text as old, bygone, and ultimately hindering – this is how the words of Hirsch and Trillhaas sound. Instead of expectant adherence to the word the fearful question arises as to whether this old word *still* has anything to say. And then new ground has to be broken – dogmatic or

²⁴ Emanuel Hirsch, *Predigerfibel*, Berlin 1964, 3.

²⁵ Wolfgang Trillhaas, *Einführung in die Predigtlehre*, Darmstadt 1974, 35.

exegetical or associative – so as to clarify what can *still* be successfully used from the old text for the supposedly relevant message for today.²⁶

When the text – not in the preparations for the sermon, but in the sermon itself – becomes lost in such a way, then the congregation will certainly not be motivated to make their own discoveries in the biblical word. Then a sermon is *ex*-egesis in the truest, as well as the most problematical, sense of the word. It leads one through the text *outward* into the statements and accordingly the message of the preacher. Luther himself gave another direction, most clearly at the end of his church tract (“Kirchenpostille”) written in 1522. He wanted interpretation not just to be exegesis, but on the contrary a journey into the scriptural text. Luther writes:

“Therefore enter in, enter in, dear Christians, and let my interpretation and those of other teachers be only a scaffold for the true building, so that we ourselves can grasp the simple, pure, word of God, tasting it and abiding in it. For there resides God alone in Zion. AMEN.”²⁷

I think it would not hurt to discover this instruction again – and exactly through this to avoid some of the more boring pulpit talk. It couldn’t hurt to move the word, in its fascination and strangeness, back into the focus – and to do with the congregation nothing more than reading the word and learning to read it new again. It would be promising if we were to cling “to the letters,” as Luther once said in a sermon, “like one grasps a tree or a barrier with his fist, so as not to slip or flutter away and fall into error with one’s own thoughts.”²⁸ And it would help us if we let ourselves be infected by the rabbinical readers’ meticulousness, so that the text is not merely a springboard from which we can quickly reach our own conclusions, but instead is seen as a place in which there is something to be discovered.

In the Talmud one finds the sentence: “No one can understand the words of the Torah until he has stumbled over them.” (bGit 43a) In order to stumble, it is certainly important not to soar above the text in one’s own dogmatic or exegetical heights. To be able to stumble one must move closer to the text, pay attention to unevenness, not resolve tensions too quickly, and discover with pleasure the gaps. For this is how meticulousness turns out to be the essential condition for imagination. It is necessary – metaphorically speaking – to read long and closely until Jacob’s ladder is not only in Bethel but in one’s own back yard, where the angels ascend and come down there of all places and no stone in our yard lives in strife with any other.

Certainly, it is a theologically specific form of meticulousness that is taught among the rabbis. It definitely has something to do with philological *eros*, but it is far and away much more than that. It has much more to do with a meticulousness that assumes *a priori* that the Biblical word is nothing other than a communicant entrusted by God himself to his people, to be read anew, so that this people hears His own voice – His living Torah – in, with and under these words. To cling to the words, truly meticulously, means at the same time to cling to God, with whom the old words and letters are spoken anew. In one part of the rabbinical literature there is a short question posed during a very complex discussion: “What is the Torah?” And in reply a similarly short answer: “The exegesis of the Torah.” (bQid 49b) To read and interpret in this specific expectation – this makes the meticulousness of reading into a promising method.

²⁶ Cf. Gerd Theißen, Über homiletische Killerparolen. Oder die Chance protestantischer Predigt heute, in: PrTh 32 (1997), 179–202, esp. 187.

²⁷ WA 10, 1, 1, 728, 18–22.

²⁸ WA 28, 77 (Sermon on John 17.1, delivered on August 8, 1528).

2.2 Trusting the pictures – homiletic imagination and its forms of speech

The second thesis is: *Christian preaching can learn from the rabbis to trust the illustrations and concrete expressions and to discover this imagination as a remedy against the burden of concepts and abstract deductions.*

The homiletic problem identified by this second thesis has been noticed often – and especially in the US-American homiletical discussion – in recent years.²⁹ Honestly, it would be best to label it as “homiletic concept-fetishism.” It has to do with the homiletic tendency towards abstraction, which not infrequently turns the sermon into a lecture – into a kind of theology lecture “light” – and accordingly disrupts the worship service in problematical ways.

