

Preaching the Truth and the Truth of Preaching: Jewish Lessons for Christian Preaching

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Abstract

In colloquial language, people often refer to the truth as 'plain and simple'. There is little doubt that in a so-called post-truth world truth has become rather obscured and complicated. Truth has not only become disconnected from reality, but its meaning has also become adrift from its theological and biblical mooring. It is in and from this context that the three questions of this conference are raised: questions about the preaching of the truth, the role of the truth-preacher and the truth of preaching itself. There are few other (Jewish or other) philosophers that have thought so deeply and profoundly about the relation of truth and reality than Franz Rosenzweig in his opus magnum, Der Stern der Erlösung. Together with some of his contemporaries (Martin Buber, among others), they direct us to an understanding of truth and reality that is deeply rooted in the Torah. They show us that the real disconnect is between truth as an idea and truth as an experience or encounter; that truth is not abstract and general, but concrete and particular. Therefore, Rosenzweig begins his quest for truth with reality, taking us on a journey through life and it is here, in reality, where truth is finally, not so much discovered, but revealed. Finally, Rosenzweig teaches us that preaching does not supply an apology for the truth, but guides both preacher and congregation in their encounter with one another, with God in and through reality, to 'verify' the truth of the Gospel: in the contingencies of life.

Keywords: Rosenzweig; preaching; truth; reality; revelation

1. Introduction

The claim to truth has always been at the heart, not only of Christianity, but of all religions. In Christianity, this claim is further deepened and concentrated by the claim of Jesus Christ: "I am the truth, the way, the life ..." Christians are not only seekers of truth, but witnesses to this truth. In the centre and at the forefront of this witness is Christian preaching.

"Preaching is the communication of truth by a person to people" is how Phillips Brooks commenced his famous 1877 Lectures on Preaching at Yale University.¹ For him, the communication of truth was mediated by two things: the truth of the message and the personality of the preacher. "Truth through personality" is the way that Brooks's

¹ Phillip Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1907). The original lecture says: "Preaching is the communication of truth by a man to men".

understanding of preaching became known. In other words, it is not only the truth of the message that matters, but also the truth of the messenger. There is no doubt that in an era of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’² this has become a deeply confusing and contested space.

What adds another layer of difficulty for Christian preachers in society is the way that the word ‘truth’ has increasingly become confined to a kind of scientific verification of facts. For many people, there is little difference between truth and fact. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that this that has morphed into what has been described as ‘alternative facts’.³

Particularly illuminating is the description or definition of ‘alternative facts’ on Dictionary.com:

Alternative facts have been called many things: falsehoods, untruths, delusions. A *fact* is something that actually exists – what we would call “reality” or “truth.” An *alternative* is one of the choices in a set of given options; typically the options are opposites of each other. So to talk about *alternative facts* is to talk about the opposite of reality (which is delusion), or the opposite of truth (which is untruth).⁴

The words ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake truth’ are often used in the same breath or grouped together as if they are the same. However, there is a significant difference between these two claims. Those who advocate for a post-truth position claim there is no truth. Those who challenge others on the basis of fake truth suggest, or pretend, at least, that there is an alternative version (the ‘real’ truth), in other words, that truth exists. However, in practice, that ‘alternative truth’ is very seldomly, if ever, offered. In the end, this comes very close to a situation of no truth. So, although the two words differ greatly, in practice they occupy the same terrain.

2. Franz Rosenzweig: Truth through Reality

In a certain sense, the entire history of philosophy is a history of the search for a lasting or final truth. The answer of the Enlightenment and the 19th century in particular was that reason was the main and perhaps only key to finding this truth (Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’ and Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* are both examples of the quest for such an anchoring point). This was the intellectual and cultural environment in which Rosenzweig grew up and that he embraced fully.

To understand Rosenzweig’s radical break with the philosophical tradition of his time and to appreciate the importance of his thought for Christian preaching on truth today, one has to start with a few biographical notes, and in particular his life-changing experience during a Yom Kippur service on 13 October 1913 in Berlin.

² The word ‘post-truth’ has been chosen by the Oxford Dictionary as its word that characterised 2016. Its relevance and importance are perhaps best illustrated by the publication of no less than four books in 2018 containing the title ‘Post-Truth’! These are Matthew D’Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Elbury, 2018), James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (London: Biteback, 2018), Evan Davis, *Post-Truth: Peak-Bullshit – and What We Can Do about It* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2018), Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018).

³ A phrase made notorious by Kellyanne Conway during a Meet the Press interview on January 22, 2017.

⁴ <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/alternative-facts/>.

Franz Rosenzweig was born on Christmas Day 1886, the only child of German-Jewish parents. No one in the family was particularly religious, but they also did not shy away from their Jewish heritage. To some commentators, the German and Jewish backgrounds flowed together, like two rivers,⁵ but others hold that “the Rosenzweigs were not very Jewish, but they were very German”.⁶

What is undoubtedly true is that the young Franz absorbed the liberal German culture of the time, that he was deeply immersed in the river of German idealism and that he received virtually no Jewish religious education as a child. His closest circle of friends during his college years included two of his cousins, both very active Christians, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessey (a Christian of Jewish descent) and his wife, Magrit.

It was Eugen Rosenstock, a jurist and historian by profession, in particular, whom Rosenzweig admired for both his intellectual integrity and his faith in revealed truth. In his study on the life and thought of Rosenzweig, Nahum Glatzer⁷ tells of a conversation between Rosenstock and Rosenzweig in which Rosenzweig asked his friend what he would do when all answers fail. To this Rosenstock replied: “I would go to the next church, kneel and try to pray.” These simple words, uttered by a scholar with a supreme intellect, more than anything else, convinced Rosenzweig that Christianity was a living power in the world and he made the decision to convert to Christianity.

