

The Binding of Isaac: A View of Jewish Exegesis

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FOR JEWS, THE BIBLE IS AN ANIMATE BEING. Understanding it means understanding everything we have experienced. The sum of meaning in the Bible is the sum of life's meaning. Judaism is over 2,000 years of Bible study and nothing more. While others have twisted the Bible and tortured its meanings, we Jews would never do that. It is our family, our parent, our companion, our child, though it may be wayward and hard to understand.

Recently, I spoke in a class at the LDS Institute of Religion adjacent to the University of Utah, at the invitation of Gil Scharffs, who teaches a course there on comparative religion. At the end of one of my lectures, after the students had left, I looked up the aisle and noticed a book on the floor. (I knew it was a holy book because it was bound in black morocco.) Jews don't put holy books on the floor; Jews don't pile holy books on top of each other; Jews don't put holy books on seats where people sit. My trained response in seeing a holy book on the floor is to pick it up. Perhaps, though, it wasn't one of *my* holy books. I thought about it and then went to pick it up. As I was reaching for it, I asked Gil whether it was a common thing for LDS people to leave books of that nature on the floor. He admitted that it is, sadly, not at all uncustomary for Latter-day Saints to treat scripture in such a way. He mentioned that there are other items that are given the same respect that Jews pay to the Torah, the text of the first five books of the Bible, but the scriptures are not among them.

We not only pick up the book, we are embarrassed for it; and when returning it to its place, we kiss it. The process of kissing is associated with the Torah scroll itself. As the Torah scroll is paraded around the congregation on Shabat or other occasions, people move forward to kiss the Torah. It is a dear thing. It is such a dear thing that one of the very few things a Jew is permitted to

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spend his life on is *Kiddush ha Shem*, the sanctification of the name of God. One may die to save another human being, an act we understand to sanctify the name of God. Saving a Torah scroll from the fire at the expense of one's own life is also deemed appropriate and is admired.

It takes ten Jews to pray in public legally. When nine Jews want to pray, they have to figure out how to do so. One way is to include a child holding a Torah scroll. The child, although not of legal age, and the Torah scroll together constitute the tenth Jew.

When the Bible itself, the Torah scroll, falls by accident to the ground, the people who are responsible or who saw it happen are instructed to fast for forty days. The period of time is approximately that of mourning for a dead person. When printed Bibles or Torahs are worn out — and the Torah is all Jewish writing containing God's name in this case — they are not tossed out. They are buried, or they are put away respectfully.

To Jews, the Bible, the Torah and all literature that descends from them are human; they are alive; they are beings. They, and the Bible particularly, must be dealt with on their own terms in order to be understood. These works must be dealt with in their own language and are not to be deprived of their eccentricities and departures from what seems, to those who possess them temporarily, right or reasonable or appropriate. Ultimately, the person who determines what the Bible means is the individual. There are many rabbinic comments which make the point that the individual has the responsibility of determining what the Bible means. The most memorable of these is that which compares it to manna, which, for each individual tasted like the food he liked most. For each of the 600,000 at Mount Sinai who heard the Torah when it was first given, the Torah sounded and meant something different. It meant one thing to God and another thing to every individual who agreed to live by it and be judged.

In the text of a traditional Jewish Bible, the biblical passage is centered; the separate commentaries run in columns on both sides — sometimes four columns or even more — and beneath the passage.* There is no limit to the ways a commentator can relate to his text. It is the printer's arrangement that holds the text and commentaries together and makes everything of nearly equal value. It is true that in my original, the text of Genesis 22:1–19 is in bold type and the commentaries that run around the central text are in lighter type. This is a fair representation, I suppose, of the difference between the text and its commentaries on an average page of the Jewish Bible as well as on the pages of other traditional Jewish works. However, everything can be in absolute disagreement and still stay on the page. In fact, that may be the only way a commentator gets on the page — to get into a nice disagreement with somebody. Everything from word and letter counts, to the most abstract sort of philosophy, mysticism, and homiletic readings may appear in such a text. In the text that we use in our congregation, the most recent scientific and comparative

* In the lecture, the text page shown had three columns containing commentary from five rabbinical sources. To preserve legible-sized type, these materials have been arranged in one column to accompany the text.

ancient Near Eastern commentaries appear along side the most hoary, ancient, and legentic interpretations.

