

## INTRODUCTION

*Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet*

It is my pleasure to offer a word of welcome to you on this very special occasion. Inevitably, though it is a time of celebration it is mixed with many other emotions. Just looking at the various photographs taken over the past forty years brings back joyous memories and experiences, but also a deep sadness at seeing again faces that are no longer here to share this moment with us. Few of the founders of the Bible Week are still alive, and most of us have memories of particular individuals who played an important part in our lives during the Week. Perhaps that is the first thing that should be stressed. For forty years this week of studying together the Hebrew Bible, has always been more than simply sitting together studying a text. For many it has been a life changing experience, a safe space for personal exploration and growth alongside the intellectual and creative work that we have shared. But perhaps that is also what studying the Bible should really be about, an opportunity to engage with personal challenges, to deepen our spiritual awareness but above all to be open to surprise, to let the text take us to places we could never have imagined.

In retrospect the formula is very simple. Invite a lot of people to sit down in small groups, each with resource persons with knowledge of Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, and see what happens. But simple though the formula is, it also evolved. I remember from the early days the reluctance to put so much emphasis on the study groups and frequent attempts to reduce the time given to them in favour of lectures. It was as if we did not quite trust the text to speak, or perhaps to allow ourselves to be prepared to listen. Perhaps, as well, there is a kind of hierarchic tendency in religions that prefers that someone with authority lectures to those without, and we had to learn to trust our own knowledge and personal authority in the shared study.

This is not the occasion for a history lesson and I am delighted that Daniela Koeppler has almost completed a theological and historical analysis of the two unique conferences that were born or developed at the *Hedwig Dransfeld Haus* in Bendorf under the guidance and inspiration of Anneliese Debray. The Bible Week and the companion Jewish Christian Muslim Student Conference could only have come into existence because of her and any celebration is also a celebration of her extraordinary contribution. If nothing else, Anneliese bequeathed to us a quality of independent thinking that allowed us to experiment, take risks, confront taboos and simply break down barriers. Her restless curiosity about people and her deep desire to find ways of reconciling people in conflict gave both programmes a special impetus. She simply embodied the principles of dialogue, interpersonal, intercultural and interreligious, and we all learnt from her example. *Zichronah livrachah*, may her memory ever be a blessing.

In retrospect it is clearly significant that it is called the 'Jewish-Christian Bible Week' and not the 'Christian-Jewish Bible Week' as virtually every other similar or related programme in Germany. The latter is understandable because such programmes are inevitably Christian initiatives, given the size and constitution of the Jewish community here, and are often part of the attempt to ad-

dress the tragic history of the Shoah. I no longer know what led us to this title, but it does represent the first of many unique aspects. From the beginning the presence of Jewish participants, mostly rabbinic students from Leo Baeck College, meant that the planning and participation was a shared activity, something almost unimaginable some forty years ago. One can point to significant events in the sixties that provided a background, *Nostra Aetate*, and the various emerging Protestant documents, but the young Jews who came here had no real knowledge of them. We were on our own religious journey. Inspired by Rabbi Lionel Blue, and engaged in the work of the Youth Section of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, we understood that we had to come to Germany if we were to help build a future for European Jewry. It was a quixotic quest, and it had about it also a kind of youthful rebellion against the expectations of our parents' generation. But we found here in this and other circles, people with a hunger to meet with us, and in some ways it was quite overwhelming. We crossed a boundary and to our surprise, and perhaps at times discomfort, found people we could trust, and in time come to love. The framework of the Week was probably less important. In those early years the common Hebrew Bible simply gave us an excuse to come together.

So from the beginning there were always these three dimensions to what took place in Bendorf, and I think still here today. There was the Jewish-Christian encounter, that made the Bible Week possible, and probably necessary as well, as Christians tried to come to terms with what was seen as a disastrous failure of the Church. There was the Jewish-German encounter, highly problematic and at times deeply painful as we, Jews and Christians alike, became witnesses to a deeply felt shame and guilt. And thirdly there was the Hebrew Bible itself, the official catalyst and, through its treasure of stories, and the richness of interpretations, an open door to any number of steps to understanding. Over time the balance between the three components has changed, with the Bible itself now taking central place, though the other elements are always potentially or actually present, particularly as new people participate. Jewish tradition emphasises the need to remember our past, especially that we were once slaves in Egypt. But that remembering is not to make us live in the past, or hoard old resentments and prejudices, but to remind us what shapes our attitudes today, so that we can learn from them and create a different and better future.

I must draw these remarks to a close. But I cannot do so without one more tribute to our new home and in particular to Uta Zwingenberger who so readily offered this house when Bendorf closed and has not only embraced the Bible Week but helped create an atmosphere and quality as good as anything in the past. As important is the fact that we have also managed to develop a new younger organising team who plan and administer the programme with the same enthusiasm and commitment as any before them. It is a pleasure and privilege to be able still to work with them.

We could not end without taking the opportunity to reflect on those who are no longer with us, to regret their absence and rejoice in their memory. So I would ask us to stand for a moment's silence, after which we will recite the Kaddish. As you know it is the memorial prayer for the dead, but its contents are actually a praise of God and a prayer of hope for the future.