However, he had one proviso: He wanted to enter Christianity, like the founders of the religion, as a Jew. He felt he needed to familiarise himself with his own religious tradition and that that would serve as a preparation for joining the Church. This meant that he had to go back to the synagogue to leave the synagogue. As part of these preparations, he attended the service of the Day of Atonement in Berlin in 1913.

What exactly happened during the service, he never discussed with anyone, nor did he ever write about the details of that experience. However, the background that Glatzer⁸ provides for what typically happens during the service allows one to imagine something of the setting and the content of this experience.

On the Day of Atonement and through its liturgy, Jews come to stand before God, alone and stripped of everything, as they will on the day of their death. The drama of the service begins with the *Kol Nidre* on the eve of Yom Kippur, during which Jews make their confession of their guilt against others, and only when released of this may they enter into the liturgy of the service the next day.

So, once a year, on this day of days, they come to stand alone (with the rest of the congregation) before God with the full burden of their sin against God, and against God only. The service, which lasts the entire day, recalls the ancient atonement rites and what God desires, namely to set the oppressed free and feed the hungry. It is worth quoting Glatzer in full as the service reaches its zenith:

⁵ Rüdiger Lux, “Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929),” Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/franz-rosenzweig> [accessed May 22, 2010].

⁶ Norbert M. Samuelson, *Jewish Philosophy: An Historical Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2003), 297.

⁷ Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), xv.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii–xviii.

From here the liturgy leads through the recollection of the ancient Temple service of the Day of Atonement at which the high priest pronounced – this single time in the year – the ineffable of God (who is near to those who call upon Him), to the reading of the story of Jonah the prophet who tried to flee from God (who is near to those who forsake Him). The hour of sunset nears when the worshipper once more expresses his desire to ‘enter Thy gate’, to experience eternity within the confines of time. Then, in utmost solemnity, the congregation cries out the profession: ‘Hear o Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!’ and finally ‘The Lord is God: the God of Love, He alone is God!’ In this profession, followed by the sounding of the ram’s horn, the drama of the Day of Atonement finds its resolution.⁹

Rosenzweig entered the synagogue as a Jew and converted ... to Judaism. This experience had a profound impact on him and on the future course of his life. At this point he was right in the midst of working on his first publication, a two-volume work, titled *Hegel und der Staat*, which was completed in 1914 but only published after the war, in 1920. One section of this work was submitted as his PhD dissertation in 1912.

It was during this time of working on Hegel that doubts about the validity of Hegel’s absolute idealism and the whole notion of ‘truth being in the whole’ emerged.¹⁰ In his view, the mistake that Hegel made was to give history an ontological status. Contrary to Hegel’s understanding, Rosenzweig held that history is not the unfolding of being, but the act of the perpetrators (*Tat der Täter*), whereby God is discerned in every ethical event, rather than the Whole (of history).¹¹ Therefore, any claim to absolute truth by means of philosophical idealism is mere hubris; a claim that simply disintegrates before the individual’s question: “Who or what am I?”¹²

It was the existential need to provide an answer to this question that led to Rosenzweig declining an academic position in Berlin, much to the chagrin of his teacher, Professor Meinecke. Explaining himself in a personal letter to Meinecke, he says:

“In 1913, something happened to me for which *collapse* is the only fitting name. I suddenly found myself on a heap of wreckage, or rather I realized that that the road I was then pursuing was flanked by ‘unrealities.’”¹³

What he experienced during the Yom Kippur service was exactly what he was looking for in Christianity and what he thought could only be mediated by the person of Jesus Christ: the truth as *Ereignis*, as an event, a happening or a revelation, or an experience of the closeness or ‘reality of God’. Writing to Rudolf Ehrenberg a fortnight or so later, clearly needing the time to reflect on his Yom Kippur experience, he maintains the position and commitment that he

⁹ Ibid., xvii–xviii.

¹⁰ Paul Mendes-Flohr (ed.), *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 4.

¹¹ In his view of history, Rosenzweig was much more indebted to Schelling, whose eschatological aspects of history resonated with him. (See Alexander Altmann, “Franz Rosenzweig on History,” in: Mendes-Flohr (note 10), 136.

¹² Nahum N. Glatzer, “Foreword,” in: Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), x.

¹³ Quoted by Glatzer (ibid.).

gave to Ehrenberg on the night before the service, namely that he believed that Jesus was the only way to the Father, but then he added that the situation is “quite different for one who does not have to reach the Father, because he is already with him”.¹⁴ Put more succinctly: Jesus is the only way to the Father, apart from those who are already with the Father.

Even though he did not enter into Christianity, the faith of the Church continued to be an integral part of his thinking – to such an extent that Norbert Samuelson could say that “... no notable Jewish thinker has been so profoundly influenced by Christian life and thought as was Franz Rosenzweig”.¹⁵

This continued engagement with Christianity becomes almost immediately evident in his continued reflection on the Yom Kippur experience, in particular in his first essay after this (1914), titled “Atheist Theology”. At the heart of both Jewish and Christian truth, Rosenzweig claimed, are the events of Sinai and the incarnation, respectively, and not merely the giving of an autonomous law or a teaching about the humanity of Jesus. What is needed, in other words, the only way to counter a basic ‘atheistic’ theology, is the renewal of the “offensive thought of the revelation”.¹⁶

It is this emphasis on the revelation as both historical fact and existential possibility – but more, as the way to the renewal of Judaism as a living faith – that is at the centre of both the *Star of Redemption* as well as his thinking.¹⁷ It is impossible to attempt doing justice to the *Star*,¹⁸ one of the most notoriously complex and difficult¹⁹ works of 20th- century philosophy and theology, by trying to summarise it in the scope of one or two paragraphs. However, the broad outline of the book is divided in three parts: the Elements, the Course (or the Path) and the Configuration (or the Forms). Each part contains an introduction as well as three books. Right in the centre, in the middle of the middle part, is Rosenzweig’s exposition of revelation or the ‘ever-renewed birth of the soul’. The entire work culminates in Book 3 of the third part – the innermost chamber of revelation – with what is most pertinent for this paper: “The Star or the Eternal Truth”. Here the *Star* has come full circle, in that the un-real truth of the philosophers whom Rosenzweig set out to radically challenge and dismiss at the beginning has been answered by the call of the truth of reality, the real truth:

For truth is the only thing which is wholly one with reality and, while no longer separating in it, nevertheless is still distinguished from it as a whole. Truth is enthroned above reality. And is then truth – God? No. Here we ascend the pinnacle seen from which the entire traversed path lies at our feet. Truth is not God. God is truth. To go on from the latter

¹⁴ Quoted by Glatzer (ibid.).