The commentary that I have chosen to use is from a page of the best-selling Bible. Its pages include a group of four or five commentaries from what might be called the golden age of exegesis, the eleventh through about the thirteenth centuries A.D. The men who wrote these lived in Europe, which was at the time a connected geography. I have also included two words from an early translation of the text into Aramaic from the second century A.D. In most cases, a typical page will also contain notes which cross-reference the text to other Jewish literature, particularly the Talmud, as well as to other biblical passages.

Text	Commentary
<p>Genesis 22</p> <p>After these things¹ Elohim tested² Avraham. He called, 'Avraham,' who answered, 'I am here.' He said, 'Take now your son, your only, the one you've loved, Yitzhak. Go over to the Moria land³ and offer him up as a burnt offering on the hill I show you.' So Avraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey and got his two servant boys and his son Yitzhak together. He broke up some wood for the offering and left quickly for the place Elohim had told him of. Three days later Avraham saw the place³ far off and said to his servant boys, 'Stay here with the donkey while the boy and I go off and worship and come back to you.' Avraham took the firewood and put it on his son, Yitzhak; he carried the cleaver and the fire himself. The two of them went on together. Yitzhak asked his father, 'My father. . . ?' and he said, 'I am here my son.' Then Yitzhak said, 'The fire and the wood for the burnt offering are here, but where is the sheep?' Avraham answered, 'Elohim will see to the sheep for the offering, my son.' The two of them continued on together. They came to the place Elohim had mentioned, and Avraham built the altar, and laid out the wood. He bound his son Yitzhak and laid him on top of the wood on the altar. Avraham put out his hand and picked up the cleaver, ready to slaughter his son. Then a messenger from YHWH/Elohim called to him from the sky, 'Avraham, Avraham.' Avraham said, 'I am here.' The messenger went on, 'Do not put your hand on the boy. Do nothing to him. I know well that you have</p>	<p><i>Onkelos (Eretz Israel 2nd c. A.D.)</i></p> <p>¹words ^{4a}(ram)</p> <p><i>Rashi (France, 1040-1105)</i></p> <p>¹'After these words' [Satan-tale from BT Sanhedrin] ^{4a}) The ram was 'other' having been created during the twilights of creation; b) the ram appeared 'after' the angel's command; c) 'after' Avraham's plea for mercy on behalf of his children.</p> <p><i>Abraham ibn Ezra (Spain/North Africa/Rome 1089-1164)</i></p> <p>²Some say the word 'tested' ought to be read 'raised up;' but the meaning of the episode is entirely against them. The 'genius' says God tested Avraham in order that Avraham might display his faith and teach others. But no one was there with him to watch, the 'others' having been kept away. ⁴'After' being caught in the brush. The form 'being caught' serves as the subject of a relative clause used as an appositive here, as in many places, with no relative pronoun. Without further particles of speech the syntax militates against the use of 'after' to indicate either that the ram appeared 'after' the angel's words or 'after' Avraham raised his eyes.</p> <p><i>Nahmanides (Catalonia/Eretz Israel 1194-1270)</i></p> <p>²'tested.' Since, in my opinion, man has complete freedom to choose what he does</p>

respect for Elohim now, for you have not hidden even your son, your only one, from me.' Avraham caught sight of a/different⁴ ram caught in the brush by his horns. He took it up and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. Avraham named that place, 'YHWH sees to it.' The mountain is today called 'YHWH may be seen.' Then the messenger of YHWH called Avraham again from the sky. He said, 'I am sworn — it is a speech of YHWH — that since you have done this thing — not even holding back your son, your only one — that I will bless you in every smallest thing, and make your seed so many as the stars of the skies and the grains of sand on the edge of the sea. Your seed will take the gate of their enemies. All the nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed because you have attended to me.' Avraham returned to his servant boys, and they all left together for Seven Wells. Avraham settled down at Seven Wells.

or doesn't want to do, this is a test from the point of view of the one being tested; but the One-Who-Tests (May He be blessed) commands him to act in order to bring that which is potential into activity, so that he might receive the reward for his acts as well as his beliefs.

