

## **Fourfold Focus on Scripture**

### **27 May 2010**

The healthy attendance at the recent CCJWA's panel presentation on "The Authority of Scripture" attested to interest in unflinching interfaith discussion. Some 80 members and visitors gathered at Temple David on 27 May to listen to Rabbi Marcus Solomon (Honorary Senior Rabbi of the Beit Midrash of WA Inc.), Kenneth Arkwright OAM (Progressive Judaism, Temple David Congregation Inc.), The Right Reverend Dr Anthony Nichols (Honorary Lecturer, Trinity Theological College, Perth, and two Indonesian Colleges), and The Reverend Professor William Loader FAHA (Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow at Murdoch University and Minister in the Uniting Church in Australia), express their respective positions regarding the authority of Scripture.

Their charge, to present their position in 15 minutes, which the Reverend Rowan Strong (CCJWA Chairperson) conceded in his introduction was an entirely 'unreasonable' request, nevertheless proved constructive. The four positions, familiarly known as 'orthodox' and 'progressive' Judaism, on the one hand, and 'evangelical' and 'academic' Christianity, on the other hand, he noted, all reflected "people of the book," but "people" that varied in their interpretation of what that "book" was comprised (canon), and in what way, and on what basis, that particular canon should be honoured and obeyed. Comparing without avoiding our differences, it was hoped, might stimulate sensitive and substantial dialogue, fulfilling one of the Council's aims.

The presentations began with Rabbi Marcus Solomon briefly clarifying that his tradition was not 'Orthodox' in the sense of literalist as is commonly supposed. He then questioned the presuppositions that might be held. "What is meant by 'authority'? By 'scripture'?"

For traditional Jewish Orthodoxy 'scripture' is the Torah and it is accompanied by the Talmud. The Torah is ultimately authoritative, sometimes literally so, however, to the extent that it is understood as mediated through human experience, and, again, mediated through authorised human exegesis. Rabbi Solomon asserted, referring to George Horowitz's 1953 publication *The Spirit of Jewish Law*, that the 'letter of the law' should be kept in harmony with the spirit of that law. And while it states in Deuteronomy 4 that nothing is to be added or removed from the law, the spirit of humanity has removed and added or 'revealed' much, sometimes with binding force. Rabbi Solomon then corrected an assumed negative interpretation of an 'eye for an eye', stating that what is to be learned from this phrase is to value humanity precisely so that we do not fall to the abominable conclusion that the phrase suggests. Further, he added, the laws are not to be held in isolation but interpreted through the oral tradition. Talmudic, or Pharisaic, Judaism takes the written law and the oral tradition together.

With humour the Rabbi enlightened guests that his tradition was law-obsessed, operating through the 13 rules of statutory construction (such as a civil society operates). Consistent with this, he continued, their community begin their daily liturgy with a recitation of the rules of this statutory construction. The Talmudic discussion which follows, the construal of the law, involves lively argument between rabbis. A story followed demonstrating the dynamic between the arguing rabbis (Eliezer and his opposition), Moses, Akiva, God, and the law being argued over.

Arguing over the purity of an oven, Eliezer appeals to God for support (above the Torah) but the rabbis who oppose him dismiss God's replying voice as of no account as "the Torah is not in heaven." God smiles to see his children prevail over him. In another passage of the Talmud, God shows Moses a series of visions involving the great Rabbi Akiva.

Moses sees God in heaven doodling inscriptions (to become laws) for future rabbis to interpret. Upon giving these, God patiently watches for persons to rise to the challenge. In another vision, Moses is troubled by the fact that Akiva is teaching Moses something incomprehensible to his ears, but God points out to Moses that Akiva's teaching is in fact derived from what Moses presented earlier. God affirms to Moses his inscrutable wisdom; though Akiva advances something 'greater' than Moses' writings, Akiva acknowledges that the wisdom he is teaching is an extension of the revelation received by Moses himself. Thus, in conclusion, Rabbi Solomon reflected, what God has mandated as authoritative, awaits derivation.

