

Scriptural Reasoning 'Texts' and 'Traditions of Reading'

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# COMMON HUMANITY

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# “COMMON HUMANITY” – SCRIPTURES

## Jewish Text 1

### Genesis (Bereshit) 1: 26-28

כּו וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים קִיּוּם נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי  
הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ הַרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

כז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים קִיּוּם אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ  
בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים קִיּוּם בָּרָא אֹתוֹ  
זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם.

כח וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים קִיּוּם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים קִיּוּם פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ  
וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשׁוּהָ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-  
חַיַּי הַרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

### Genesis (Bereshit) 1: 26-28

<sup>26</sup> And God said, ‘Let us make a human in our image, after our likeness, to hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens, and the cattle and the whole earth and all the crawling things that crawl upon the earth.’

<sup>27</sup> And God created the human in His image;  
in the image of God He created him;  
male and female He created them.

<sup>28</sup> And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and master it, and hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and every living thing that crawls upon the earth.’

### Glosses

v. 26: ‘human’ - the word in Hebrew is *adam*, which is related to the words for ‘earth’ (*adamah*) and ‘red’ (*adom*). This term has connotations of ‘human being’, especially in contrast to the often-used *ish* (man) and *ishah* (woman). The standard Hebrew expression for ‘human beings’ is *benei adam*, ‘children of Adam/Human Being’.

v. 26: ‘image’ - *tselem*. This term can be used of physical images.

v. 26: ‘likeness’ - *demut*. The root of this word has connotations of resemblance.

vv. 26, 28: ‘hold sway’ - *yirdu/redu*. This is an unusual word (basic form: *radah*), and not one of the roots usually used for ruling or having dominion (*mashal* or *malakh*).

Verse 27 is a ‘mini-poem’, with four words and four stress beats in each line. Note the shift from singular (‘him’) to plural (‘them’).

## Jewish Text 2

### Micah 6: 8

ח הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מַה-טוֹב וּמַה-ה' דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ  
כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת הַסֶּדֶק  
וְהִצְנִיעַ לֶכֶת עִם-אֱלֹהֵיךָ.

### Micah 6: 8

He has told you, O man, what is good,  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
Only to do justice  
And to love kindness  
And to walk humbly with your God.

#### Glosses

'man': *adam*, the universal word for human being.

'justice': *mishpat*, a central concept in Judaism; possible translations include  
'judgement', 'law', 'right', 'custom'

'kindness': *chesed*, a central concept in Judaism: possible translations include  
'favour', 'goodness', 'love', 'grace', 'mercy', 'charity', 'benevolence',  
'benefaction' 'loving-kindness'

'humbly': *hatsne'a*, has overtones of modesty and concealment.

**א** לְמַנְצִיחַ בְּנִגְיֹת מְזֻמֹּר שִׁיר.  
**ב** אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְבָרֵכֵנו  
 יְאֵר פְּנֵינוּ אֲתָנוּ סֵלָה.  
**ג** לְדַעַת בְּאֶרֶץ זָרָבָב  
 בְּכָל-גּוֹיִם יִשְׁוַעְתְּךָ.  
**ד** יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 יוֹדוּךָ, עַמִּים כְּלָם.  
**ה** יִשְׁמְחוּ וַיִּרְנְנוּ לְאֵלִים:  
 כִּי-תִשְׁפֹּט עַמִּים מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל  
 וּלְאֵלִים בְּאֶרֶץ תִּנְחֵם סֵלָה.  
**ו** יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 יוֹדוּךָ, עַמִּים כְּלָם.  
**ז** אֶרֶץ נִתְנָה יְבוּלָהּ  
 יְבָרֵכֵנו אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְנוּ.  
**ח** יְבָרֵכֵנו אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 וַיִּירָאוּ אוֹתוֹ כָּל-אֲפִסֵי-אֶרֶץ.

**Psalm 67**

<sup>1</sup> For the leader; with instrumental music: a psalm, a song.