Because all of this has already been identified as a problem for some time, the demands for preaching to become more narrative and pictorial have been numerous and are certainly nothing new. Indeed, Hans van der Geest recognized a peculiar problem in his empirical investigation made in the late seventies. Namely, listeners were completely dissatisfied with the increasing tendency towards more pictorial and narrative-based sermons. Van der Geest writes: “The listeners want to pack up and take along what they’ve seen; they would like to have it at their disposal.”³⁰ Thus van der Geest recommends always supplying some concepts along with the narrative. “It would be to simplistic,” he writes, “to remain at descriptive speech. The clear promise of narrative and pictorial sermons only fulfills itself, strangely enough, when conceptual speech is included.”³¹

Van der Geest’s approach is a certainly provocative, but it ultimately results in an almost classical, and in my opinion highly problematical, opposition between narrative and pictorial speech on the one hand and conceptual speech on the other. Quite often preachers do not allow a story or illustration to work for itself but instead immediately jump to “what it actually means.” Finally it is suggested that the actual point of the narrative or illustration can be grasped conceptually as well. Narratives and illustrations become anecdotes for concepts that one can pack up and take home – but also quickly forget. Narratives and pictures become “examples” – and merely illustrate that which one already knows. The potential of new insights into reality or of transformation is not made available.³²

The rabbinical illustrations and narratives are completely different. For instance, consider the argument of the stones as to which can claim to be the greatest. The rabbis forgo having to toss around a concept that classifies or clarifies the metaphor. Instead, the rabbinical narratives and illustrations stay open – exactly because they stimulate the hearer’s own imagination, and nonetheless cause him or her to reflect. The individual hearer is challenged to continue the metaphor, to interpret it, and to let it affect his or her everyday life.

For this reason the story is not merely an “illustration” in the shallow sense of the word, i.e. of something we all know.³³ The story points beyond what merely “is,” or is the case.

²⁹ Cf. e. g. David Buttrick, *Homiletic. Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia 1987; Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet. Daring Speech for Proclamation*, Minneapolis (MN) 1989; Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority*, St. Louis (MO) 42005, and many others.

³⁰ Hans van der Geest, *Du hast mich angesprochen. Die Wirkung von Gottesdienst und Predigt*, Zürich 1978, 169.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

³² Cf. Michael Nüchtern, *Bild und Beispiel. Beobachtungen zur Funktion des Erzählens in der Predigt*, in: PTh 70 (1981), 135–145.

³³ Cf. McClure, *Preaching Words* (note 11), 55–57. McClure writes: “The rationalist and utilitarian assumption that illustrations are simply persuasive tools in service of sermon ,points“ has been challenged by homileticians with

Linguistically another world is constructed, and the story shows that what “is” is actually not all that is. The new world of God, in which even the stones set aside their debates over power and honor and esteem, is already there in the language of the *Haggadah*. Theodor W. Adorno once said, “The form of all of today’s artistic utopias is: Do things we don’t know anything about.”³⁴ That could mean: To venture out with one’s own language in to the realm where the security of dogmatic definitions, of exegetical knowledge, and of empirically verifiability ends and the venture begins to make room available for God’s new world with the language of this one.

It is not surprising that this can be learned from the plays on words in the rabbinical *Haggadah*. I assert however: it can also be learned in this respect from the rabbinical *Halakhah*. The orthodox rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993) shows this in his main work, “Halakhic Man.” In this book he makes clear how the imaginative constitution of God’s new world occurs not only in the *Haggadah* but also in the *Halakhah*. He or she who discusses the *Halakhah*, says Soloveitchik, imagines a world that could be if God’s will were to take hold. And what is more: the wordplays of the halakhic discussions enable one to currently inhabit this halakhic world, to be at home in it. This is exactly how the *Halakhah* leads to world-changing action – and does not simply support the established order.³⁵ The new world of the *Halakhah* is already anticipated in its language, and this applies not only to the great theme of brotherly love but to the jug on the footpath as well.