¹⁵ Samuelson (note 6), 298.

¹⁶ Glatzer (note 12), xiii.

¹⁷ Arthur A. Cohen, “Introduction: Franz Rosenzweig and the German Philosophical Tradition,” in: Mendes-Flohr (note 10), 1.

¹⁸ He started writing it around August 1918 (while serving in the German army in die First World War on the Balkan Front) on postcards that he posted to his mother, and after the end of the war in November, returned home and finished it in the middle of February 1919!

¹⁹ In my opinion, Hilary Putnam, in her introduction to *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*, puts it best when she simply says, “*The Star of Redemption* is so very hard to read.” (Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.

proposition first: it is not truth itself that sits enthroned above reality, but God, because God is truth. Because truth is God's signet, God can be One above the one-and-all of reality. Truth is the scepter of God's dominion. Life is consummated in the one-and-all; it becomes wholly alive. Truth is the essence of this wholly alive reality to the extent that it is one with it; to the extent that it can nevertheless separate itself from this reality – without in the least suspending the connection – truth is the essence of God ... The proposition 'reality is truth' claims equal status with the other one, 'God is truth'. Thus truth is the essence of reality as well as of God.²⁰

Much of Rosenzweig's deepest pathos and of his 'new thinking' is revealed here. His fiercest critique against the philosophers is based on his conviction that their thinking is un-real; that they conceive of all reality in terms of its 'essences'. In a very brief booklet that was published after his death, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*,²¹ in which he depicts the philosophers as the 'sick', he diagnosed the cause of their sickness as their assumption that it is possible for something to exist beyond reality.

This brings us back the main thrust of the *Star of Redemption* and its attack against idealism and Hegelian idealism in particular, against the idea of 'truth is in the whole'. Contrary to this, Rosenzweig wants to take his point of departure, not from what he regards as a kind of reduced truth (and hence abstract or 'essential' truth, which is nothing but a creation of the mind), but from reality as it is available to 'common sense', the threefold reality of World, People ('Man')²² and God. These are neither 'one' in the sense of the idealist 'All', nor are they the (reduced) results of any thought process. These are the bearers of truth, because truth requires a bearer, but not only one bearer, because then it would be neither *our* truth nor *the* truth. As Gershom Scholem notes regarding Rosenzweig's 'messianic theory of knowledge': "Truth bears witness to itself. But our truth requires existence. Our truth has more than one face, is variable, like the two elements other than the Creator: human and the world."²³

Here, in the three elements of Human, World and God we find the 'original' parts of reality, of the Whole. These are the irreducible elements of the ground of reality and are unrelated to one another. It is in the second section of the book (the Course, or the Path) that Rosenzweig leads the reader into understanding the relation between these three. In and through creation a relationship is established between God and the World, a process whereby the World is imbued with reality. God's own involvement and renewal of God's creation is what Rosenzweig calls 'Revelation'. The content of this revelation is the outpouring of God's love, the process whereby humanity receives an awareness of identity and hence reality. This divine love continues to stir and awaken reciprocal love, a love that allows 'Man' to also love his neighbour. Where 'Man' or the self participates in this, the world is lead to 'Redemption'. Even

²⁰ Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (note 12), 385–386.

²¹ Rosenzweig (note 19), 57.

²² As a man of his times, Rosenzweig did not use gender-neutral language. I have tried as much as possible to use gender-neutral language, but have kept Rosenzweig's original language in inverted commas.

²³ Gershom Scholem: "Rosenzweig and His Book *The Star of Redemption*," in: Mendes-Flohr (note 10), 39.

though Redemption is the goal and represents the fullness of time, the Jewish person can, through the holy cycle of the liturgical year, anticipate and participate in the final reality.

The two representations in the real world of this triadic movement Rosenzweig finds in the historical expressions of Judaism and Christianity. They are the Configuration or the Forms that he discusses in the first two books of the third part. Judaism is the ‘Fire’ or the Eternal Life, Christianity the ‘Rays’ or the Eternal Way, and together they constitute the ‘Star’ or the Eternal Truth.

It is important to note that Rosenzweig does not use the word ‘religions’²⁴ but ‘Forms’ when he refers to Judaism and Christianity as the Configurations of the eternal truth. Also, he explores Judaism and Christianity not in the context of their dogmatic teachings, but in relation to the actuality of their liturgies and prayers. This means that the truth he is talking about is not found by means of logical reasoning or deduction, but in the particularity of the faith experience – in Christianity, the acts of worship and prayer, the celebration of the sacraments, the physical gathering on the Sunday, the preaching.²⁵

Placing this epistemological part, the theory of knowledge, right at the end of his book illustrates perhaps better than anything else how Rosenzweig wanted to differentiate his ‘new thinking’ from the philosophical systems of his time. The new thinking begins with individuals and their particular experience that is both temporally and spatially limited: In order to gain the knowledge of truth, one does not step out of the river of time, but rather ‘wait’ there, exactly where truth is *revealed* over time.

Rosenzweig’s answer to the problem of philosophical thinking (‘old thinking’) of reduction by reason is to introduce the notion of what he calls ‘speech-thinking’ (*Sprachdenken*), or perhaps even better translated: ‘speaking-thinking’. In other words, the method of thinking is replaced by a method of speaking. The language of logic, of reasoning, is for Rosenzweig only a foreshadowing of the real language of grammar.

