

Scriptural Reasoning 'Texts' and 'Traditions of Reading'

TEACHING

“TEACHING” - SCRIPTURES

Jewish Text 1

Deuteronomy (Devarim) 6: 1, 4-7

א וְזֹאת הַמִּצְוָה הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְכַמְּרֵנוּ לְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָתָּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.
ד שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד.
ה וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ בְּכָל-לֵבְבְךָ וּבְכָל-גִּפְנֶשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ.
ו וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְנֶךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לֵבְבְךָ.
ז וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבִנְיֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ.

Deuteronomy (Devarim) 6: 1, 4-7

¹ And this is the commandment, the statutes, and the laws that the Lord your God has commanded you, to teach you to do in the land into which you are about to cross to possess it. ... ⁴ Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. ⁵ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your being and with all your might. ⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be upon your heart, ⁷ and you shall repeat them to your sons and speak of them when you sit in your house and when you go on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.

Glosses

- v. 1: 'the commandment' - *hamitsvah*. In Judaism, the *mitsvah* is the 'smallest legal unit'—a single law, either positive ('do X') or negative ('don't do Y'). The traditional total number of *mitzvot* (plural form) is 613, though this number does not appear before the Talmud (c. 600 CE). Mediaeval commentators compiled lists of the 613 commandments, which differ slightly. Here, however, the word is used in the singular; it may function as a collective noun, signifying all the commandments.
- v. 1: 'statutes' - *chukim*. Hebrew is rich in synonyms for 'law'; this word could also be translated as 'rule' or 'precept'. Traditional commentators often define it as referring to commandments for which there is no apparent or rational reason, usually those associated with ritual.
- v. 1: 'laws' - *mishpatim*. Another member of the set of words meaning 'law', 'rule', 'precept', etc.
- vv. 4-7: These verses form part of the first paragraph of the Shema, a set of three paragraphs from the Torah that are recited every morning and

evening (based on the traditional interpretation of the words in v. 7: 'you shall repeat them ... when you lie down and when you rise up').

v. 7: 'and you shall repeat them to your sons' - *veshinantam levanekha*. This verse is traditionally understood to constitute the commandment for parents to teach Torah to their children. The verb here is usually understood to come from the root *sh-n-h*, 'to repeat', though some commentators would derive it from a root meaning 'sharp', in which case it would mean 'to teach incisively' or perhaps 'to incise upon' in this context.

צז מָה-אֶהְבֵּתִי תוֹרַתְךָ
כָּל-הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׁיחִתִּי.
צה מֵא יְבִי תַחֲכִמֵנִי מִצֹּרֹתֶיךָ
כִּי לְעוֹלָם הִיא-לִי.
צט מִכָּל-מְלַמְדֵי הַשִּׁפְלָתִי
כִּי יַעֲדוּ תִיךָ שִׁיחָה לִי.
ק מִזְקֵנִים אֶתְבוֹנֵן
כִּי פִקּוּדֵיךָ נִצְרָתִי.
קא מִכָּל-אֲרָח רָע פָּלֵאתִי רַגְלִי
לְמַעַן אֲשַׁמְרֶךָ דְּבָרְךָ.
קב מִמִּשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לֹא-סָרְתִי
כִּי-אַתָּה הוֹרַתָּנִי.
קג מָה-נִמְלָצוּ לְחַכֵּי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ
מִדְּבַשׁ לְפִי.

Psalms 119: 97-103

- ⁹⁷ O how I love Your Torah!
All day long it is my talk.
- ⁹⁸ Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.
- ⁹⁹ I have gained more insight than my teachers,
for my talk is of Your decrees.
- ¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the elders,
for I guard your precepts.
- ¹⁰¹ I have held back my feet from every evil path,
so that I may keep Your word.
- ¹⁰² I have not turned aside from Your laws,
for You have taught me.
- ¹⁰³ How pleasant is Your speech to my palate,
sweeter than honey to my mouth.

