

„You shall love your neighbour as yourself.“
(Lev 19:18)

40th International Jewish-Christian Bible Week
The book of Leviticus

27th July to 3rd August 2008



BIBLE WEEK SHABBAT SERMON 2 AUGUST 2008 **A FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY DREAM**

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‘Was it necessary for someone to die in setting up the tabernacle and the sacrificial cult?’ asked the professor. ‘Why else repeatedly refer to Nadav and Avihu?’ The class in advanced social engineering was studying the Book of Leviticus. The teacher, a tenured professor of philosophy called Kohelet, had a reputation for cynicism. He, however, insisted that the quest for truth demanded rigour. All opinions and options, including the most challenging, had to be explored, analysed, then accepted or rejected, if the resulting conclusion was to stand. He liked to challenge his students with his questions and draw on their own experience.

As usual Solomon was the first to put up his hand. Having run his own empire more or less successfully he tended to offer a pragmatic opinion on all of the class’s research topics. ‘No system of comprehensive control of a population can be introduced’ he said, ‘without some becoming victims. You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs’. He preferred totalitarian models, though had to admit that his own kingdom had split up as soon as he was out of the way.

Professor Kohelet was rather fond of the red-headed man who sat in the front row. Though small in stature David compensated with a kind of aggressive charm that made others both like him and feel a bit wary of crossing him. David was the next to reply, drawing on his military experience, and he spoke in his usual blunt way. ‘You cannot have a conflict’, he asserted, ‘without some collateral damage!’ There was a murmur of protest behind him from others in the class. Kohelet smiled. They did like to see purpose and meaning in events. Random chance, accidental deaths were scary categories outside their usual theological, cause and effect, comfort zone.

Inevitably he turned next to Isaac who almost never spoke unless directly asked. Some trauma in his childhood had made him almost inarticulate and wary of expressing an opinion. As a teacher Professor Kohelet wanted to draw him out, but he was aware that his own persecutory tendencies were aroused by Isaac’s silence. This time however Isaac responded immediately to the teacher’s glance and stood up. ‘There can be no revolution in the human heart’ he said ‘without its martyrs and its sacrifices.’ and sat down again to an uncomfortable silence.

Professor Kohelet decided it was time to change the direction of his enquiry. ‘What do we know about the actual event?’ he asked. This was a dangerous question because the class included any number of conspiracy theory addicts. And sure enough Jeremiah was the first to respond. A quick glance from Kohelet prevented him launching into an elaborate parable, and he restricted himself to the recorded facts. ‘The investigators had only restricted access to the scene on the grounds that it was too holy for laymen to enter. The bodies were quickly removed and disposed of so that no forensic investigation was undertaken and no coroner’s report produced. The only witness, Aaron, on the advice of his lawyers, has maintained a stubborn silence about what happened.

Effectively all we have is the written record produced by Moses who is hardly a neutral figure in the whole event. It has to be a cover up.'

Professor Kohelet noted the rise in tension in the class. After all this was calling into question the sacred archives and the great teacher himself. There were limits even to his beloved 'rigorous quest for truth'.

A hand went up in the second row. The professor was fond of Isaiah. He knew the court and the realities of power politics. But he was also something of a mystic and more open than most to spiritual questions. Kohelet nodded to him to give his opinion. 'I find I cannot entirely dismiss the story of the fire coming from heaven. As you recall from my own encounter with the six winged, fiery seraphim...' At the mention of his mystical experience some students at the back started to yawn significantly while others began flapping their arms and making comic noises to distract him. Kohelet had to call the class to order and for once lost his calm composure. Mystical experiences were not to his liking, but in the interests of objectivity they had to be taken into account.

Isaiah seemed not to have noticed the reaction. 'We have evidence from the Korach rebellion', he said, 'from the fate of the two hundred and fifty first born who took their censers into the sanctuary and were consumed by heavenly fire that such phenomena, though rare, certainly exist. The only question is whether to see their fate as a punishment or a special reward for their zeal and burning devotion, to be taken to God literally as a fire offering.'

Professor Kohelet felt more and more uneasy about the direction this was taking. After all he had had to introduce a couple of verses about the importance of the 'fear of God' into his own treatise on vanity so as to get it past the censorship of the religious police. You never knew who in the class might be taking notes and reporting what was said.

Almost as if to confirm his fears there was a sudden commotion in the entrance to the hall and a bearded man, loins girded, covered in dust, strode in and marched to the front. To his relief he saw that it was only Elijah, back from one of his mysterious trips. Surprisingly he was not angry for a change, but obviously felt that he had a message to deliver. The professor yielded the floor to him.

'As you know, I have been particularly zealous for the Lord God of hosts. I have also performed my own 'heavenly fire descending on the altar' effect. So I checked the records and can confirm that on the date in question, a controlled burst of fire was indeed unleashed with pinpoint accuracy on the altar in question. Of course if someone was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time ...'

What happened next could have been anticipated. From the back row came a single word, 'Men!!' It was said with all the contempt that the widow Naomi could muster. Even the professor felt a blush creep up his face. 'Men! How can you talk so glibly about these deaths! How can you ignore the pain of families destroyed, of women widowed and children orphaned?'

Recovering the professor felt it was time to take control of the situation and bring the class to a close. He thanked Naomi for reminding them of this wider perspective which also threw light on their topic. He was aware he sounded a bit patronising and dismissive, but the damage had already been done. Fortunately Miriam and Deborah were away that week.

'Next week's assignment' he said, 'is on the fiscal consequences of the sabbatical and jubilee years. We are fortunate to have as our guest lecturer, Dr Amos of Tekoa College, whose paper has the intriguing title: "Are you not just like the Ethiopians to me, O Israel? Discuss!"'