What is mute in reasoning becomes audible in speech. But reasoning is not speaking, that is, is not ‘silent’ speaking but rather a speech prior to speaking, the secret foundation of speaking. Its arch-words are not real words but rather the promise of the real word.²⁶

What is foreshadowed in thinking becomes real in speaking. While the thinker knows her words in advance, the speaker’s words are dependent on time: she has to wait, her speaking is dependent on the speech of someone else. This means:

The difference between the old and the new, the ‘logical’ and the ‘grammatical’ thinking does not lie in the fact that one is silent while the other one is audible, but in the fact that

²⁴ In a response to Rudolf Hallo’s challenge about Rosenzweig’s ‘religious’ method in the *Star*, Rosenzweig responded by saying that Judaism is neither a culture nor a religion and adds: “Revelation has only this function: to make the world unreligious again.” (See Stéphane Mosès, “Rosenzweig in Perspective,” in: Mendes-Flohr [note 10], 187.)

²⁵ Reading through these parts in the *Star*, it becomes obvious exactly how familiar Rosenzweig was with Christianity, with its festivals, liturgy, practices and preaching.

²⁶ Rosenzweig (note 12), 109.

the latter needs another person, and takes time seriously – actually, these two things are identical.²⁷

Speech-thinking is neither timeless or prognosticating in the way that old thinking is, nor can it be a solitary endeavour in the way ‘thinking’ is. It takes its cues from others. Language has to do with speaking and listening, it is bound to time and shaped by time. To Rosenzweig, as Glatzer observes, “language is not the ‘essence’ of the world; it is the ‘bridge’ between the world and other things: God and the self. And the name calls the Self into its presence.”²⁸

In other words, it is through language that a connection is made, that communication becomes possible between the irreducible realities of God, World and Human; it is language that enables revelation:

Linguistic morphology became our organon of revelation as a real entity vis-à-vis the original idea of language, which had become our methodological organon of creation [...] And language as the organon of revelation is at the same time the thread running through everything human that steps into its miraculous splendor and into that if its renewed presentness of experience.²⁹

Rosenzweig’s main epistemological tool or instrument turns out to be speech, the dialogue between the self and others, between I and Thou; speech is the bridge between God and humanity and it is in this dialogue that truth unfolds. In this regard, Rosenzweig claims to restore the biblical notion of truth; if you want, the *Jewish* notion of truth. This Jewish way (*das Jüdische*), Rosenzweig held, is his method, not his object. In other words, Jewish, for him, “is the insistence on the concrete situation; the importance of the spoken word and the dialogue; the experience of time ... the profound significance of the name, human and divine.”³⁰ Similarly, theology is the reflection that grows from a concrete situation; it emerges from the real (and eternal) questions about life and death, about pain and judgement, it receives its life and vitality from the depths of human experience. Truth and experience belong together, not in the (Hegelian or philosophical) sense of an absolute knowledge, but as a miracle. When he uses the word ‘miracle’, it is not about the suspension of rationality; rather, he uses it as a sign, an equally ‘offensive’ sign, one might add, almost like the notion of prophecy that cannot be understood in terms of levels of credibility, but only in terms of the absolute truth (or falseness) of its claims.

In the words of Reiner Wiehl, “The experience of the miracle and the belief in miracles belong in the realm of religious experience [...] such experience is placed [for Rosenzweig] under the condition of the truth of redemption.”³¹ Or, one could add, the truth of revelation.

²⁷ Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking: Philosophy and Religion,” in Glatzer (note 7), 200. Rosenzweig recognises the role of Feuerbach and Buber in realising this, but credits Eugen Rosenstock as the main influence on his speech-thinking.

²⁸ Glatzer, “Introduction 1,” in: Rosenzweig (note 19), 29.

²⁹ Rosenzweig (note 12), 110.

³⁰ Glatzer, “Introduction 1,” in: Rosenzweig (note 19), 31.

³¹ Reiner Wiehl, “Experience in Rosenzweig’s New Thinking,” in: Mendes-Flohr (note 10), 67.

The word ‘experience’ in preaching and theology usually evokes a wide variety of responses and even suspicions. The way that Rosenzweig uses the word ‘experience’ wants to take the human engagement or participation in an event seriously, without putting the emphasis on mere subjectivity.

This resonates very well with the way that Anna Carter Florence (with reference to Ricoeur) speaks about the role of experience (as it relates to testimony) in preaching. Speaking from experience in preaching, she says, is not a way of creating ‘connections’ with a congregation, but “experience is what happens when God meets us, right smack in the middle of our lives”.³²

And this finally brings us to perhaps the most crucial part of this truth. The truth of revelation, as an ‘eternal’ truth, nevertheless, has to be ‘verified’ (*bewährt*), or perhaps a better English translation, has to be ‘confirmed’. The confirmation of the truth of the revelation, an eschatological truth that inserts itself into our present time, takes place in the reality and actuality of real life. That is the calling, or in Rosenzweig’s language, the responsibility,³³ of the Church and the Synagogue: to testify to and verify the truth of God – how and where? In life. Therefore, the last words of the *Star*, after the exploration of the eternal truth, are the words that summon the readers: INTO LIFE.

What is of more than just passing interest is how Rosenzweig’s own life in the end became a confirmation of what he has written in the *Star*. In February 1922 he was diagnosed with what is today called Lou Gehrig’s disease, a motor neuron disease that affects the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord and causes paralysis and eventually death. He was not expected to live longer than a year. By the end of that year, he could no longer write and communicated with great difficulty. The disease progressed rapidly and he soon reached the stage where he could only communicate with his wife, to whom he continued to dictate articles and correspondence, later only by way of eye movements. He continued living in this state of complete paralysis until his death on 10 December 1929.