<sup>2</sup> May God be gracious to us and bless us;  
 May He make His face shine upon us, *selah*,

<sup>3</sup> That Your way be known on earth,  
 Your salvation among all nations.

<sup>4</sup> Peoples will praise You, O God,  
 All the peoples will praise You.

<sup>5</sup> Populations will rejoice and shout for joy,  
 for You will judge the peoples with equity,  
 You will guide the nations of the earth, *selah*.

<sup>6</sup> The peoples will praise You, O God,  
 All the peoples will praise You.

<sup>7</sup> May the earth yield its produce;  
 May God, our God, bless us.

<sup>8</sup> May God bless us  
 And may all the ends of the earth fear Him.

## Glosses

- v. 2: *selah*: a word that appears in several of the Psalms, perhaps meaning 'pause' or 'interlude', or introducing an instrumental section.
- v. 3: 'nations' - *goyim*: used of all nations, including the Jewish people.
- v. 4: 'peoples' - *amim*: used of all peoples, including the people of Israel.
- v. 5: 'populations' - *le'umim*: a slightly rarer word, used of all nations.
- v. 5: 'equity' - *mishor*: from a root with connotations of 'straight', 'level', 'honest'.

## Christian Text

### Matthew 5: 38-45

<sup>38</sup> You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

<sup>39</sup> But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

### Glosses

v. 39: 'resist' – *antistenai*, oppose, stand against, stand your ground against.

v. 39: 'the one who is evil' – *to ponero*, can mean 'the evil' or 'the one who is evil'—as also in the Lord's Prayer: 'deliver us from the evil (one)'.

v. 45: 'sons' – *huioi*, the implication here is that the one who loves enemies as well as friends will be an adoptive child of God. Adoption is also a favourite theme of Paul's (cf. Romans 8: 15-17).

v. 48: 'perfect' – *teleios*, a common word in Greek thought (where it could imply conformity to a divine ideal), but a rare word in the Gospels—found only here and in 19: 21. The verse seems to fuse two Old Testament references in a complex way: Deuteronomy 18: 13's instruction to be 'blameless', and Leviticus 19: 2's call to be 'holy'. In a parallel passage, Luke's Gospel reads 'merciful' (Luke 6: 36).

## Islamic Text 1

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

### Surah al-Nisa' ('Women', 4: 1-10), Medinan

*In the Name of God, All-Merciful, Most Merciful*

<sup>1</sup> O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord,  
Who created you from a single person,  
created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain  
scattered (like seeds) countless men and women—  
fear Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights),  
and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you):  
for Allah ever watches over you.

<sup>2</sup> To orphans restore their property (when they reach their age), nor substitute  
(your) worthless things for (their) good ones; and devour not their substance  
(by mixing it up) with your own. For this is indeed a great sin.

<sup>3</sup> If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry  
women of your choice: two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be  
able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (captives) that your right  
hands possess; that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.

<sup>4</sup> And give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift; but if they, of  
their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it with  
right good cheer.

<sup>5</sup> To those weak of understanding make not over your property, which Allah  
has made a means of support for you, but feed and clothe them therewith,  
and speak to them words of kindness and justice.

<sup>6</sup> Make trial of orphans until they reach the age of marriage; if then ye find  
sound judgement in them, release their property to them; but consume it not  
wastefully, nor in haste against their growing up. If the guardian is well-off, let  
him claim no remuneration, but if he is poor, let him have for himself what is  
just and reasonable. When ye release their property to them, take witnesses  
in their presence: but All-Sufficient is Allah in taking account.

<sup>7</sup> From what is left by parents and those nearest related there is a share for  
men and a share for women, whether the property be small or large—a  
determinate share.

<sup>8</sup> But if at the time of division other relatives, or orphans or poor, are present,  
feed them out of the (property), and speak to them words of kindness and  
justice.

<sup>9</sup> Let those (disposing of an estate) have the same fear in their minds as they  
would have for their own if they had left a helpless family behind: let them fear  
Allah, and speak words of appropriate (comfort).