The Right Reverend Dr Anthony Nichols presented next. A professor of biblical studies at Trinity College, Dr Nichols plunged into the deep with God's words "Let there be light" and light was brought to be. Further, God created humans "in his image" as "speaking beings." How a transcendent God might communicate through "culture bound language," Dr Nichols approached, by offering biblical evidence in Exodus 4:11-12 where God 'speaks', "Who has made man's mouth?" and "... go, I will be with your mouth." Moses' words, thus guided by God, further in Exodus eventually become "the Book of the Covenant," with what God has done read "in the hearing of the people." So Exodus 24 becomes the "nucleus of the Bible." The nature and authority of Scripture, Dr Nichols saw, is not a construct superimposed by theologians, but is to be found in this covenantal origin. Consistent with this, he disagreed with the notion that biblical writings are a product of the community of faith, but that biblical writings emerged through prophets and apostles in spite of *lack* of faith.

Later biblical proofs for written holy words as authoritative, Dr Nichols added, come from the prophets Isaiah 41 (v. 26) and Jeremiah 36:27-28 (Jeremiah writes words which are burned by Jehoiakim) supporting the notion that "words written by men, if God so intends, may be God's word written". Though these 'words' are flawed, their character remains God-originated, and issues to do with canon, transmission, translation, and interpretation Dr Nichols saw as secondary. Their character, he described, was covenantal: God addressed his people in a covenantal message whose coherence is found in the fulfilling of covenantal promises in the Christian Testament.

Apparent 'errors' such as numerical detail, Dr Nichols felt could be resolved by looking to the writer's purpose, such as intended literary devices engaged to state something. The overall, or final, meaning should prevail. To sum up, a Christian biblical view of scripture is that all scripture is "God-breathed" (cf. 2 Tim 3:16), unified and fulfilled in the Messiah Jesus, and as such should be stood before "with humility and reverence."

Mr Arkwright turned our attention to the 'Ten Commandments', better translated as 'the Ten Words' or 'the Decalogue', stating that it is on these that we "stand or fall." Using the Exodus and Deuteronomy 'words' on coveting, he illustrated a variation that reflected historical context. In the era represented by the Exodus 20 text, where houses were scarce, 'God prohibits' the coveting of houses (as mentioned first) over coveting spouses, but in Deuteronomy 5 where to have a wife was rarer, spouses preceded houses. Mr Arkwright noted that the Shema affirms keeping these words, the law, in one's heart. Earlier in history the heart was undifferentiated from the mind, evident in the expression "to learn by heart," and "don't take it to heart," and here it is meant "take the law to the *heart*," not merely the mind. He recounted a story where a Gentile asked Shammai to teach him the whole Torah while balancing on one foot. Shammai sent him away, so he turned to Hillel who taught him "that which you hate, don't do to others; that is the whole Torah, the rest is interpretation."

The effect of the position of a book in the approved canon was also pondered. When Christians place Ruth following Judges, preceding Ezra and Nehemiah, who sent non-Jewish wives and children into exile, a rejection of Ruth's entrance into Jewish history is hinted at, whereas, if Ruth is included in the Kethuvim, the book remains a love story. Matthew's genealogy includes Ruth as an ancestor of Joseph, but does the previous exile of non-Jews threaten his Jewish ancestry?

Kenneth Arkwright concluded with the "Guiding Principles of Progressive Judaism" which follow.

God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature, but also in the vision and moral striving of the human spirit. Revelation is a continuous process confined to no one group and to no one age. Yet the people of Israel, through its prophets and sages, achieved unique insight in the realm of religious truth. The Torah, both written and oral, enshrines Israel's ever-growing consciousness of God and of the moral law. It preserves the historical precedents, sanctions and norms of Jewish life, and seeks to mould it in the patterns of goodness and of holiness.

Being products of historical processes, certain of its laws have lost their binding force with the passing of the conditions that called them forth. But as a depository of permanent spiritual ideals, the Torah remains the dynamic source of the life of Israel. Each age has the obligation to adapt the teachings of the Torah to its basic needs in consonance with the genius of Judaism.

