BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

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Jewish theology has many forms. In rabbinic antiquity it was famously characterized by the exegesis of Scripture—be it narrative, topical, or thematic in manner. These interpretations could stand alone or they could also be collected in formal anthologies. They comprise the great classic collections of Midrash. In the medieval period, Jewish theology utilized the resources of the biblical and rabbinic traditions but reformulated the content in light of diverse philosophical interests and structured them in formal treatises. The works of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides are exemplary of this genre. Some of these trends have continued well into the modern era, but now Jewish theology was particularly characterized by types of edifying discourse (if we may put it this way, thanks to Kierkegaard)—though these were still modified expressions of contemporary philosophical currents (be this life philosophy, types of Verstehen, or modes of speech thinking). One may readily count the writings of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Abraham Heschel in this batch, their notable differences notwithstanding. In all these cases, a firm allegiance to the resources of Jewish tradition was combined with external worldviews and conditions of thought. This must be the dual responsibility and verve of Jewish theology in our day, as well—lest the streams of tradition eddy in stagnant pools and the ship of theological thought run aground.

Historical theology is a vast retrospective assemblage. But at every stage in its creative life, faced with prospective possibilities, theology was constructive. How may we continue this task today, engaging in a constructive theology that seeks to continue the traditions of historical theology? What are some of the resources of contemporary thought that speak to us today and help us understand our human condition in honest ways? The possibilities vary, of course. For me, philosophical hermeneutics is fundamental, insofar as it seeks to ground our humanity in acts of interpretation at every stage and in every way—from the most primary articulations of our being in the world (our ontological primacy) to our most sophistical analysis of texts and Being itself. The convergence of this hermeneutical thinking (a resource of modern philosophy) with Jewish hermeneutical thinking (and its resources of historical tradition) would, I think, help put us on the
path of a new Jewish philosophical theology—the path I wish to travel and articulate.¹

By way of beginning, let me formulate my project in propositional terms. Concisely put, my intent is to bring biblical hermeneutics into conversation with philosophical theology in such a way as to construct a contemporary Jewish philosophical theology: Jewish, because grounded in the core mode of Jewish theology—biblical hermeneutics—and philosophical, because grounded in a mode of rational reflection and inquiry. Or, to restate these two tracks somewhat differently: Jewish hermeneutic theology (from all historical periods) tries to think theologically via biblical texts and their traditional interpretations—and this it deems a most authentic mode of inquiry; whereas philosophical theology (from all historical periods, as well) seeks to think theologically through certain structures of reflective analysis—and this it deems a necessary task for universal discourse. The question I shall therefore pose is this: can the structures of philosophical analysis (rational and universal) be informed by Jewish modes of hermeneutic inquiry (programmatic and particular) in such a way that the knowledge achieved through biblical hermeneutics may also be a philosophical knowledge and that the hermeneutic inquiry will (reciprocally) produce a mode of philosophical reflection that is Jewish in its mode and character?

Now you may respond that this question is a *contradictio in adiecto*, and that one should let each mode of thought proceed along its own inherent track. For what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? But I disagree. Biblical hermeneutics needs philosophy to reach beyond historical theology and its regional assertions of value; and philosophical theology, for its part, also needs biblical hermeneutics, to ground it in historical traditions and the particulars of human inquiry. As in most things, the way one thinks makes all the difference. Hopefully, my procedure will turn an apparent aporia into a productive correlation.

Let me begin by sharpening the issues. Since Gadamer and Ricoeur (building upon the work of Schleiermacher and Dilthey), the task of a general hermeneutic is to establish a mode of textual and cultural interpretation that is appropriate to itself within the general humanities—thus “analytic,”

¹ A version of this chapter was presented at a conference at Harvard University in 2013, devoted to the Song of Songs and its hermeneutics; hence the use of passages from the Song in my discussions of tradition Jewish interpretation.