Glosses

- v. 97: 'your Torah' - *toratekha*. The word *torah* is derived from the root *h-r-h*, meaning 'teach', 'instruct'; this verse could also be translated: 'O how I love your teaching'.
- v. 98: 'it is always with me' - *le'olam hi-li*. The word 'it' (*hi*) is actually the feminine singular pronoun (Hebrew has no neuter gender), and seems to refer back to the word *torah* (a feminine singular noun) in verse 97, rather than to the feminine plural *mitsvot* ('commandments') in verse 98.
- v. 99: 'your decrees' - *edotekha*. Another synonym for God's 'teachings/laws'; it comes from a root meaning 'testimony', 'witness'.
- v. 100: 'Your precepts' - *fikudekha*. Yet another synonym for 'laws', from the root *p-k-d*, with connotations of 'visit', 'order', 'command', 'count'.

Jewish Text 3

Deuteronomy (Devarim) 31: 10-13

י וַיִּצְוֵנוּ מֹשֶׁה אֹתָם לֵאמֹר מִקֵּץ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים בְּמֵעַד שָׁנָה
הַשְּׁמִיטָה בְּחַג הַסִּכּוֹת.
יא בָּבוֹא כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל לִרְאוֹת אֶת-פְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר
יִבְחַר תִּקְרָא אֶת-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת נֹגֵד כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם.
יב הִקְהֵל אֶת-הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים וְהַטַּף וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ
לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלַמַּעַן יִלְמְדוּ וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְשָׁמְרוּ
לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת.
יג וּבְנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעוּ יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלַמַּדּוֹ לִירְאֵה אֶת-ה'
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם כָּל-הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם חַיִּים עַל-הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם
עֹבְרִים אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.

Deuteronomy (Devarim) 31: 10-13

⁹ And Moses wrote down this Torah and he gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bear the Ark of the Lord's Covenant, and to all the elders of Israel.

¹⁰ And Moses commanded them, saying, 'At the end of seven years, in the set season of the sabbatical year, at the Festival of Sukkot [Tabernacles], ¹¹ when all Israel comes to appear before the presence of the Lord your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Torah in the presence of all Israel, in their hearing. ¹² Assemble the people—the men and the women and the children and your stranger who is within your gates—so that they may hear and so that they may learn, and they will fear the Lord your God and will keep to do all the words of this Torah. ¹³ And their children, who have not known, will hear and will learn to fear the Lord your God all the days that you live on the soil to which you are about to cross the Jordan to take hold of it.'

Glosses

v. 10: 'at the end of seven years, in the set season of the sabbatical year'. The Torah commands that every seventh year be a year of 'release' (*shemita*), when debts are cancelled and the land is not worked (the latter only applying to the land of Israel). Since the majority of the population in Torah times were farmers, this meant that most people were free from their usual agricultural work in the seventh year. The *shemita* year is still observed (in varying ways) in Israel; the Jewish year that runs from September 2007 to September 2008 is a *shemita* year.

- v. 10: 'the Festival of Sukkot' - *chag hasukot*. This festival runs from 21 to 28 Tishrei, the Jewish month that roughly corresponds to September/October (it varies every year since the Jewish calendar is principally lunar). Jews are commanded to eat (and ideally, sleep) in temporary huts with roofs made of branches and leaves (unless it is pouring with rain!), and also to perform a waving ritual with a palm branch, a citron (*etrog*), two myrtle twigs and three willow twigs.
- v. 11: 'when all Israel comes to appear before the presence of the Lord your God in the place that He will choose'. When the Temple still stood, it was also a religious obligation for Jewish men to bring a sacrifice there on the festivals of Passover, Shavuot ('Weeks') and Sukkot.
- v. 12: 'Assemble the people' - *hakhel et-ha'am*. This assembly and public Torah reading is understood to be a positive commandment, known as 'Hakhel' after the first word of this verse. Traditionally the king read sections of Deuteronomy; in 1945 the ceremony was revived in Jerusalem, and has been held every seven years since, usually with the president of Israel performing the reading, though some Jews would regard this as a symbolic commemoration of the practice rather than 'the real thing'.

