

## Between Exegesis and Theology: Jewish and Christian Appraisals of Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*

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### Abstract

Shai Held's two-volume work, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (2017), is a model of articulate Jewish theologizing grounded in specific biblical texts. This article introduces Shai Held's work and the reflections of Jewish and Christian biblical scholars that were originally presented at a panel discussion on *The Heart of Torah* at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, CA, November 2019.

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“‘O how I love your Torah,’ declares the psalmist; ‘I meditate upon it all day long.’” With these words from Psalm 119:97, Shai Held opens his Introduction to *The Heart of Torah*.<sup>1</sup>

Shai Held is currently President, Dean, and Chair in Jewish Thought at the Hadar Institute, in New York City, an ecumenical, egalitarian center for the renewal of Jewish thought and life. I first heard of Shai Held when Bill McDonald, a friend of mine who lives in Michigan, sent me an email in 2013 with a quote from Held, in which he articulated his commitment to a Torah centered on *hesed*:

My aspiration for *Yeshivat Hadar*, and for my own teaching, is that we teach a *Torat Hesed*, a Torah of love and kindness, a Torah that reminds us that every step we take towards God is a step towards—not away from—the world. As I often remind students, if being present in the face of others' pain were easy, Torah wouldn't describe it as the culmination of the religious life.

This quote is taken from the Covenant Foundation announcement of the 2011

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1 Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 1:xxi.

Award for Excellence in Jewish Education, which Shai Held received, along with two other Jewish educators.<sup>2</sup>

My Michigan friend then sent me, the following year, a PDF of one of Held's commentaries on the first Parashah or lectionary reading from the Torah in the annual Jewish cycle, called "What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can't They?"<sup>3</sup> Written originally in the Fall of 2013, this commentary became the first essay in the two volumes of *The Heart of Torah*. My friend pointed out that this Jewish scholar had quoted my work on the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1.

I was pleased and honored by that; but I didn't think much more of it, until I received an email from Shai Held in January 2015. He wanted a phone conversation with me on how egalitarian the *imago Dei* text in Genesis 1 really was, stemming from a discussion he had just had with Jon Levenson (who had been Held's dissertation advisor). Held was scheduled to give a public lecture in New York City three days later on police violence against blacks, and he wanted firm exegetical footing for his affirmation of the dignity of all people, including African Americans.

It turns out that Shai Held had previously been arrested during a protest of the police shooting of Eric Garner.<sup>4</sup> In his CNN article on the event, Held noted that the arresting officer had asked his permission to touch his prayer shawl. Would that the police had treated Eric Garner with the same respect, said Held.<sup>5</sup>

With my interest piqued from the phone call, I looked into the Hadar Institute (then called Mechon Hadar) and began reading two years of Shai Held's commentaries on the weekly Torah portion, which would be published as *The Heart of Torah*. I then attended Hadar's Executive Seminar, held every July for laypeople. I attended the Seminar in 2016 and 2017, and I came to feel a special kinship with this group of egalitarian, ecumenical Jews, who welcomed a Christian of Jewish ancestry into their midst, and took my participation (and my questions) seriously, whether during morning Talmud study, in the lectures given by various Hadar teachers, or in informal discussion at the lunch table.

So when Shai Held asked if I would write an endorsement for *The Heart of Torah*, I immediately agreed; and I solicited endorsements from a number of Christian biblical scholars, three of whom have contributed articles to this thematic journal issue.

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2 Shai Held's remarks are quoted in the announcement of the Covenant Foundation 2011 awards, April 7, 2012. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120407122625/http://www.covenantfn.org/awards/past-recipients/awards-2011/shai-held>.

3 Held, Bere'shit #1 (Gen 1:1–6:8), "What Can Human Beings Do, and What Can't They?" in *The Heart of Torah*, 1:3–6.

4 Eric Garner was killed in a chokehold by an NYPD police officer on July 17, 2014.

5 Shai Held, "All Are Equal, but Not All Are Treated Equally," July 11, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/11/opinions/equality-racism-opinion-rabbi-shai-held/>

## Jewish and Christian Engagement with *The Heart of Torah*

These articles have their origins in a panel discussion on Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* at a joint session of the Society of Biblical Literature, held on November 24, 2019 in San Diego, CA. Special thanks are due to the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures and the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, the two program units of the Society of Biblical Literature that co-sponsored the event. Thanks are also due to the Jewish and Christian biblical scholars who participated in this event, including Shai Held for his response to the panelists.