<sup>10</sup> Those who unjustly eat up the property of orphans, eat up a fire into their  
own bodies: they will soon be enduring a blazing fire!

### Glosses

*ayah* 1: 'Guardian-Lord' - *rabb*

*ayah* 1: 'of like nature' - literally, 'from it'. The translation is based on the  
commentary of al-Razi (149-1209 AH/CE).

*ayah* 1: 'fear' - or 'reverence'.

## Islamic Text 2

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

### Surah Bani Isra'il or al-Isra' ('Children of Israel' or 'The Night Journey', 17: 66-70), Meccan

<sup>66</sup> Your Lord is He that makes the ship  
go smoothly for you through the sea,  
in order that ye may seek of His bounty.  
For He is unto you most merciful.

<sup>67</sup> When distress seizes you at sea,  
those that ye call upon—besides Himself—  
leave you in the lurch!

But when He brings you back safe to land,  
ye turn away (from Him). Most ungrateful is man!

<sup>68</sup> Do ye then feel secure  
that He will not cause you to be swallowed up  
beneath the earth when ye are on land,  
or that He will not send against you a violent tornado (with showers of stones)  
so that ye shall find no one to carry out your affairs for you?

<sup>69</sup> Or do ye feel secure that He will not send you back  
a second time to sea and send against you  
a heavy gale to drown you because of your ingratitude,  
so that ye find no helper therein against Us?

<sup>70</sup> We have honoured the sons of Adam;  
provided them with transport on land and sea;  
given them for sustenance things good and pure;  
and conferred on them special favours,  
above a great part of our creation.

#### Gloss

*ayah 70: Bani Adam*: 'sons or children of Adam'. In Arabic (and related Islamic languages such as Persian, Urdu and Turkish), a man or human is called *adami*. In classical Arabic, *adam* carries the following meanings, amongst others: 'mud', 'earth', 'surface', 'reddish-brown', 'an example for others'.

### **Islamic Text 3**

**[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]**

#### **Surah al-Hujurat ('The Chambers', 49: 9-13), Medinan**

<sup>9</sup> If two parties among the believers fall into a quarrel, make ye peace between them: but if one of them transgresses beyond bounds against the other then fight ye (all) against the one that transgresses until it complies with the command of Allah; but if it complies then make peace between them with justice and be fair: for Allah loves those who are fair (and just).

<sup>10</sup> The believers are but a single brotherhood: so make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and fear Allah, that ye may receive mercy.

<sup>11</sup> O ye who believe!

Let not some men among you laugh at others: it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): nor let some women laugh at others: it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used of one) after he has believed: and those who do not desist are (indeed) doing wrong.

<sup>12</sup> O ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible):

for suspicion in some cases is a sin:

and spy not on each other nor speak ill of each other behind their backs.

Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother?

Nay, ye would abhor it ... but fear Allah:

for Allah is oft-returning, most merciful.

<sup>13</sup> O mankind! We created you

from a single (pair) of a male and a female,

and made you into nations and tribes,

that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).

Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

# “COMMON HUMANITY” – TRADITIONS OF READING

## JEWISH TEXTS

### Introduction and Context

The Jewish Bible, known as the Tanakh, consists of three parts:

*Torah* ('Teaching': Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), traditionally believed to have been given by God to Moses (c. 1250 BCE)

*Nevi'im* ('Prophets': Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets), spanning the period from Moses' death down to about 500 BCE

*Ketuvim* ('Writings': Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles), dating from different periods, from the time of King David (c. 1000 BCE) to about the second century BCE.

Each of the three texts chosen for study comes from one of these divisions.

The text from Genesis (Bereshit) forms part of the story of God's creation of the world, and is the source for many important concepts in Judaism. The rabbis derived the notion of the equality of all human beings and the equality of men and women from these words, and the phrase *betselem elokim* ('in the image of God') is often used to emphasize the infinite value of each individual (for instance, 'B'Tselem' is the name of an Israeli human rights organization). Every year, the entire Torah is read in sequence in the synagogue on Shabat (sabbath), in weekly portions (*parshiyot*); this text forms part of the first portion, usually read in October, after the festivals of Rosh Hashanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), and Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles).