2.3 Defying arbitrariness – Haggadah and Halakhah, Bible and life, ethics and aesthetics in interplay

The third thesis: *Christian preaching can learn from the rabbis how to bring ethics and aesthetics into a provocative interplay, and in doing so not forget common, everyday matters.*

Ever since Gerhard Marcel Martin called the sermon an “open art form” in 1983, discussion about the possibilities and boundaries for including this metaphor (coined by Umberto Eco, “opera aperta”) in a homiletic perspective has not ceased. Like a *cantus firmus*, the discussion always leads to a misgiving: Is there not the danger, many ask, that such open pulpit talk would become *arbitrary*?³⁶

My view is that the charge of arbitrariness against the “open art form” does not become any truer simply by being constantly repeated.³⁷ And it certainly would not be adequate to answer that charge by now pitting the supposed unambiguousness of conceptual language against the supposed arbitrariness of an “open art form sermon.” Another problem of Christian pulpit talk, however, seems to be hidden in the background of some discussions of “openness” or “arbitrariness.” If put into analogous Jewish concepts, the question would be: Are our sermons not often in danger of forgetting the *Halakhah* and in its place only wanting to preach *Haggadah*?

deeper poetic sensitivity The have argued that illustrations can indeed *be* the point and need not be wholly subservient to a sermon’s rational content” (55).

³⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Vers une musique informelle*, in: id., *Quasi una fantasia*, *Gesammelte Schriften* 16, Frankfurt/M. 1978, 493–540, 540.

³⁵ Cf. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, Philadelphia 1983, esp. 19f.24–29.37f.101.107f.

³⁶ Cf. Erich Garhammer/Heinz-Günther Schöttler (Eds.), *Predigt als offenes Kunstwerk. Homiletik und Rezeptionsästhetik*, München 1998.

³⁷ Cf. Wilfried Engemann, *Der Spielraum der Predigt und der Ernst der Verkündigung*, in: Garhammer/Schöttler, *Predigt als offenes Kunstwerk* (note 35), 180–200.

Abraham Joshua Heschel recognized this as the intrinsic problem of Protestantism. He diagnosed a typical Protestant failure of the “commandment to instruct” and with it a failure to perceive the concrete life of the Christian in the world.³⁸

He was also strongly critical of Judaism when either the Halakhic or Haggadic dimension was drowned out. “Panhalakhism” is what he called every current, particularly that of Orthodox Judaism, which stresses the *Halakhah* above all – and forgets the *Haggadah*.³⁹ Analogously, the reverse phenomenon can be termed “panhaggadism.”⁴⁰ For Heschel both of these belong together: *Haggadah* and *Halakhah*.⁴¹ With the *Haggadah* one narrates him- or herself into the timeless history of the Torah, into God’s history with God’s people and the world. In contrast, the *Halakhah* guarantees stability in life to those congregants who follow its commandments. It elevates the plot, according to Heschel, “from the level of individual action to the eternal encounter between the people of Israel and God [...], from the level of incidental experience to a lasting covenant.”⁴² Heschel can therefore pointedly say: “Judaism’s core is the interrelatedness of *Halakhah* and *Aggadah*. *Halakhah* without *Aggadah* is dead; *Aggadah* without *Halakhah* becomes an uncontrolled weed.”⁴³ If Heschel were to classify us Protestants, he could describe us as notorious panhaggadists.

Certainly, the antagonism between *Haggadah* and *Halakhah* is an old one. Already in rabbinical times there were those who leaned towards either the *Haggadah* or the *Halakhah*. And there were quite a few conflicts between these types of people. In certain rabbinical circles the *Halakhah* was the most preferred. R. Seir once remarked disparagingly: “It [the *Haggadah*, AD] gets tossed in every direction, but nothing is ever learned from it.”⁴⁴

On the other hand, the *Haggadah* seems to enjoy a much greater popularity among “the people” than the *Halakhah*. A story from the Talmud (bSot 40a) attests to this. It is about two rabbis who come into a village and speak there. The one, Rabbi Abahu, teaches *Haggadah*, and the other, Rabbi Chija bar Abba, teaches *Halakhah*. In the Talmud we learn what then happens:

“R. Abahu and R. Chija b. Abba went into a village. R. Abahu taught *Haggadah* and R. Chija *Halakhah*. Everyone left R. Chija b. Abba alone and went to R. Abahu, which grieved the former. Therefore he [namely, R. Abahu] said to him [the *Halakhah* teacher, R. Chija]: I want to tell you a parable. To what can we compare this? To two men, one of them who sells precious stones and the other sewing needles.”