The Master of the Columns (Jacob ben Asher, Germany/Spain 1270-1340)

³'the place' equals 'this is Jerusalem' . . . 'to the Moria land' equals 'in Jerusalem.' 'We will worship and return' occurs seven times in the Bible. (here; Num 14.4; 1 S 9.5; Jer 46.16; Ho 6.1; Lam 3.40; Lam 5.21) and these show how Israel merits the opportunity of 'return/repentance' through Avraham's deed . . . (Where to repent?) In Jerusalem on the pilgrimages. For the phrase 'mountain of YHWH' occurs once each in the Torah, the Prophets and the Hagiographa: once for each pilgrimage.

Jewish exegesis, in all of its marvelous variety, has been going on for a couple of thousand years. I will distinguish only the four classical divisions of biblical exegesis used by the Jews who lived at the same time as these commentators, with the exception of Onkelos. The mnemonic device for remembering these four types of exegesis is the word *pardes*. *Pardes* is a Persian word meaning Paradise, and exegesis is usually thought of as a sort of paradisiacal encounter. The "p" stands for the Hebrew word *pshat*, which means "simple interpretation;" the "r," for the Hebrew word *remez*, which means "allusive interpretation;" the "d," for the word *drash*, which means "homiletic or teaching interpretation;" and the "s," for *sod*, which means "mystic interpretation." Generally, all commentators make use of all four sorts of commentary.

In approaching the text I have decided to use, I will not cover all of the commentaries, any one of the commentaries, or all of the commentary on any of these commentators. That would be a long haul. What follows is from the most traditional, orthodox, broadly accepted Jewish printings of the text and its commentaries. I will touch on about four of the points that they take up, indicated in the Genesis text with superscript numbers. Two of the points derive from textual and linguistic problems, although I hope that the distinction will be less clear when I finish. These are my translations, both of the text and the commentaries.

The title of this text, as it is known in Hebrew, is *akeda*, or "the binding." Jews typically do not call this text "the sacrifice of Isaac" or "the near-sacrifice of Isaac" for there is some question about whether any of that happened. But most Jews would agree that Isaac was bound.

The first sort of commentary that takes place as one moves out from the Hebrew text is its translation. It may not seem, at first thought, that transla-

tion is a form of commentary, but it is in fact an impoverished form of commentary. Translation strips ambiguity from the text in favor of singularity, for no two languages and no range of meaning of any word in any two languages completely overlap. Much, if not all, of the ambiguity of the original is perforce lost.

The first people to lose this ambiguity were some seventy men put away on an island, according to the *Letter of Aristeas*, to translate the Bible into Greek.¹ Miraculously, so the story goes, each came up with the same answer to every problem. The same thing reportedly happened when the Bible was translated into English under the auspices of King James I.

These are fables of a lost Eden. If it were possible for these events to have happened, it would indicate that God had rescinded the curse of Babel. But there has been no such rescission. The curse of Babel — the impoverishment of truth — is still with us. Onkelos, a convert to Judaism, first translated the Bible into Aramaic, the popular language of the time in Eretz Israel (Palestine) and throughout the Near East. He did so because people had lost Hebrew facility and wanted to hear the text in the language they knew. The problems Onkelos faced are frightening enough as evidence against the practice of translation.

The first problem arises with the word “things,” which is one of two possible translations of the Hebrew word *devarim*. *Davar* in Hebrew means both “a word” and “a thing.” This may have had only one definition at some time in the past, but by the twelfth century B.C., both meanings inhered in *davar*, or in its plural *devarim*. Unfortunately, there is no word in Aramaic that means both “a word” and “a thing,” and Onkelos had to make a choice. Onkelos decided to use *pitgamaya*, which means “words” not “things,” to translate this word throughout. He began his translation/commentary with “After these words”

A little further along in the history of commentators is Rashi, a man who lived in Troyes, France, some eight centuries later. He also thought that this word means “word” and recited a legend in his commentary. The legend is taken from the Babylonian Talmud, from the tractate called Sanhedrin, which is in the Mishnaic order dealing with damages. “After these words” Rashi wrote. What words? If the phrase is “after these things,” we understand what things are intended: the birth of the longed-for boy, and so forth. But after what particular “words” could this episode possibly unfold?