The text from Micah (a prophet who was active about 735-700 BCE) is addressed to *adam*, each human being, and presents God's expectations from every member of humanity. It appears in the context of the prophet's rebuke of the people of Judah and their leaders for their moral corruption, as he warns that their refusal to listen to God's commands will bring destruction upon them and their society.

This verse forms part of one of the readings from the Prophets (*haftorot*) that follow each week's Torah portion in the synagogue.

The Talmud speaks of ten authors involved in composing the book of Psalms (Tehilim); this psalm comes from the group often ascribed to King David. It speaks of God's kingship over all people on earth, and their acknowledgement of Him.

The psalm is recited daily during the seven weeks between Passover (March/April) and Shavuot (June—the Feast of Weeks, which commemorates the giving of the Torah).

## Points to Consider

- What is 'common' to all humanity, according to these texts?
- Have the texts omitted anything important?
- How should we express our common humanity?

## The Text in Tradition and Today

Many of the musings on the nature of humanity throughout Jewish tradition are based on the two accounts of the creation of human beings in Genesis: the text given here and the less general, more-human centred version in the second chapter of Genesis. The vast body of midrashic material on these passages explores many dimensions of what it means to be human: the essential equality of man and woman, for example, emerges clearly from the text presented here. Some midrashic comments visualize the first human as androgynous, only becoming two distinct sexes at a later stage of creation. This is not so apparent in the Chapter 2 text (in which Eve is created from Adam's rib), thus providing fuel for centuries of debate about the relationship between the sexes. The unique nature of humanity is stressed in midrashic explorations of the balance of 'heavenly' versus 'earthly' factors in the composition of mankind: like the animals, human beings eat, drink, reproduce, and die, but like the angels, they speak, think, are aware, and serve God.

Several vitally important principles are derived from the fact that all humankind traces its origin to a single God-created being: the unique value of every human being, the equality of all human beings, the unity of God, the greatness of God, and universal human responsibility for each other, as can be seen in a famous passage from tractate *Sanhedrin* in the Mishnah (c. 200 CE):

For this reason was *adam* created as a single being, to teach you that anybody who kills a single soul, Scripture reckons it as though he had killed the whole world; and anyone who saves a single soul, Scripture reckons it as though he had saved the whole world. And also for peace among people, so that no man can say to his fellow; 'My father was greater than yours'. And also so that heretics should not say: 'There are many powers in heaven' [i.e. many gods]. And to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be he: for a mortal man strikes many coins in a single die and they all resemble each other; but the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, 'struck' each human in the mould of the first *adam*, and none of them resembles another. Therefore every individual should say: 'For me was the world created.' And none should say: 'What have we to do with this trouble [of someone else]?'... and none should say 'Why should we risk ourselves for someone else?'

Thanks to this view of the common origin and value of humankind, Judaism has never claimed that it holds the exclusive path to salvation or the good life (and has generally not tried to convert members of other faiths). All human beings are bound by the 'seven commandments of the sons of Noah' (no idolatry; no murder; no blasphemy; no incest/adultery; no theft; no eating a

limb torn from a living animal; and an obligation to set up a justice system), and if they observe these, they are considered to have fulfilled what God expects of them. Micah's formulation of the 'recipe for righteousness' (Text 2) expresses the principles underlying these seven commandments. Jews are traditionally understood to have an additional 606 commandments to observe (not as frightening as it sounds: many of them are to do with sacrifices, and only a couple of hundred apply to daily life), but are also bound by the basic seven.