The disappointed *Halakhah*-teacher is supposed to be comforted by this. It is indeed clear that what one regularly needs the most will be most sought-after: the sewing needle, i.e. the edifying statements of the *Haggadah*. The priceless jewel of the *Halakhah*, however, which is appreciated and honored, is not something that is frequently bought or sold. But this does not comfort Rabbi Chija. According to the Talmud, he remains disturbed by the fact that the people are not interested by the *Halakhah*.

³⁸ Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Erneuerung des Protestantismus. Eine jüdische Stimme*, in: id., *Die ungesicherte Freiheit. Essays zur menschlichen Existenz*, InfJud 6, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1985, 137–144.

³⁹ Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Gott sucht den Menschen. Eine Philosophie des Judentums*, Neukirchen-Vluyn/Berlin 2000, 248.253f.

⁴⁰ Cf. Neil Gillman, *Jewish Expression Takes many Forms*, in: *Jewish News* 55/20, January 10, 2003.

⁴¹ Cf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism*, 2 vol., London/New York 1962/1965, vol. 1, 1.

⁴² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Der Mensch fragt nach Gott. Untersuchungen zum Gebet und zur Symbolik*, InfJud 3, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982, 47.

⁴³ Heschel, *Gott sucht den Menschen* (note 38), 259.

⁴⁴ Leo Baeck, *Der alte Widerspruch gegen die Haggada*, in: id., *Aus Drei Jahrtausenden. Das Evangelium als Urkunde der jüdischen Glaubensgeschichte*, Leo Baeck Werke 4, Gütersloh 2000, 182–190, 183.

For Heschel, when there is *Haggadah* without *Halakhah*, or vice versa, then something has gone wrong. Then there is the danger that a theology arises which does not respect the plurality of life and all its forms. And conversely there is the danger that theological work loses itself in everyday trifles, that jugs on pathways are contemplated from an ivory tower while the connection with God's history in the world and with Israel is lost.

To return to sermons: Perhaps it is the panhaggadic tendency of many Christian sermons to leave behind a feeling of inadequacy. Perhaps it is the tendency to preach aesthetically – and therefore to neglect the indispensable connection between ethics and aesthetics. Perhaps the concrete view of all aspects of life is lacking, as well as the imaginative search for new life in the old – even in life's every day matters. Perhaps we must relearn the specific interplay between *Haggadah* and *Halakhah* – and in Christian preaching to speak “haggalakhic,” to use a made-up word.

To do this, it will certainly be necessary to leave outdated schemata behind us once and for all. So-called Jewish legalism, Jewish works-righteousness: notions like these obstruct our view of the *Halakhah*'s imaginativeness – the imaginativeness of a spirituality that does not only relate to individual inwardness but also to the shaping of one's life in the context of faith. It is a spirituality that explores the “realm of possibility”⁴⁵ and keeps “the desire for a better life”⁴⁶ going. It will be a sermon that encourages and enables its listeners to become *poietaei logou*, “doers of the word” (Ja 1.22).

The previous three theses are for a Christian homiletics that is willing to learn from Jewish forms of speech. They are three theses that show how *Haggadah* and *Halakhah* can justify a new enthusiasm for the creative *and* precise, imaginative *and* meticulous exploration of the biblical word. It is necessary, therefore, to imaginatively *and* meticulously keep at the promising word of God.

⁴⁵ Cf. Gesche Linde, Art. Phantasie II. Religionsphilosophisch, in: RGG⁴ 6 (2003), 1260f, 1261.

⁴⁶ Cf. Ernst Bloch, quoted according to Wilhelm Albrecht, Sauerstoff der religiösen Erziehung: Phantasie, in: KatBl 114 (1989), 465–469, 469.