The Reverend Professor William Loader presented a Christian academic approach. He began with the problem: Are we in a position to prioritise commandments given to demonstrate loving God "with one's whole heart, soul and strength," herein rendering all commandments holy? The laws of Torah, in early 'New Testament' history, and preceding centuries, were prioritised along pretty diverse criteria, the Reverend Loader observed, but construed "never entailed picking and choosing, let alone discarding," rather, "appropriate combinations" were chosen. He pointed to Philo as an example of treating the Torah as inviolate, regardless of halakhic interpretation, and Jesus as representing an ethical rather than cultic focus, originating not just in the prophets and wisdom but also in the Torah (where the notion of circumcision of the heart originated).

Professor Loader traced the tradition of keeping the Torah (the first authoritative Scripture) through its upheaval in Christian development. Emerging Christianity, Jewish in its foundation and tradition, contended with whether Gentiles should observe Torah. The Matthean and Lucan communities report the Messianic Jesus as saying not one stroke of the Torah is to be abandoned, and reflect the Torah's universal and ethical values taking precedence over laws pertaining to ritual and dietary purity.

Paul, claiming to stand in an Abrahamic tradition which bypasses the Torah, Professor Loader commented, took an even more radical approach, and like Mark, turned an inclusive contrast into an exclusive one. Thus Paul declared that Christians no longer lived under the Torah; their expression of fraternal love "by the Spirit given through Christ which was to manifest itself in radical love" fulfilled what Paul felt was the Torah's original intention. Professor Loader described Paul as 'construing' a response to the problem of being in diaspora: to what degree can you "compromise in the interests of opening your faith to all humankind without risking its integrity?" To dissolve potential "barriers between Jews and Gentiles," the ethics of need, echoing Jesus' teaching, prevailed. In a different way John's Gospel saw Torah as foreshadowing what came in Jesus and thereafter reduced to that role, and otherwise not to be observed.

Professor Loader turned to the present and admitted that he stood in the Christian tradition which inherits Paul's resolution, leading him to encounter this same dilemma. He described three scenarios. In one position, all biblical commandments are kept without priorities, for example, forbidding divorce, forbidding women in ministry, requiring lifelong celibacy for those of a homosexual orientation, which might pose a threat to the spirit of the law.

Another position upholds the spirit of compassion in the law which means, though affirming all, setting priorities which “allow for one part to override another.” A further position, he added, not easily distinguishable as separate from this, would “permanently override some elements and seek to identify the core values which drive such decisions.” Professor Loader observed that many evangelicals today held to the second position as long as a precedent “conflict” could be pointed to in the Bible; however, that makes for an arbitrary formula.

To conclude, Professor Loader posed a question representing the challenge: How might our tradition be interpreted to serve the homosexually oriented person who is not profligate and enable them “to develop their spiritual maturity and responsibility with the same seriousness and discipline” as persons of heterosexual orientation? He felt Scripture ought not to be abandoned but taken more seriously, not as an “ahistorical tractate but in ... its context, as a cross-cultural encounter in which we know we will be blessed,” allowing room to affirm discontinuity as well as continuity. He expressed his indebtedness to those Jews who opened “the blessings of their religious heritage to the wider world by dropping their own distinctive ethnic markers and trimming Torah to the largely ethical, combined with axioms derived from loyalty to their new messianic leader.” Yet he also recognised that others regarded these strategies as unnecessary and/or as betrayal, and acknowledged the controversy and pain which subsequently resulted from “such innovation in approaching scripture and tradition.”

Associate Professor Strong concluded proceedings by opening the floor for questions. Any expectation that this panel would demonstrate mere opposition between a literalist and a symbolic rendering of text had been challenged. Variances were more qualified, making for a thought-provoking dialogue. Some discussion followed on what was explicitly refused in the law on sexual relations, as this bore on the discussion of an ethics of homosexual relations. A guest expressed thanks to the Jewish presenters for maintaining their tradition, so that many (those present) eventually benefited from it.

Significantly, each presenter focused on the relational aspect of the words of Scripture — how they initiate and provide the material for the conversation between God and persons, persons and God, and for responsible loving inter-subjective relations.

Each position held a core of truth and it may be said that our holding to distinctiveness within the atmosphere of mutual respect is where the core is most authentically held, whether it be in tension or complementarity.

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