Thus all humanity is capable of serving God and leading a good life, and the Jewish vision is of a united world, full of the knowledge of God and devoted to His service (as in Text 3). The Alenu prayer (possibly 2000 years old), which concludes each of the three daily prayer sessions, first focuses on the unique responsibilities of the Jewish people, and then turns our awareness out to the wider world:

Therefore we place our hope in You, Lord our God, that we may soon see the glory of Your power, when You will remove idols from the earth, and fetishes will be utterly destroyed, when the world will be perfected under the sovereignty of the Almighty, when all humanity will call on Your Name, and the wicked of the earth will turn to You. All the world's inhabitants will realize and know that to You every knee must bow and every tongue swear loyalty ... And it is said [Zechariah 14: 9]: 'Then the Lord shall be King over all the earth: on that day the Lord shall be One and His Name One.'

God will only truly be One when He is perceived as such by the (currently fragmented and divided) people He has created, and He will only truly be King when His authority is accepted by all humanity, whatever their religion. The role of the Jewish people is to serve as 'a light to the nations' in the effort to reach that ultimate aim for all humankind, restoring all people to a true 'common humanity'.

## **CHRISTIAN TEXT**

### **Introduction and Context**

This passage in Matthew's Gospel comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It is the first of five major discourses by Jesus in the Gospel, and is often regarded as the greatest: the Gospel's masterpiece. It has a parallel in Luke's Gospel. It is fairly systematic in its coverage of what would have been understood as the most important ethical and religious questions in its Jewish context.

Here we have the end of a section that interprets and applies a series of laws. The earlier parts of chapter 5 describe Jesus' teaching on anger, adultery, divorce and oaths. Here, towards the end of the chapter, we find him dealing with the law of retaliation and the law of love. And here (as elsewhere in the Sermon) he is shown upholding fidelity to the Torah, but always in a way that

calls for an 'excessive righteousness': the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven.

In discussing retaliation, Jesus comments on a legal rule (called 'talion') used to regulate revenge: 'an eye for an eye'. After discussing retaliation, Jesus articulates a 'law of love' based loosely on Leviticus 19: 18 (the words 'and hate your enemy' are not in Leviticus), a 'law' which is to govern relationships with all human beings and not just those of a restricted group.

### **Points to Consider**

- Could it be that Jesus' teaching on retaliation does not necessarily mean passively unresistant; it simply rules out *violent* resistance, and may allow for other sorts of moral or psychological resistance. What might these be?
- Jesus' interpretation and application of the Law seems to push towards a more radical reading than those of the Scribes and Pharisees of his context. Is Jesus' teaching here, as some commentators have said, 'lacking in ethical sobriety'? Is it 'do-able'?
- What might the appeal to common humanity be grounded in, in this text? What is the relevance of sun and rain? What is the relevance of the reference to 'sonship'?

### **The Text in Tradition and Today**

The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel cherishes the Law; his interpretation of it centres on costly love and discipleship.

In the distant past, the intention of the law of 'talion' had been to limit revenge to precise reciprocity in order to stop violence from getting out of hand. It was not interpreted in a literal way in the developing rabbinic Judaism of Jesus' day: the rabbis found it too harsh, and commuted such punishment to fines. But the aim of the legal rule had always been a moderating one. Jesus' teaching, meanwhile, follows a different and perhaps more startling line. It invites a response to wrong-doing that is non-violent, and also (apparently) non-reciprocal because it is pursued at considerable expense to the Christian disciple.

That said, his teaching may not be calling for behaviour that is *entirely* non-resistant . . . Jesus may have been playing with the customs and laws of his context to embarrass the perpetrators of wrong. Turning my other cheek prevents an aggressor from hitting me in the back-handed way he would strike a slave or social inferior, and means he will have to confront me as an equal, with an 'overhand blow'; going beyond the bare mile a Roman soldier could legitimately (by his laws) require someone to carry his pack for him risked making a law-breaker of him.

The last section of the passage—verses 43-48—looks like a summons to generosity and forbearance that does not want to restrict love to any narrow group, religious, ethnic, class-based, gender-based, or any other. There is a

vision of all (anyone and everyone) as entitled to the same treatment—not only ‘your brothers and sisters’. All can hope to be adopted children of God, the heavenly Father.