The articles in this theme issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review* are lightly edited versions of the panel presentations. One of the issues raised in just about all the articles is the relationship between exegesis and theology; or, to put it in Jewish terms, the relationship between *peshat* (literary-contextual readings of the Bible) and *midrash* (readings that go beyond the intent of text, in order to explore contemporary significance). While all the articles are agreed that these are both legitimate approaches to the Bible, there is some disagreement about how these should be related, and Held's response addresses this issue head on.

Beyond showcasing a variety of perspectives on *The Heart of Torah*, we have retained the authors' differing ways of referring to the divine name (including the spelling of G\_d). However, we have systematized the citations to *The Heart of Torah*, providing as much detail as possible about each Parashah reading.

Perhaps a word of explanation is especially appropriate for Christian readers who might be unfamiliar with the Jewish lectionary cycle and Jewish terminology (especially for those outside the guild of biblical scholars familiar with Hebrew). The lectionary cycle for Jewish synagogue worship consists in reading through the entire Torah or Pentateuch once each year. To that end, the Torah is divided into units, each a few chapters long, each known as a Parashah (plural Parashot; Parashat is the construct form, meaning "Parashah of"). A sermon, reflection, or commentary on a Torah portion is called a D'var Torah (plural Divrei Torah). Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* consists for the most part in two short reflections (Divrei Torah) on each Torah portion. Volume 1 covers Genesis and Exodus, while volume 2 covers Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Each Parashah or Torah portion has a traditional name, using a Hebrew word or phrase found near the start of the literary unit. Thus the first Parashah (Gen 1:1–6:8) is called Bere'shit (the opening word of Genesis 1) and Held's two reflections on Parashat Bere'shit are labeled Bere'shit #1 and Bere'shit #2.<sup>6</sup> Held also has his own title for each D'var Torah, which is given when a particular reflection is first cited. Although not listed with the heading of each essay in *The Heart of*

6 Although we have standardized the spelling of transliterated Hebrew words throughout the essays in this journal issue, various alternative phonetic spellings may be found in classical and contemporary Jewish usage.

*Torah*, we have added, for the benefit of the reader, chapter and verse references for each Torah portion cited.

### A Jewish Ethical Analogue to the Christian “Rule of Faith”

Having read and re-read the essays in *The Heart of Torah*, as well as the lucid Introduction, in which Held lays out his approach to the biblical text, I have come to appreciate Held’s hermeneutic of Scripture, which has a certain resonance with my own approach.

I appreciate Held’s willingness to address the dark patches and rough edges of the Bible. His commitment to wrestle with (rather than ignore) difficult texts is an important model for biblical scholars, rabbis, pastors, and laypeople in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

But Held does not simply succumb to these difficult texts, either to read them as justification for unethical action or to jettison such texts from the Torah. Rather, Held cites the phrase “Jewish Humanism” from Moshe Unna, with Unna’s emphasis on the word *humanism*. Unna noted that “from the Torah one can learn many different things. . . . One can even learn from it an obligation to engage in terror. . . . The word ‘humanism’ serves to explain and clarify on the basis of which values, of the many found in our literature, we seek to establish Jewish education.”<sup>7</sup>

As Held puts it, the question is not *whether* the interpreter uses a lens through which to read Scripture, but *which* lens she uses. “My own readings,” he confesses, “reflect my belief in a God who prioritizes the ethical and by Rabbinic tradition’s own claim that love of neighbor and affirmation of every human being as an image of God are the ‘great principles of the Torah.’”<sup>8</sup> Held, therefore, is willing to wrestle with texts that on first glance might seem to contradict this principle, until he receives from the text—and from the God who is present in the text—*berekah*, a blessing.

