

THE BIBLE – SACRED SCRIPTURE FOR JEWS AND FOR CHRISTIANS

Jonathan Magonet

It is a great privilege to have been invited to speak at this international congress. My professional life as a rabbi and Bible scholar has been lived against the background of the Second Vatican Council and the significant changes it has introduced into Christian-Jewish relations. Not all of these changes have filtered down to the grass roots of the Church, but neither have they been sufficiently recognised within the Jewish world. It is therefore a particular responsibility of those who are teachers to engage with the Bible at the popular level and open up the dimensions that can further dialogue. Indeed, having the Bible as a common source for our two traditions can be a positive factor when approached in the right way. If we face each other directly, armed with our respective histories, beliefs and incontrovertible truths, the result can only be confrontational. However if we have a common source to turn to, approaching it side by side from our particular positions, then the similarities and differences in our understanding and perspectives can enrich our shared activity. At the very least, instead of facing each other we are facing in the same direction.

I thought it might be helpful as an introduction to describe the practical experience of shared Jewish-Christian Bible study that I have been engaged with.

For over thirty-five years I have co-organised an annual Jewish-Christian Bible Week in Germany. For most of that time, it was held in a little town called Bendorf, in a Catholic conference centre that was dedicated to ecumenical and interfaith work. The name Hedwig Dransfeld Haus will have echoes amongst the Catholic Women's movement, and I would hope that Anneliese Debray who was its director after the war until shortly before her death, is another name that is recognised and suitably honoured by the Church. In her creative, imaginative and sometimes anarchic way, Frau Debray pursued the intention of *Nostra Aetate* long before others within the church hierarchy did, and it would be remiss of me not to mention her remarkable, practical contribution to Jewish-Christian but also Christian-Muslim dialogue through the programmes she introduced there. When, as a young rabbinic student, I first became involved, the Haus hosted an annual Catholic Bible Week. The presence of young Jewish rabbinic students led to the attempt to open up this Bible study to a shared experience between the two faith communities. We began with a few biblical texts, chosen I should add, because they were the only ones about which I felt competent to say anything. But subsequently we started working our way fairly systematically through the Hebrew Bible from Genesis. I still feel guilty that we skipped over Leviticus as it seemed too difficult at the time, and we should return to it one day. We were selective in the passages we chose, but have at least tackled sequentially all the other books according to the Jewish canon and are currently working through the Book of Psalms. Sadly the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus had to close for financial reasons but the Bible Week has relocated to another centre, Haus Ohrbeck in Osnabrueck where regular Bible study led by Catholic theologians also takes place.

I have mentioned this personal history because I wanted to introduce some of the issues that have arisen during this practical engagement. The Bible Week is inevitably coloured by the history of German-Jewish relations, indeed but for that past I doubt that such a programme would have been introduced, let alone supported so consistently, over such a long period. There have always been at least three distinct agendas operating at the same time amongst the participants in this Week: the issue of the German past and the genocide of the Jews; the intensive exploration of Jewish-Christian relations through daily living and studying together; and the shared exploration of the Hebrew Bible itself, working directly from the Hebrew text with the help of translations and resource people. It is significant that over the course of time the former two elements, although they have never gone away and are always more prominent when new people participate, have

tended to recede into the background, whereas the study of the biblical text itself has become ever more important.

At this point it might be helpful to describe the way in which we undertake this study. From early on we established that the study groups each morning with ten to twelve participants, each with a Jewish and a Christian resource person, were the motor that drove the week. Although all of the groups work directly with the Hebrew text, they are organised according to a number of approaches. The first series of groups simply offer direct text study of the given passages, with all possible commentaries, but particularly traditional Jewish ones, available to help understand the different dimensions of the text. There is a second series of groups that were more popular in the original Christian form of the Bible Week, which use the text as a springboard for more personal explorations. A third group is called 'creative' and will use a variety of artistic media such as painting or clay, or bibliodrama, meditation or dance, to open up quite different dimensions of the text. A fourth group may explore the same passages through aspects of the Jewish mystical tradition. On three of the afternoons a lecture will focus on the text from an unusual perspective or discipline, perhaps literature or psychotherapy, as well as via classical Christian or Jewish sources. On the Jewish Sabbath and Sunday we attend one another's services, and the sermons themselves may offer another dimension to what we have been studying.

The first point to emphasise in this approach is that we try to allow the text itself to determine the issues that it raises, rather than come to it with a preconceived idea as to how it should be viewed through any single tradition, dogma or academic discipline. Inevitably there are 'favourite passages' that play a significant role in one or other of the traditions and hence the temptation to focus on these alone. Nevertheless it is important, if the Scripture itself is to be taken seriously, that we do not limit ourselves to these, but allow ourselves to be surprised, even shocked, by all that is to be found there. We try to be open to the 'multidimensionality' of the text and the plurality of traditions of interpretation.