### **A Jewish perspective on the Christian Text**

Was Jesus not aware that the rabbis of his time had clearly said that the ‘law of talion’ (an eye for an eye, etc.) was never intended to be applied literally and had always meant monetary compensation for injury? And why does he quote Leviticus 19: 18 incorrectly, adding on the injunction to hate enemies (which does not appear anywhere in the Torah)? What is to become of fighting against injustice if one always ‘turns the other cheek’? And, on a slightly more technical note, what is ‘costly love’?

## **ISLAMIC TEXTS**

### **Introduction and Context**

The first text is the opening passage of the long *surah* (chapter) entitled ‘Women’ (176 verses), which deals mainly with family and community life. It is the opening *ayah* (verse) that particularly relates to our theme; the succeeding verses are given for context. This *ayah* was often recited by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, along with two other Qur’anic passages, at important occasions. To this day, these three portions of the Qur’an are regularly recited in Friday sermons and marriage ceremonies all over the Muslim world. The two other Qur’anic passages also begin with the command to ‘fear’ or ‘reverence’ God.

The ‘Night Journey’ takes its name from the reference in the opening *ayah* (verse) to the Prophet’s miraculous nocturnal journey in the company of Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he led all the prophets in prayer and then ascended through the seven heavens before leaving Gabriel behind, enjoying a direct vision of God and communicating directly with the Divine Presence. The *surah* is also known as ‘The Children of Israel’ because the rest of the opening passage speaks of this important people who were given the covenant earlier. Mention is made of two sacks of Jerusalem, usually understood to refer to the destruction of the Temple, plus a prophecy about events towards the end of time which are read by many nowadays as a reference to the founding of the modern state of Israel and subsequent events.

In the second and third texts, it is the last *ayah* that is especially relevant to the theme; the preceding verses are provided for context. The *surah* of the third text is short (18 verses) and begins with the believers’ duty of etiquette towards God, then Muhammad, then fellow-believers, then all of humanity, before ending with subtle allusions to the realities of faith, submission and divine omniscience. *Ayah* 13 is often quoted in inter-faith and cross-cultural dialogues.

## Points to Consider

- (Text 1) How are men and women's natures related?
- (Text 2) Humanity seems to be united by common ingratitude to God whilst enjoying common divine favours. How have we been preferred over other creation?
- (Text 3) How does 'knowing each other' happen in today's world?

## The Text in Tradition and Today

The mention of 'fearing God' in the first text has implications for civic contexts, and the tradition of quoting this verse in marriage ceremonies underlines this. One implication is that while our shared humanity means that we must pay strong attention to social justice (looking after the rights of the weak, oppressed and poor, as women and orphans have been in many societies), it also means that we must retain our natural 'sense of the sacred', that is echoed by the admonishment to fear and reverence God. Strongly secular societies seem to believe that the former is possible without the latter, and my view is that this is, in the end, impossible. The increasing moral breakdown of secular European societies with increasing addiction to alcohol, gambling, debt, pornography and paedophilia, plus the banality of much of modern art, architecture and philosophy, is a sign of this.

An important theme in the opening verse of the first text is the mention of wombs, which are essentially a feminine attribute, signifying nurture, growth, protection. The Arabic for 'womb' (*rahm*) is synonymous with mercy (*rahmah*) and is the root of the important Divine Names *al-Rahman* (All-Merciful) and *al-Rahim* (Most Merciful) that occur alongside the Greatest Name, *Allah*, at the beginning of every chapter of the Qur'an except one. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, explicitly taught that these Divine Names were derived from the womb, indicating God's 'feminine', tender, caring and loving qualities towards His creation. The keeping up of family and tribal ties, known in Qur'anic terms as 'joining the womb', is central to traditional Muslim social life. In a modern civic context, family ties need to be understood as extending to the entire human family.

### A Jewish perspective on the Muslim Text

In Text 1, *ayah* 1, what are the 'mutual (rights)' that humans demand through Allah?

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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