Concluding his essay on the notion of truth in the *Star*, Kenneth Green ends with this assessment:

As a unique “mystical” work endeavouring to wrestle with philosophy and so defeat it (and, we might add, in order to obtain its “blessing”), it possesses a rare speculative profundity, deriving from the noble aim to cognitively justify and account for Rosenzweig’s own faith as illuminating “the eternal truth”. Suffice it to say that the truth he attained was equally tested in life, a truth which he “verified” by holding it faithfully despite severe personal suffering. Perhaps precisely because his work is such a great “testimony to God”, it is also a great testimony to truth.³⁴

Martin Buber tells what is perhaps the best way to conclude this. On experiencing the first symptoms of his illness, Rosenzweig (who did not believe in doctors) was persuaded to see two

³² Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 68.

³³ See the essay of Bernard Casper, “Responsibility Rescued,” in: Mendes-Flohr (note 10), 89–106.

³⁴ Kenneth H. Green, “The Notion of Truth in Franz Rosenzweig’s ‘The Star of Redemption’: A Philosophical Enquiry,” *Modern Judaism* 7, no. 3 (1987): 297–323.

specialists in the field of his disease. One was Ottfried Foerster, an atheist, and the other Victor von Weizäcker, a devout Christian. Buber, who was in the next room, was listening to the two of them as they discussed their (similar) diagnosis. He heard Foerster say: “This man is a hero.” But Von Weizäcker said: “This man is a Jew.”³⁵

3. The Truth of Preaching

Rosenzweig never wrote a book on homiletics; he was not even known as a preacher, but towards the end of his life he had he written an essay titled “Sermonic Judaism” and there are a few pages in the *Star* dedicated to (Jewish) preaching. Yet the same *Star* is saturated with the very things that constitute the truth of preaching: revelation, silence, words, dialogue, listening, experience, etc. The word ‘truth’ is not used here in the sense of an exact correlation between the representation and the thing, but in the sense of the Hebrew word *emeth*, with its much broader semantic field of faithfulness, reliability, goodness and even beauty. It is also not used in the Platonic sense of something timeless or unchanging, but in the biblical sense of veracity, honesty and sincerity as things related to human existence.³⁶ Biblical truth, as the Orthodox rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, is not something that is necessarily immediately recognisable, but emerges only “through the experience of formative events, [as] *a movement from acts done by God for the sake of human beings, to acts done by human beings for the sake of God*” [italics original].³⁷ In other words, truth is something that has its origin in God and finds expression in the reality and contingency of human life in such a way that these human acts point back to their deepest Source.

The *Star* is a book in which the relationship between reality and truth is in sharp focus, and in this respect it offers important perspectives for the preacher at a time when truth is devalued, distorted and often simply ignored in multiple ways. When we have reached a stage where we do not know whom to trust and how to distinguish between fact and falsehood, it will have serious consequences for preaching, which is deeply dependent on the trust in veracity, honesty and sincerity.

The aim here is not to deduce certain homiletic ‘principles’ or ‘values’ from Rosenzweig’s thinking, but rather to engage with him and his thinking from the perspective of listening and learning. The challenge is to ‘hear’ his concerns and to offer an ‘ear’ for his insights, specifically where it relates to the truth and practice of preaching.

For Hegel, the notion of the ‘whole truth’ had a circular character, which many have observed seemed not only the method, but indeed the goal of truth itself. As that notion of complete or final truth has palpably not led to any happiness or ‘wholeness’ in itself, it clearly does not deliver what it promises. It is exactly at this point where Rosenzweig claims that Hegel as gone as far as philosophy can go. From here, philosophy must become theology to

³⁵ Told by Ernst A. Simon, “Recollections of a Disciple,” in: Mendes-Flohr (note 10), 213.

³⁶ See Abraham J. Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2004), 45.

³⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 157.

reach the final truth, and it can only do so by means of an act of faith. In other words, reason needs faith to find truth.

Hence, Book 3 begins with the words “God is the truth”. As Green summarises:

But the God who is the truth for Rosenzweig, the transcendent entity to which man can rise and from which attain truth, is one who also appears as ultimately beyond both words and form. Consequently, while man can attain a notion of God, the apprehension derives from a limited human experience rather than a god-like intellection, and hence he can only represent Him figuratively or symbolically rather than absolutely.³⁸

This does not mean that humans can ‘grasp’ the truth, but rather that they are only offered a glimpse of it, traces of it in the world. But to discern these traces of truth, an act of trust in the existence of such truth is required. The criterion for truth is directly linked to the ‘undeniability of truth itself’, a fact: “Thus it is not the fact in which we trust, but in its trustworthiness.”³⁹ It means that the search for true knowledge does not begin with an ‘undeniable’ claim of truth, but with faith in the ‘undeniability’ of a fact, thereby making experience of even greater significance than intellect. Therefore, he could say: “All trust in truth thus rests upon an ultimate trust that the ground on which truth places itself with its own two feet is capable of supporting it.”⁴⁰ Therefore, perhaps the deeper question is: Where does this trust come from? In Rosenzweig’s case, it was a specific event, a true *Ereignis*, that seeded it.

For Rosenzweig, the event that triggered the dramatic reversal to his own roots was the 1913 Yom Kippur service. Perhaps his experience is best described in the well-known words of Kierkegaard: “The truth is a snare; you cannot have it without being caught. You cannot have truth in such a way that you catch it; but only in such a way that it catches you.”⁴¹

In terms of preaching, it means that the truth of preaching requires both the trust in such a truth and the experience to confirm this truth. Here one does not come before the other; it is the confirmation of truth that builds the trust and at the same time it is the trust in such a truth that remains open to the experience. This has important consequences for the way that the preacher begins to engage with the act of preaching, understanding the act of preaching as much as an inextricable part of this truth experience.⁴²

The truth of preaching is deeply embedded in this *Ereignis* character. The German word that Rosenzweig uses, *Ereignis*, often translated into English as “event” or “happening”, comes from *er auginis*, which is originally related to the act of seeing, usually in a theatre setting, but including the other senses to describe the act of being touched by something.