Christian Text

Acts 8: 26-39

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over and join this chariot.' ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' ³¹ And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, 'About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?' ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Glosses

v. 27: 'eunuch' – *eunouchos*. Deuteronomy had ruled out the admission of castrated men into the racial and religious community of Israel (23: 1), although there is a promise to faithful eunuchs in Isaiah 56: 3-5.

v. 27: 'worship' – from *proskuneo*, 'to go down on one's knees to', 'to do obeisance to'.

v. 35: 'told him the good news' – *euangelisato*, 'preached to him', from *euangelion*, the 'good news' or 'good tidings'.

Islamic Text 1

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-'Alaq ('The Clot', 96: 1-19)

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

- ¹ Recite! in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created—
- ² created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood:
- ³ recite! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful—
- ⁴ He Who taught (the use of) the pen—
- ⁵ taught man that which he knew not.
- ⁶ Day, but man doth transgress all bounds,
- ⁷ in that he looketh upon himself as self-sufficient.
- ⁸ Verily, to thy Lord is the return (of all).
- ⁹ Seest thou one who forbids
- ¹⁰ a votary when he (turns) to pray?
- ¹¹ Seest thou if he is on (the road of) guidance?
- ¹² or enjoins righteousness?
- ¹³ Seest thou if he denies (truth) and turns away?
- ¹⁴ Knoweth he not that Allah doth see?
- ¹⁵ Let him beware! If he desist not, We will drag him by the forelock,
- ¹⁶ a lying, sinful forelock!
- ¹⁷ Then, let him call (for help) to his council (of comrades):
- ¹⁸ We will call on the angels of punishment (to deal with him)!
- ¹⁹ Nay, heed him not: but bow down in adoration, and bring thyself the closer (to Allah)!

Islamic Text 2

[Qur'anic Arabic text to be added]

Surah al-Kahf ('The Cave', 18: 60-82)

⁶⁰ Behold, Moses said to his attendant, 'I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travel.'

⁶¹ But when they reached the junction, they forgot (about) their fish, which took its course through the sea (straight) as in a tunnel.

⁶² When they had passed on (some distance), Moses said to his attendant: 'Bring us our lunch; truly we have suffered much fatigue at this (stage of) our journey.'

⁶³ He replied: 'Did you see (what happened) when we took shelter at the rock? I did indeed forget (about) the fish: none but Satan made me forget to tell (you) about it: it took its course through the sea in a marvellous way!'

⁶⁴ Moses said: 'That was what we were seeking after'. So they went back on their footsteps, following (the path they had come).

⁶⁵ So they found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence.

⁶⁶ Moses said to him: 'May I follow you, on the basis that you teach me something of the (higher) truth which you have been taught?'

⁶⁷ (The other) said: 'Verily, you will not be able to have patience with me!'

⁶⁸ 'And how can you have patience about things about which your understanding is not complete?'

⁶⁹ Moses said: 'You will find me, if Allah so wills, (truly) patient: nor shall I disobey you in anything.'

⁷⁰ The other said: 'If then you would follow me, ask me no questions about anything until I myself speak to you concerning it.'

⁷¹ So they both proceeded: until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it. Said Moses: 'Have you scuttled it in order to drown those in it? Truly a strange thing have you done!'

⁷² He answered: 'Did I not tell you that you can have no patience with me?'

⁷³ Moses said: 'Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising difficulties in my case.'

⁷⁴ Then they proceeded: until, when they met a young man, he killed him. Moses said: 'Have you killed an innocent person who had killed no-one? Truly a foul (unheard of) thing have you done!'

⁷⁵ He answered: 'Did I not tell you that you can have no patience with me?'