I have come to view Shai Held’s articulated hermeneutic (which is exemplified in his commentary) as a Jewish ethical analogue to the Christian *regula fidei* or “rule of faith,” the theological lens through the early church fathers, beginning with Irenaeus, attempted to read Scripture.

As Rob Fennell suggests, in his nuanced account of the *regula fidei*, having a trusting theological perspective in one’s approach to the Bible does not necessarily lead to a monolithic approach to the text, but is compatible with acknowledging the complexity of Scripture, the diversity of interpretative traditions, and the need for reflection on the social and historical location of the interpreter.<sup>9</sup>

7 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxxii.

8 Held, *The Heart of Torah*, 1:xxxii.

9 Robert C. Fennell, *The Rule of Faith and Biblical Interpretation: Reform, Resistance, and Renewal*

I myself have stated my own assumptions for reading (and teaching) the Bible in a handout that I regularly give new students. The first assumption is that:

The Bible is a *complex* collection of literature that nevertheless is framed in terms of a *coherent* story of redemption that is meant to guide our lives. The coherence of Scripture holds true despite many differing theological emphases, and even the presence of dissonant voices. We ignore both the *coherence* and the *complexity* of Scripture at our peril.

Whereas the complexity of Scripture is certainly important for me as a biblical scholar, many years ago I took to heart Abraham Joshua Heschel's comment addressed to Christian theologians:

It has seemed puzzling to me how greatly attached to the Bible you seem to be and yet how much like pagans you handle it. The great challenge to those of us who wish to take the Bible seriously is to let it teach us its own essential categories; and then for us to think *with* them, instead of just *about* them.<sup>10</sup>

Heschel's concern is echoed by the Christian Old Testament scholar David Jobling, who has been one of the most incisive proponents of an ideological-critical reading of the Bible in Canada. Although Jobling has often read against the grain of the text, articulating a critique of patriarchy or ethnocentricity in Scripture, he was constrained to admit that: "The powerless, and those who write out of experience shared with them, are not prepared to give up the power of the Bible. They need to draw on the Bible's power in empowering ways."<sup>11</sup>

Jobling notes that it is those "socially invested with power" (he mentions particularly white males like himself)

who are inclined to assert our power *over* the Bible through a very skeptical critique. . . . I continue to think that such critique of the Bible is utterly necessary. But . . . I have begun to worry that, as I help my students to take power *over* a Bible which has disempowered and oppressed them, I am denying them access to power *through* the Bible, of which they are so much in need.<sup>12</sup>

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(Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

10 Quoted in Albert C. Outler, "Toward a Postliberal Hermeneutics," *Theology Today* 42 (October 1985): 281–91, here 290 (emphasis original).

11 David Jobling, "Experiencing the Many: A Response to Camp, Mack, and Wimbush," in *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 281–89, here 283 (emphasis in original).

12 Jobling, "Experiencing the Many," 283–84.

It is Held's attempt to read *with* the Bible (as Heschel puts it), in such a way as to open up access to the power of the Bible for human life, that I very much appreciate.

### **The Relationship of Heart and Action**

There is one more aspect of Held's approach to the biblical text that resonates with me as one who stands in the Wesleyan theological tradition—that is, Held's emphasis on moving beyond study or reflection to *action*. Whereas there are, of course, differences between Jewish Torah observance and the Wesleyan emphasis on social holiness, it is significant that a few years ago at the Society of Biblical Literature, Jewish biblical scholar Ben Sommer commented to one of my students (herself a Wesleyan) that he felt a particular affinity with Wesleyan Christians.

But Jews and Wesleyans, while united by an emphasis on praxis, need to move in opposite directions, so to speak. Held has to counsel his Jewish readership to move from merely outward observance to cultivate intimacy with God (this is especially the theme of the new book he is working on). I, on the other hand, have students who are often caught in the classic Protestant antithesis of faith and works. So with them I have to stress that motives of the “heart” are not enough; the inner life must be put into observable action.

Shai Held's *The Heart of Torah* is a rich feast of theological engagement with Scripture and it is my great pleasure to introduce this theme issue of the *Canadian-American Theological Review* devoted to Jewish and Christian engagements with Held's approach to the biblical text.