In this regard we may often have to read against the apparent overt meaning of the text. There is an apologetic tendency, at least within Jewish tradition, to defend certain heroic figures even when their behaviour is clearly unacceptable. Sometimes the Hebrew Bible itself is braver in its judgement but this requires the reader not merely to identify with the apparent 'hero' of the given passage but with the position of the narrator, often indicated indirectly. Undertaking this kind of reading can also be a disturbing exercise for people whose perception of the Bible may have been formed in childhood and not subject to adult questioning.

These patterns of study have evolved over time but they have themselves evoked interesting responses from the participants. Undoubtedly what was particularly attractive for the Christians from the early years was to hear the Jewish voice. Apart from the obvious historical issues for German participants that lie behind this interest, Jewish exegesis is particularly rich. As well as providing access to the Hebrew text itself, it can draw upon the extensive midrashic tradition in addition to the extraordinary flourishing of biblical exegesis in the Middle Ages influenced by the Christian and Muslim European societies within which Jews lived. What is particularly refreshing about this material is its close reading of the text and the quest to explicate the text itself in its own terms which matches contemporary literary approaches. In contrast the equivalent Christian exegetical tradition, as I understand it, tended to focus on typological readings and to view texts primarily insofar as they led to the new revelation that arose with the coming of Christ.

This plurality of Jewish interpretations was at first shocking to the Christian participants who were accustomed to an approach which tended to circumscribe the possible range of interpretation. But in time it became for them a kind of liberation. In some ways this came

about simply because of the discipline of starting with the Hebrew text, discovering its inner connections and dynamic, and recognising the problems that this raises for interpretation. Indeed using different translations, with their occasional tendentious approach, was itself a helpful reminder of the relativity of exegesis.

At a later stage a reaction crept in whereby Christians expressed the desire for an explicit Christian exegesis. They found themselves frustrated because the only contemporary approach to the Bible they knew tended to be the historical-critical method. This led to the wish to explore the theology of the Yahwist, Elohist and Deuteronomist. Given the origins of these hypothetical precursors of the Hebrew Bible in the work of largely Protestant scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there are likely to be few surprises in the theologies that might emerge from such a labour. But the issue of what constitutes an authentic contemporary Christian exegesis remains till today a question for the participants.

This brings us in a roundabout way to the title of this session and some questions that it raises. The first is inevitably the terminology 'sacred scripture'. In Jewish terms I would rather speak of Torah, firstly in its limited sense of the Pentateuch, but above all in its broader range as referring not only to the Hebrew Bible but to the entirety of traditions derived from it directly and indirectly over the centuries. In this broader sense, Torah is teaching, direction, the way, and thus is not reducible to a single text. That at least is the traditional construct. However today's Jewish world is also a product of the enlightenment and the emancipation. Jews share with others in the West a largely secular view of existence and a historical consciousness that also approaches Torah in all its dimensions with a greater sense of its human composition, however far it may reflect divine revelation or inspiration. Moreover, such authority as the Torah may have it owes, at least throughout most of the past two millennia, to the rabbinic tradition that defined and regulated Jewish society. That tradition fixed the practical expressions of Jewish life through Halakhah, Jewish law, while leaving open the beliefs that underlay them. With the breakdown of Halakhah as the sole regulating force in Jewish life after the emancipation a number of competing possibilities have emerged, religious, cultural, nationalistic or ethnic, seeking to replace it. In this anarchic situation the position of Torah is no longer clear. Thus it is there to be discovered, explored and even applied by all who choose to do so in their own particular way, but except for a few, its comprehensive nature and the authority it held in the past are no longer the case. So Torah, in the limited sense of the Hebrew Bible, can certainly provide a place of meeting between Christians and Jews, but it brings with it no binding commitment either to belief or to action. Perhaps that very neutrality makes it a useful meeting place, as long as there is a clear recognition of this reality. In a strange way this even accords with an old Jewish teaching that the Torah should be studied *lishma*, 'for its own sake', with no ulterior motive or purposive intent beyond celebrating it as God's gift to the world.

Both Jews and Christians today, in their respective ways, are facing similar questions about the nature of authority in religious matters. Does it lie without or within? Where do we find the spiritual security both to trust and continually question the ideas we discover through our study of Torah or Scripture and the values to which we commit ourselves? In this particular regard dialogue offers at least a framework within which to test out what we find with companions on a shared journey.