

Bible Bulletin 39

I recently participated in a short Bible study course looking at the Old Testament with emphasis on the books of Genesis and of the Prophets. The following comments are either taken from the course or are the result of my later reflections.

Asked what the account of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11: 1-9) had to say about God my instinctive response was: “Nothing, but it has a lot to say about man’s imagination”. Later, I recalled the argument of David Brown in his ‘Tradition and Imagination’ that “God speaks to humanity through the imagination, and human imagination is influenced by historical context. It is the imagination that ensures that religion continues to develop in new and challenging ways.”

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets (Hebrews 1: 1). Although the methods employed by the prophets varied considerably there was unanimity in their main message: a reminder of the nation’s covenant obligations. Loosely, this can be regarded as observing the Law (or laws, of which, traditionally, there were 613: 248 positive and 365 negative). Realistically, the requirement was paying due honour to God, obligatory sacrifices and refraining from foreign worship (and, of course, moral conduct).

Micah identified concisely what was needed: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (NRSV). Hosea’s patience with his unfaithful wife taught him something of the dealings of God with a rebellious people; the claim that God told Hosea to marry a prostitute is fanciful. After the return from exile in Babylon Haggai urged the people to rebuild the Temple which had been destroyed by the invaders; he received qualified support from Zechariah.

Zechariah’s reservations concerning restoration of the Temple are understandable. During the exile in Babylon the people, largely influenced by Ezekiel, had begun to shake off the preoccupation with the system of sacrifices associated with the Temple. To rebuild the Temple, as indeed happened, meant reverting to the earlier practice which continued into New Testament times. The destruction of the Temple by the Romans in A.D.70 was at first regarded as a disaster but wiser counsels prevailed.

Under the leadership of men like Yohanan ben Zakkai and Rabban Gamaliel 2 an academy was established at Jamnia, which led to the formation of Rabbinic Judaism. Yohanan is on record as saying that “good deeds will atone as sacrifices once did”. A document of Vatican 2 in 1985 referred to a ‘spiritual fecundity’ which marked Rabbinic Judaism, continuing into modern times. This later Judaism showed a nobility largely missing from a Christianity which placed more emphasis on dogma than right conduct, leading to persecution of ‘heretics’ – and Jews!

A Messianic theme evident in the prophetic writings is differently interpreted by Jewish and Christian readers, largely because Christians used the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) which contains some alternative readings.

‘Crocodiles Do Not Swim Here’, by Smith Wilkinson

This is a book of Bible study with some surprising claims, chief of which is the notion that Moses was an iron-worker and that the book of Exodus describes the onset of the Iron Age.

Regrettably, there is much unnecessary repetition and the punctuation is appalling; commas and apostrophes are placed randomly and there are no colons or semi-colons. The intentional absence of punctuation in the book’s title indicates its ambiguity (an exclamation mark after ‘Crocodile’ would convey an entirely new meaning).

Enoch Powell is known mainly as a politician but he was also an accomplished Greek scholar whose biblical researches produced some surprising results which can be found in the volumes ‘No Easy Answers’ (1973) and ‘Wrestling With The Angel’ (1977). When asked if he was a Christian he replied, ambiguously, “I am an Anglican”.

Referring to the Nativity story in Luke’s Gospel, Powell points out that there is no mention of a stable. His argument is that the inn *in which they were deemed to stay* had no cradle, hence the substituted manger. [the Greek word for ‘room’ is more usually rendered ‘place’.]

Following the murder of Abel by Cain, God asked Cain, “Where is your brother?” and Cain replied “Am I my brother’s keeper? The answer given to this question is normally “Yes”, but Powell argues (surely correctly) that the answer is “No”. As he explains, “If I am to be ‘my brother’s keeper’. . . I must be given control over him as a parent or guardian has control over a minor”.

The story of the woman taken in adultery in John’s Gospel is not found in every Greek manuscript. Powell asks, “did somebody miss it out, or did somebody put it in?” He continues, “My own hunch is that the story is authentic, and that someone somewhere left it out because he found it too difficult. ‘This will never do’, thought he, ‘how can the law be kept if only the sinless can execute it? and what shall we come to if adulteresses are to be let off with a warning? So out the passage came.”

Contrary to an almost unanimous opinion among biblical scholars, Powell argued that Matthew, rather than Mark, was the first gospel to be written. The reasoning is complex but one aspect is that, rather than Matthew expanding Mark, Mark omitted portions of Matthew he deemed superfluous (he claims

some support from St Augustine who regarded Mark as a copyist and abbreviator). Powell is not alone in championing the primacy of Matthew; John Robinson, the former bishop of Woolwich, also held this position, argued in his book 'Redating the New Testament'.

'Scripture and Translation' is a 1994 English translation of a work first published in German in 1936. **Martin Buber** and **Franz Rosenzweig** provide a "unique collaborative account of the message and stylistics of the Bible" (blurb). The collection of essays includes a description of the formation of a new translation into German of the Hebrew Bible.

In 1925 Buber was requested by a Christian publisher to provide a translation of the Old Testament. In agreeing, he stipulated the collaboration of Rosenzweig, with whom he had previously worked. Despite suffering from motor neurone disease, Rosenzweig agreed. The method of working adopted was that Buber prepared sections of text which he sent to Rosenzweig who, with the physical assistance of his wife, offered "objections, suggestions and proposed alterations".

Although most of the exchange was by correspondence, they met once a week for discussion. They first attempted a revision of Luther's German Bible but, feeling that this was too 'Christianised' and influenced by Greek and Latin, they determined to produce a version which was based purely on Hebrew ways of thinking and expression. Also, they wanted a text which would sound correct when read aloud (this point was not always appreciated by critics).

Rosenzweig died in 1929 aged 43 and Buber finished the task without his 'muse of precision' as Rosenzweig depicted himself. Buber states that from Rosenzweig he learned that "belief without humour is a fearful thing, that humour without belief has no foundation, but that both together let us bear the pain that there is to bear."