³⁸ Green (note 34), 302.

³⁹ Rosenzweig (note 12), 387.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁴¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. Alistair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴² Having read or heard several sermons over the last ten years in the Uniting Church in Australia, my suspicion is that it is exactly here the problem starts: the absence of or little trust in the truth of the experience – see Johan Cilliers, *Die Uitwissing van God op die Kansel: Ontstellende Bevindinge oor Suid-Afrikaanse Prediking*. (Cape Town: Lux Verbi), 1996.

Preaching is a happening that has all the dynamics of such a free event. It is entirely dependent on the ‘offensive’ notion of revelation. What is revealed is not revealed through the insights or the faith of the preacher, but despite the insights of the preacher. Therefore, Rosenzweig could say: “Even the ‘ultimate’ that we know of God is none other than the innermost we know of him, namely that he reveals himself to us.”⁴³

However, this ‘event’ draws the person in, allows the hearer to participate. In other words, the event is ‘complemented’ by an experience (*Erlebnis*). Rosenzweig makes a distinction between what could be stated about God and what could be experienced about God. What could be stated is simply that God ‘is’ or ‘exists’, but this statement is related to the experience in the same way as a marriage certificate is related to the daily reality of a marriage: “The reality cannot be communicated to a third person; it is no one’s concern and yet is the only thing that counts ...”.⁴⁴

Perhaps therefore the best sermons that I have listened to are those that I can remember, not for what they said to me, but what they did to me; not for what I took from them, but how they took hold of me; not what I saw in them, but what they saw in me. Or again, in the words of Kierkegaard, “You cannot have truth in such a way that you catch it; but only in such a way that it catches you.”

Closely related to the importance of the actual experience, the existential aspect of reality – what is captured by Rosenzweig’s ‘new thinking’ – is his *Sprachdenken*, the ‘speaking-thinking’. Through the transformative experience the person becomes attentive to the voice from ‘outside’ and hence to reality of revelation itself – something that happens in the intimate surroundings of the experience. Therefore, when Rosenzweig talks about ‘revelation’, it is this actuality, the presentness of it, that he has in mind. And crucially, it is this revelation that evokes a human response, in other words, creates language.

The dynamics of this revelation/experience, the dialogical nature of ‘speaking-thinking’, has close parallels with preaching. If, as the Helvetic Confession claims, the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God, then preaching itself constitutes something of the reality of the dialogue between Word and congregation. What characterises Rosenzweig’s ‘speaking-thinking’ is the fact that the speaker’s utterance is dependent on the response from the listener. Most, if not all Christian homileticians would agree on the importance of this dialogical character of preaching. A good preacher is one who is in constant dialogue with the listener, who ‘listens’ to the questions of the listeners, who is sensitive to their sorrows, whose sermon is more than a soliloquy, even and especially so if the voice of no else sounds during the sermon.

It is important to bear in mind that when Rosenzweig refers to the sermon in the *Star*, he has the Jewish sermon in mind, not the Christian sermon. When he analyses the sermon, he makes a distinction between a dialogical conversation and a public speech. Unlike the way that I have referred to Christian preaching above, the way that Rosenzweig viewed and

⁴³ Rosenzweig (note 12), 388.

⁴⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, “Divine and Human: A Letter,” in: Glatzer (note 7), 243.

experienced the Jewish sermon is closer to the way a public speech is conducted: The speaker speaks and the listener listens.

However, Rosenzweig is deeply aware of the dialogical aspect of the public monologue as well. The question is: Wherein lies the dialogical aspect of this, or what is it that creates such a dialogue?

4. The Truth of the Preacher

The first potential answer to this that comes to mind has to do with the integrity or authority – the truth – of the speakers or the preachers themselves. There is no doubt that Rosenzweig understood that the truth of preaching is also inextricably linked to the truth of the preacher;⁴⁵ however, what guarantees the dialogue in preaching – the speaking congregation and the listening preacher, so to speak – lies in something other than the authority of the preacher. Jewish theologian Yehoyada Amir summarises Rosenzweig’s view on what constitutes the dialogical aspect of preaching in the following way:

The essential element which creates listening should lie in another dimension than the message or the personality of the speaker. The sermon gains its unique quality by being based on the ‘verse’, namely, on a sacred text, that serves as such as the foundation of the faith-community’s belief. The mutual listening that would be nothing but listening, listening where a crowd becomes ‘all ears’, does not result from the speaker, but rather only from the drawing back of the actively speaking person [...]. The fact that the sermon must come by way of the ‘text’ has its basis here; only the connection to the text secures for it the ‘devoted’ listening of everyone [...].⁴⁶

Perhaps this is the most important Jewish lesson that Christian preaching should take very seriously. The dialogical failure of the sermon does not necessarily lie in the fact that the preacher does not ‘listen’ to the questions that the congregation might have or in the fact that the congregation is not allowed to speak, but in the disconnect between the preacher and the text, or better put, in the fact that there is no ‘listening’ connection between the preacher and the congregation, apart from the interest that the preacher might evoke.

What this means is that Jewish preaching alerts us to the important dialogical role that the text already has. The text is neither the mere springboard nor the final authority on which the preaching is based; the text *creates* the dialogue between the preacher and the congregation. Amir calls this dialogue ‘mutual listening’.

In this sense, Rosenzweig’s understanding of this mutual listening offers a valuable corrective to both the deficits of expository preaching (with its exclusive emphasis on the

⁴⁵ His admiration of and high praise for the sermons as well as the person of the Jewish rabbi Nehemiah Nobel provide ample evidence of this.