There is a character, Satan, who appears in the book of Job and who nags at God sufficiently so that God is ostensibly led to torture Job. Satan is brought into our text artificially at this point to deal with the question, “What words were those exactly?” Rashi’s tradition holds that the words were those of Satan to God. Satan says to God, “Why do you take credit for Abraham’s faith? He’s rich. He’s had everything he ever wanted in his life. He’s never had to offer a poor man’s sacrifice; he’s always had a bullock to spare. And now at the age of 100 years old, you make him a father. Of course, he’s faithful to

¹ Moses Hadas, ed. and trans. *Aristeas to Philocrates*. New York: Harper for Dropsie College, 1955.

you. Of course, he loves you. But take away this gift, and let's see." Ostensibly, God consents to Satan's plan. This then was Rashi's explanation for what this particular phrase meant, repeating an earlier source.

The next problem word is the word "tested." The most common translation of "tested" in the King James Version and its derivative translations is "tempted." One problem with the King James Version is that one has to know seventeenth-century English well. In the 1600s, "to tempt" did not mean "to try to get somebody to do something bad." It meant only what the word "tested" or "tried" means now.

Now I will introduce Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, who lived in the twelfth century. He was born in Spain and moved to North Africa and thereafter to Rome. He is the intellectuals' commentator par excellence. He is interested in establishing the basic meaning of words and going very little beyond that. He is the most simple of the commentators and the most difficult to deal with and to understand, and he is impossible to refute. He says, "Some [and he sneers] say the word 'tested' ought to be read 'raised up.' But," he continues, "[this is impossible]; the meaning of the episode is entirely against them." That is, God is not raising up Abraham, elevating him for all to see; God is simply testing Abraham. In the next sentence, ibn Ezra refers to his friend, Rashi, who predeceased ibn Ezra. Rashi was well known throughout Europe, and ibn Ezra didn't care very much for his sort of commentary, which was 90 percent borrowed from earlier *midrashim*, or "homilies." Ibn Ezra constantly refers to Rashi, not by name, but as "the genius." "The 'genius' says God tested Avraham in order that Avraham might display his faith and teach others. But no one was there with him to watch, the 'others' having been kept away." Ibn Ezra points to the fact that the only people on the mountain were Abraham and Isaac and that any teachings that were going to occur would happen within a very limited scope.

Next we find a selection from the commentary of Nahmanides, Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman of Catalonia, later a resident in Eretz Israel. In his commentary dealing with the word "tested," he begins with the words "Since, in my opinion . . . [very careful in establishing that he's simply expressing an opinion] man has complete freedom to choose what he does or doesn't want to do, this is a test from the point of view of the one being tested; but the One-Who-Tests (May He be blessed) commands him [Abraham] to act in order to bring that which is potential into activity so that he [Abraham] might receive the reward for his acts as well as his beliefs." A common theme develops in these three major commentaries — Elohim knows what is going to happen and that it is not a fair test from his point of view, at least, because he knows what the outcome will be.

Another question, before I get to the summary question of what unites all of these commentaries, if anything, is the question of the ram, of how he got there and what his nature was. Abraham caught sight of "a" ram or of a "different" ram. The Hebrew word in the text is *'ahar*, and it usually means one of three things: "other" or "different" or "after." It is commonly confused by scribes with the word *'ahad*, which means "one" or "a." *'Ahad* ends

with the letter *dalet* as opposed to the letter *resh* which appears in the text. The difference between a *resh* and a *dalet* is, I think, what is called a tittle in the expression “every jot and tittle.” The top of the *dalet* goes on a little bit after it touches the right-hand leg, whereas the *resh* does not have that extra little bit on the top. That means that it is very easy, if a mistake has been made (and scribes constantly make mistakes), to confuse these two words. Onkelos decided that it was not a “different” ram but only “a” ram — *'ahad* not *'ahar*. This is not what is written in Hebrew but the text which Onkelos supposed the scribe should have written.

