

INTRODUCTION

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This year we wanted to maintain the usual structure of the Week, but also acknowledge this significant fiftieth anniversary. In the first Bible Week certain passages were studied, so we thought it might be interesting to see how their interpretations and significance have changed in the intervening period. But this choice also reflects changes in the nature of the Bible Week itself since that beginning. At the time we were still working in a conventional conference format with formal lectures throughout the day given by lecturers who were accorded considerable authority. But the system gave little opportunity for the participants to have real discussions, either with the lecturer or amongst themselves. The pattern of morning study sessions, which are now part of the ethos of the Bible Week, belong to a kind of democratisation of the programme, that only appeared gradually, and had to be fought for.

The texts reflected in large part the interests of the Christian organisers at the time and their curiosity about a Jewish response to them. Hence the opening chapters of Genesis, the theme of the ‘suffering servant’ in Isaiah and the Book of Jonah. I must have had some input because at the time at the beginning of my rabbinic studies these were the only passages about which I had anything at all to say! However, in those days, it was a bit easier to bluff and offer a few scattered comments because the lectures were translated orally, sentence by sentence. That gave me time during the translation to think of something reasonably intelligent to say.

What the three passages had, and still have, in common, is their importance in different ways in Jewish-Christian dialogue. The Genesis account is an important source for questions about the sin of the first human couple in disobeying God. While this is a fundamental issue in Christian thought it has been far less significant for Jews and Judaism. It is important to remember that thanks to the remarkable ecumenical Christian commitment of Anneliese Debray, we had both Catholic and Protestant lecturers and participants at the Week. This must have led to interesting internal Christian discussions, and considerable liturgical complications, which my limited German was not good enough to follow. With Genesis, we had a topic addressing a fundamental difference in viewpoint between Judaism and Christianity, one that could provide an interfaith challenge to this encounter with the Bible.

Perhaps even more challenging at the theological level, but also with serious socio-political consequences, was the question of the identity of the ‘suffering servant’ in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Was this a prefiguration of the experience of Jesus? Certainly, such an interpretation could be supported if the chapter was taken in isolation. But Jewish exegesis tended to approach it within the broader context of chapters 40 – 55 and to recognize in other chapters about the ‘servant’ an image that could equally apply to the Jewish people as a whole.

The Book of Jonah seems on the surface more available to both faiths as a kind of universal parable that transcends denominational or ideological differences. But, at that time, some Christian Bible commentaries tended to view in the figure of Jonah a stereotypical Jew, particularistic and nationalistic, and even described as hating the rest of humanity. The same authors, however, could see in the attitude of the author of the Book evidence of an 'almost Christian' expression of universalism and love. I could never understand how it was possible to separate the narrow-minded Jewish Jonah from the compassionate Jewish author of the same Book. Presumably, as I was just beginning to understand in my own studies, so much of the literary subtlety and irony of the narrative was being overlooked in the interest of ideology. In teaching Jonah, even then, I felt comfortable in offering my own opinion.

So much for the past. Despite the passage of time, many of those same attitudes and issues remain today, but alongside many new approaches to the same Biblical chapters. I would like to offer a question to each of the three passages which some of us might like to address during the course of the Week.

In the case of Genesis, the sentence: 'Let *us* make man' (Gen 1:26) raises the question: with whom is God speaking? There are many ways of understanding the word 'us' in this context, but a rabbinic midrash (based on Psalm 95:11) offers the following explanation. God is actually in debate with the angels who represent different qualities and aspects of God's concerns. So, the angel in charge of Kindness and Compassion (*hesed*) said, 'let God create man, for he will perform acts of kindness.' But the angel concerned with Truth (*emet*) said, 'let God not create man, for he will be full of deceit.' The angel in charge of Justice (*tsedeq*) said, 'let God create man, for he will act with righteousness and justice.' But the angel in charge of Peace (*shalom*) said, 'let God not create man, for he will be full of conflicts.' Nevertheless, God decided that it was worth the risk, that in the end our positive qualities would outweigh the negative ones, and God went ahead and created human beings.¹ From today's perspective, with more evidence than ever before, it is quite clear that the earth could do perfectly well, and maybe considerably better, without the presence and interference of human beings. So, an interesting question remains, at least within the framework of these Genesis passages and our shared religious traditions: why did God want to create human beings at all?