⁴⁶ Yehoyada Amir, “Towards Mutual Listening: The Notion of Sermon in Franz Rosenzweig’s Philosophy,” in Alexander Deeg/Walter Homolka/Heinz-Günther Schöttler (eds), *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity: Encounters and Developments from Biblical Times to Modernity* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

divine origin and hence the meaning of the text) and the so-called New Homiletic (with its focus on the listener).

As Amir points out,⁴⁷ by the time Rosenzweig wrote the *Star*, he was very much informed about and under the influence of biblical criticism and did not subscribe in any way to the idea of divine verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, and neither did the majority of Central European Jews. Both they and Rosenzweig were deeply conscious of both the divine and the human element with regard to the Bible. In other words, although the Bible is anchored in divine revelation, it comes to us in fully human words. In the words of Yehoyada Amir, “It encounters us not directly with God, but rather with the human encounter with him. [Therefore] it is a composition that by its nature hints beyond words, beyond language.”⁴⁸

What all of this practically means is very well illustrated by the preacher for whom Rosenzweig had the utmost personal respect and admiration:⁴⁹ Rabbi Dr Nehemiah A Nobel, one of the leading rabbis in Frankfurt Am Main at the time. Rosenzweig calls his sermons “incredibly magnificent”⁵⁰ and says that “he speaks to people as one thinks only the prophets should have been allowed to speak. It’s really the Spirit as ‘cloudburst’.”⁵¹

In his ‘Sermonic Judaism’ Rosenzweig comes back to Nobel and at the end of the essay describes the relationship, the dialogue between Nobel and the congregation, saying that during his sermons (and prayers in particular) the congregation became more than an audience – they were the ones who carried him to the Divine Throne: “Thus he could really speak; thus he could pray. We were no onlookers, but rather as much of his prayers as the words and letters. So he carried us along [...]”⁵²

But perhaps the most telling, and the most moving, account of what could be described as the ‘truth of the preacher’ comes from Rosenzweig’s own recollection of a sermon by Nobel of a text from *Koholet*:

He delivered almost his entire sermon in a quiet manner, possibly for a whole hour. It was as if he was conversing with someone. But this someone was not sitting among us. Suddenly I noticed: he was not speaking to us – in every sentence he addressed *Koholet* directly, he did not speak *about*, he spoke *with Koholet*. And then I saw him [i.e. *Koholet* – AD].⁵³

⁴⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁹ Rosenzweig also named his only son and child (Rafael Nehemiah Rosenzweig) after Rabbi Nobel. However, in spite of his respect for Nobel, Rosenzweig had some reservations about what he called “Nobel’s Christian and pagan ideas” and the “negative side” of their relationship. (See Glatzer [note 7], 120, 106–107.)

⁵⁰ In a letter to Gertrud Oppenheim, after attending High Holidays services at his synagogue. (See Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, 103.)

⁵¹ Glatzer (note 7), 104.

⁵² Franz Rosenzweig, “Sermonic Judaism,” in: Glatzer (note 7), 250.

⁵³ As quoted by Alexander Deeg, “Response” (to Amir’s “Towards Mutual Listening”) in: Deeg/Homolka/Schöttler (note 46), 134.

What becomes apparent here is that the sermon is ultimately about more than either a public speech to the congregation or a mere dialogue with the congregation; the sermon is the way the preacher engages with the voice of the biblical author, engages in a dialogue with the biblical author. The congregation is drawn into this dialogue to prepare them for the real purpose of the preaching: becoming silent before God.

In eternity the spoken word fades into the silence of perfect togetherness – for union occurs in silence only; the word unites, but those who are united fall silent [...]. The word itself must take man to the point of learning how to share silence. His preparation begins with learning to hear.⁵⁴

In the end, the truth of the preacher goes well beyond Brooks's understanding of 'truth through personality' – in a certain sense to a 'truth beyond personality'. Rosenzweig teaches us that the truth of the preacher – which includes the personality of the preacher – lies in how the preacher captures our hearing in order to prepare for what is the goal of preaching, the sacrifice of silence: the moment when the voice of God is heard.

One could put this lesson in a different way: The true goal of the preacher is not to convey some or other truth, even if that is the truth of the biblical text or the truth of a contemporary reality. The true goal of preaching – in which the preacher is the most important instrument – is to carefully guide the congregation, in and through prayer and preaching, in and through their hearing to both the discerning and the experience (*Erlebnis*) of the faithful presence of God that opens the eyes to the truth of the text and the truth of the contemporary situation.

5. Preaching of the Truth

In the last part of the *Star*, Rosenzweig looks at what he regards as the two worldly configurations (Judaism and Christianity: the eternal life and the eternal way) of the Eternal Truth. In and through their holy days and liturgical year they have become participants in the Eternal Truth. This leads him to his 'messianic theory of knowledge', which lies at the heart of Rosenzweig's understanding of truth.

We have seen how he has asserted (against idealism) that the manifold truth must become 'our' truth. In other words, truth is not so much in what 'is' true, but truth must be realised or verified in the actuality and reality of life itself. In this sense, every truth requires a bearer and that includes the final, one truth, the truth of God; it too needs to be verified. And this verification can only come from the end, not as a kind of mystical experience, but verified in terms of the price one is prepared to pay for it. Beginning with what he calls 'unimportant truths' (such as two times two is four), on which most agree and which do not cost anything, the way to verification ...

... leads over those truths for which man is willing to pay, on those that he cannot verify save at the cost of his life, and finally to those that cannot be verified until generations upon

⁵⁴ Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 308–309.

generations have given up their lives to that end. But this messianic theory of knowledge that values truth according to what it has cost them to verify them, and according to the bond they create among men, cannot lead beyond the two eternally irreconcilable hopes for the Messiah: the hope for one to come and the hope for one to return [...]. Beyond this, only God can verify the truth ...⁵⁵

This brings us to what is at the heart of his messianic theory of knowledge: the concept of verification (*Bewährung*), which is something entirely different from what we would understand as ‘evidence-based’ truth. *Bewährung* is not verification by scientific means or pure reason, but by means of something else. It is important to remember that Rosenzweig’s ‘new thinking’ is not an attack against modern science, but against speculative philosophy. His ‘new thinking’ is not only articulated by the ‘messianic theory of knowledge’, but also by the ‘philosophy of sound common sense’.