Rashi characteristically offers not only one opinion but three contrasting opinions, worlds within worlds: (a) The ram was an “other” ram, for it was created during the twilight of creation, an especially mysterious time for Jews. The text of Genesis contains the words *day* and *night* but no words for *twilight* and *dawn*, periods of time between day and night. It is true that to say “day and night” is a form of talking about the whole of a thing by talking about its two extremities. But what is of real interest is the *literal* text. About a dozen miraculous things occur in the first five books of the Bible, and what is common in Rashi’s legenic school of thinking about the Bible is the assigning of all twelve of these miraculous events to the periods of twilight and dawn during the seven days of creation. Among these miracles are Balaam’s talking donkey, Miriam’s singing well, the miraculous tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed in such a way that they could be read from either side, the miraculous script which made it possible to read the Ten Commandments forwards and backwards and inside out, and the miraculous stylus that had to be used to write this script. According to legend, this ram was also created during the twilights of creation and lingered in the world ever since, waiting for his turn until he was finally caught in the brush behind Abraham.

(b) The ram appeared “after” the angel’s command. First, the angel commands Abraham, then the word *after* appears. Abraham sees the ram after the angel’s appearance and speech.

(c) The word means “after” in that the ram appeared “after” Abraham’s plea for mercy on behalf of his children. This is an excellent commentary because there is another commentary underneath this one. Abraham’s plea for mercy on behalf of his children does not appear here in the text but is well known in *midrash*.

Before returning to this point, I would like to mention ibn Ezra’s response to “the genius.” He says simply that the word *after* means “after the ram was caught in the brush,” that the form *ne’ehaz*, or “being caught,” serves as the subject of a relative clause used as an appositive, as in many places, with no relative pronoun. Without further particles of speech, the syntax militates against the use of “after” to indicate that the ram appeared either after the angel’s words or after Abraham raised his eyes. There is a struggle going on here, but both commentators are on the same page together, and we keep them both there. Nothing can be lost in this attempt to understand one’s parent or one’s child.

Last we enter into the world of mystery and mysticism with the commentary of Jacob ben Asher, known as the “Master of the Columns.” His father, Asher ben Yehiel, was a major codifier. The son tried to assemble all exegesis that pertained to legal matters. Then he concentrated it into four columns. Ben Asher completed this work as well as a commentary on the Bible, for which he also wrote an introduction. He intended that his introduction be only intriguing and entrancing, not too serious: hors d’oeuvres and snacks, not the main course. But nobody really reads the commentary by the “Master of the Columns” any more; the only part of ben Asher that is continually read as part of this page are these few comments from his introduction which proved to be so exciting to Jews that virtually no edition of the Bible is complete without them. I have included his commentary on what “the place” means, what the words “the Moriah land” mean, and what the words “we will return” mean.

One way ben Asher works is by the method called gematria. Gematria assigns a numerical value to each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew *alef bet* so *alef* equals 1; *bet*, 2; *yod*, 10; *kaf*, which follows *yod*, 20; *tsadi*, 90; *qof*, which follows *tsadi*, 100; *resh*, 200; *shin*, 300; and *tav*, 400. The sum of the value of one word may equal the sum of the value of another word. If the words equal one another numerically, they *obviously* mean the same thing. (This may not seem to make sense at first, but when it works, it is very convincing.) Ben Asher discusses the words “the place” and “the Moriah land” together. He finds that “the place” equals “this is Jerusalem” and that “the Moriah land” equals “in Jerusalem” — all through gematria. Thus, we now know where Mount Moriah is.

Ben Asher then takes up the word *venashuva*, “we will return,” by another method. He looks at every place “we will return” in this form appears in the Bible, and he finds that it occurs seven times: here in Genesis; Numbers 14:4; 1 Samuel 9:5; Jeremiah 46:16; Hosea 6:1; Lamentations 3:40; and Lamentations 5:21. That *venashuva* appears seven times means that “return,” or repentance, begins with Abraham — that the whole doctrine of repentance, as well as its possibility, begins with Abraham’s deed. The answer to the question of where to repent is, therefore, “in Jerusalem” (at Mount Moriah, as above). When? On pilgrimages.

Ben Asher finds the phrase “Mountain of YHWH” only once in the first five books of the Bible; only once in the Prophets, the second division of the books of the Bible, according to Jews; and only once in the Hagiographa, or Writings, the third division, which includes books like Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Songs, Proverbs. Why three times, once in each division? Because there are three pilgrimage holidays on which one goes to Jerusalem to make sacrifice: Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost), and Sukkot, the Feast of Booths. This can’t be meaningless. But neither does it necessarily mean what ben Asher thinks that it does. Ben Asher thinks that something is happening on the mountain that is not clear but which will nonetheless lead to something that is clearer.