The climactic servant passage continues to challenge in a variety of ways. A careful reading of chapters 40 – 55 of Isaiah recognizes a significant division between chapters 40 – 48 and 49 – 55.² Before it, the focus is on encouraging those in exile; moreover, the city Babylon and its fate is addressed directly. But the latter chapters focus instead on Jerusalem / Zion, waiting to receive its returning children. Moreover, in the former chapters the servant is clearly identified as the exiled community in their collective identity. However, in the latter chapters a new distinctive identity and role for the servant emerges as an individual within Israel, most forcefully with the passage in 49:6:

It is too little for you to be My servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel, I will also make you a light of nations, so that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

If we accept that these two sections of the Book are consciously composed to provide a different perspective on Israel's situation and aspirations, it limits the quest for the identity of the 'suffering servant' to these latter chapters alone. Might we find further clues in the passages that we study as to who might be intended?

¹ 'Kindness and truth met, justice and peace came together'. The midrash about the discussion of the angels can be found in Genesis Rabbah 8:5.

² P. Wilcox and David Paton-Williams 'The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah' *JOT* 42 (1988) 79-102. Among other things they note that, statistically, the name 'Jacob' occurs 19 times, and Israel 35 times in 40 – 48, but respectively only 3 times and 8 times in 49 – 55.

Jonah represents the logical extension of a familiar Biblical motif. Some prophets, when summoned by God, were reluctant to accept the call. Moses pleaded his inability to communicate; Jeremiah said that he was only a 'naar', which could mean he was only a youth, or, if he belonged to a prophetic training school, that he was only an apprentice and not yet 'ordained'. But Jonah represents another reaction, to run away as far as possible from the mission itself. Just to remind us, Abraham Ibn Ezra had the important insight that Jonah does not try to flee 'mippnei adonai', physically from God's presence. The impossibility of this is made clear by the author of Psalm 139 verse 7 – 'anah mippanecha evrach', 'where can I flee from your presence?' Rather Jonah runs 'millifnei adonai'. To stand 'lifnei adonai' is what a prophet does, namely, to stand in the service of God. It is the mission that Jonah tries to flee from, not from God. But after Jonah's unsuccessful flight and the sojourn in the fish, and restoration to dry land, God nevertheless has to call him a second time with the almost identical words to do the same mission. Why? The rabbis said: 'a second time but not a third time', God gave up on using Jonah as a prophet! But I believe there is something in the text describing Jonah's behaviour that already shows why God had to do this. Perhaps what that might be is another question to address when we study the Book this week.

I would like to close with two quotations from Friedemann W. Golka, a Bible scholar and friend, whose early death prevented him lecturing last year on the Book of Proverbs. In his study of Jonah he notes the challenges to both Judaism and Christianity by the Book:

The Book of Jonah and its interpretation reflect the common history of Jews and Christians. The argument about Jonah is at the same time the argument of two world religions about a common heritage. It is here that the strongest Christian anti-Judaism appears; it is here that the Jewish exegesis finds itself on the defensive. But it is here, too – after Auschwitz – that Jewish and Christian interpretations seem to converge more than anywhere else ...

The Book of Jonah is an astonishing theological development. This is the type of post-exilic Jewish theology in whose tradition Jesus of Nazareth stands ... This does not make the author of the Book of Jonah a 'secret Christian,' but it identifies Jesus as a Jew who stands in the best tradition.³

But Friedemann's remarks about the challenge of this common heritage must surely apply to all the texts that we have studied together over the past fifty years, and to all those we will continue to study together into the future.

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³ Friedemann W. Golka 'Jonah' *The Song of Songs and Jonah: Revelation of God* (International Theological Commentary, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co. Grand Rapids 1988) 65-136, 68, 127.