From January to March 1921, Rosenzweig taught a course at the *Lehrhaus* in which he expounded on his ‘new thinking’. The significant subtitle to his course was “About the use of common sense” (*Vom Gebrauch des gesunden Menschenverstandes*).⁵⁶ ‘Common sense’ (*gesunde Menschenverstandes*) is for Rosenzweig the cure for the sickness of the philosophers, their propensity to reduce things to ‘essences’ – a delusion because things cannot exist beyond reality.⁵⁷ It is very hard to grasp the meaning of this purely from the English translation. The literal English translation for the German *gesunde Menschenverstandes*⁵⁸ is “healthy human mind”. Hence, ‘common sense’ is not merely about a common gift, so to speak, but about a mind that has been healed from a particular sickness to appreciate the truth of reality. Crucially, it is the duty of this ‘healthy mind’ or common sense to confirm the eschatological or messianic truth in life.

And perhaps even more important, as far as the preaching of truth is concerned, it is of particular significance that Rosenzweig’s final section in the *Star* is on Micah 6:8, in other words, the confirmation of the truth is via ethics – “to walk humbly with your God, to do justice and to love mercy”. In the words of Norbert Samuelson’s commentary on the last words in the *Star*, “What is good and what the Lord seeks from you, is the vision of the end that conjoins ultimate ethics with ultimate ritual.”⁵⁹

It is almost impossible to capture the breadth and depth of Rosenzweig’s vision here in terms of one or two ‘lessons’ for Christian preaching. Perhaps one could begin by pointing out that the word Rosenzweig uses for confirmation or verification, *Bewährung*, is, save for the

⁵⁵ Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” in: Glatzer (note 7), 206.

⁵⁶ Glatzer (note 28), 22.

⁵⁷ Rosenzweig (note 19), 57–58.

⁵⁸ The *Star* is an almost impossibly difficult book to translate. As Michael Meyer rightly says, it almost seems as if his philosophy cannot exist outside of the matrix of the German language. Therefore, keywords often require further explanation. See Michael A. Meyer, “The Star of Redemption, by Franz Rosenzweig,” *Commentary*, July 1971. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/michael-meyer-3/the-star-of-redemption-by-franz-rosenzweig/> [accessed February 10, 2020].

⁵⁹ Norbert M Samuelson, *A User’s Guide to Franz Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption* (London: Routledge, 1999), 331.

umlaut, the same as the German word *Bewahrung*, meaning ‘preservation’. The root of both words goes back to the German *Wahrheit*, ‘truth’.

Preaching of the truth then is not only about the confirmation of truth, but also about the preservation of truth; not only about demonstrating what is true, but also about caring for, looking after what is true. For preaching, this means that it is not only the quest to confirm the truth that is important, but also the thirst for truth. Preaching the truth is not only preaching the truth of love, but also preaching the love for truth.

If I understand Rosenzweig correctly here, then preaching the truth has two important aspects. The first lies in our trust in the truth, which has to do with our trust in the fact of truth – in other words, that truth exists. Preaching the truth is not about offering an apology for truth but derives its very life from the trust in truth. Preaching the truth is made possible by the ‘offensive thought of the revelation’. The most we can know about God, according to Rosenzweig, is none other than our innermost knowledge of God, namely that God reveals Godself.⁶⁰ And this, again, is nothing but the confirmation of our innermost experience of this truth, which is simply that God loves.⁶¹

Without this faith in truth, not only the preaching of truth, but also preaching *per se*, become impossible. In this sense, the mere act of preaching already offers a powerful challenge to the notion of post-truth or fake truth. When the preacher dares to ascend the pulpit or stands behind the lectern, it could already be understood as a profound questioning of the proposition of fake truth or the suggestion that there is no truth.

However, and this is the second aspect of Rosenzweig’s teaching: It is the continuous task of the synagogue and the church to confirm this truth, in their prayers and in their obedience to the commandments. As Amir rightly says, “Rosenzweig’s notion of truth is grounded in the ‘verification’ [*Bewährung*], namely in the realization, throughout an entire individual and communal life, of a particular aspect of *the* truth [...]”⁶²

In preaching the truth, the preacher must continually guide the congregation in a specific aspect of or particular instance of their caring for the truth. The verification of the ultimate truth is something only God could do. The confirmation of the diverse aspects of this ultimate truth is done by the communities of the church and the synagogue in their daily lives, and by doing that, they are realising the truth.

For Rosenzweig, the truth of reality is not something static, but something temporal; it appears in and over time. This adds, in conclusion, something very important to our understanding of the preaching of the truth: Truth is realised not only in time, but also during the course of time. For the preacher, this means that in order to devote oneself to the preaching of truth, patience is needed. It means that the continual quest for the truth is the ‘gate’ (to use an important word for Rosenzweig) to the realisation of the truth. Therefore, preachers must learn to wait for the truth to be revealed or to reveal itself, they must learn to wait for the truth

⁶⁰ Rosenzweig (note 12), 388.

⁶¹ Ibid., 389.

⁶² Yohoyada Amir, “Rosenzweig’s *Büchlein vom gesunden und kranken Menschenverstand* as a Prolegomena,” in: Yohoyada Amir/Yossi Turner/Martin Brassler (eds.), *Faith, Truth and Reason: New Perspectives on Franz Rosenzweig’s ‘Star of Redemption’* (München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2012), 53.

as it becomes clearer over time. For if God is truth,⁶³ truth will also come to us the way that God does: as a gift of revelation.

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⁶³ See Heschel (note 36), 45.