Now I will depart into my own exegesis and attempt to unite these exegetes: the only way to get a ram to come to a ram sacrifice is to bring it. Rams do not respond to invitations. So we already know that the ram has been planted there and that Elohim knows there is going to be a use for the ram. The next question which these commentators more or less agree on is whether Abraham has some knowledge of this. Abraham has bargained with God before this chapter. We've seen him make his famous what-if-there-are-only-fifty-good-people argument about Sodom; and we've seen Abraham win the cave of Machpelah from Ephraim the Hittite at what seems to be a dear price but which in fact turns out to be a low price for the first possession of land by Jews in Israel. We know that we are not dealing with some country boy here.

Yet Abraham seems to have absolutely no hesitation in obeying God and doing his bidding: he gets up early in the morning, saddles his own donkey, though a rich man, breaks up his own firewood, and sets out for the Moriah land. He arrives and is just about to stab his boy when, to stop him, an angel calls out from the sky.

Abraham says to the angel, "I'm not going to stop. I'm going to go ahead and do it. I'm up here on this mountain as your employer asked me to be, and before I step down from here, I will need to talk to him."

So God descends, impelled by Abraham's argument and desire to carry on the sacrifice. Abraham asks God whether he had told him to kill his boy. God says that he had. Abraham asks whether they had a contract in which Abraham's children would inherit the land. God says that they had. Abraham asks him if that contract would be fulfilled through Isaac, and God says, "Well, that was my intention."

Abraham says, "Because of the fact that I have done this and because of the fact that my boy has done it, I want leniency. I want the contract loosened." What was the contract? The contract was: "You be my people, and I'll be your God. If you go chasing after any other gods, you will no longer be my people, and I'll take you out of your land. If you continue to worship only me, you will stay in your land." Abraham knows that things are not going to work out that simply and wants some leniency in the contract.

God needs some leniency too, because if there is no body of people, no second party left to the contract, the purpose of his creation will be lost. So God says to Abraham, "You have said your part; now I'll say mine. I know that your children are going to wander away and do a lot of things that in one way or another break this contract. If your children will, one day a year, call on me earnestly and seek leniency in this contract, atone and repent, then I'll grant them leniency, not in general but only in particular."

"How are they to call for you?" Abraham asks.

God replies, "Well, they could use the horn of something like that ram." That horn is, of course, the shofar for use on the day called Yom Ha-Kippurim, the Day of Atonement.

Abraham and God have achieved in Jewish exegesis something that almost everyone in the Jewish exegetic line wants them to achieve — leniency for each other. They assert that there is something more important to them than any

contract that they might be able to write down. When a contract is written, it must be specific and detailed. But why does one write a contract with another person? Because one trusts that other person and feels friendship for him. When that other person abrogates the contract, one has a choice: to insist on the conditions of the contract, thus ending the relationship, or to go back to the precontract state. If the friendship endures, the parties return to their precontractual relationship and renegotiate on the basis of what they both wanted to achieve by the contract. But one cannot write leniency into a contract.

There lying on the altar before God from heaven and Abraham from earth is the real contract: the boy. God knows that Abraham does not want to kill his only boy. Abraham knows that the whole purpose of God's contract is to keep that boy alive and then his progeny. Both of them are more committed ultimately to the life of that boy, Isaac, than they are to anything that might be written.

In conclusion, I can only point to two real distinctions in Jewish biblical exegesis as opposed to any other sort of exegesis. First, the text is the text. The text is Hebrew. No Jewish biblical exegete works from a translation. It is absolutely impossible, and it is regarded as equally impossible, that there should be such a thing as an inspired translation, which would repeal Babel. Second, diversity and argumentation, dialogue among the commentators and dialogue between the commentators and the text, not a unity of opinion, is the key to the relationship between the Jewish people and their text. Unity is represented by the text itself. But diversity is what people are given here on the earth. Honest diversity and a willingness to accept the arguments of others are inspired by the ambiguities of the Bible. Nothing but good can come of dialogue between people as between people and the Bible.