⁷⁶ (Moses) said: 'If ever I ask you about anything after this, keep me not in your company: then you would have received (full) excuse from my side.'

⁷⁷ Then they proceeded: until, when they came to the inhabitants of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused them hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of falling down, but he set it up straight. (Moses) said: 'If you had wished, surely you could have taken some payment for it!'

⁷⁸ He answered: 'This is the parting between me and you: now will I tell you the interpretation of (those things) over which you were utterly unable to hold patience.'

⁷⁹ 'As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in poverty: they worked on the water: I only wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force.'

⁸⁰ 'As for the youth, his parents were people of faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to God and man).

⁸¹ 'So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection.

⁸² 'As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the town; there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled: their father had been a righteous man: so your Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure—a mercy (and favour) from your Lord. I did not do it of my own accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which you were unable to hold patience.'

“TEACHING & LEARNING” – TRADITIONS OF READING

JEWISH TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The first and third texts come from the first and most important part of the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible—the Torah (‘Teaching’). Consisting of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the Torah is traditionally believed to have been given by God to Moses (c. 1250 BCE).

Both these texts come from the fifth book of the Torah, Deuteronomy (Devarim), which is essentially composed of three very long speeches given by Moses to the people, assembled in the plains of Moab (modern Jordan) before they cross into the land of Israel. Moses exhorts the people to remain faithful to the covenant that God made with them at Mount Sinai, reminds them of their failures and mistakes up to this point, and goes over most of the laws given to them by God, before the book ends with an account of his death. The first text is addressed to individuals—the word ‘you’ is in the singular form—while most of the other text from Deuteronomy is addressed to the entire people—the word ‘you’ is in the plural form.

The second text comes from the third section of the Jewish Bible (Tanakh): *Ketuvim* (‘Writings’: consisting of the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles), which date from different periods, from the time of King David (c. 1000 BCE) to about the second century BCE.

The text comes from the book of Psalms (Tehilim), which the Babylonian Talmud (c. 600 CE) attributes to ten authors. Psalm 119, however, is one of the 49 ‘orphan’ or anonymous psalms, which have no indication of who wrote them. It is the longest psalm, with 176 verses; it is also an acrostic psalm, with 22 sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The verses presented here come from the section beginning with the letter *mem* (equivalent to the English ‘m’); like most of the rest of this psalm, they focus on the speaker’s love for God’s teachings.

Points to Consider

- Who is learning and who is teaching in each of these texts?
- What is the point of this learning/teaching activity?
- What is being learnt and taught? Is it the same in each text?

The Text in Tradition and Today

Learning and teaching Torah has become so central in Judaism that it is difficult to imagine the religion without it. Torah study is both an individual obligation, carried on within the family, where each generation starts as learners and ends up as teachers (see Text 1), and a communal enterprise, an essential part of the community's identity and relationship with God. It is notable that when the Bible records occasions on which the Jewish people renew their covenant with God, there is always mention of a public reading of the Torah or of sections from it—in the time of Joshua (c. 1200 BCE; see Joshua 24: 25-27), of King Josiah (c. 640 BCE; see 2 Kings 23: 1-3), and of Nehemiah (c. 450 BCE; see Nehemiah 8: 1-12), with the emphasis upon the people learning God's word. Sometimes the Levites or others are mentioned as translating, explaining, and teaching the book to the people.

Rabbinic tradition picked up and developed this emphasis on learning and teaching Torah, conceived in its widest sense as God's word, whether manifested in the Tanakh (Bible) or in later Jewish works. In Jewish eyes, Torah covers everything—'Turn it, and turn it again, for everything is in it; and contemplate it, and grow old and grey in it, and do not stir from it, for there is nothing better than this', says the Mishnah (c. 200 CE)—and no facet of human behaviour or action is ignored in Torah study, from agriculture to ethics, and from mourning to cloning.

Torah is spoken of in poetic and passionate terms, as a treasure, as conferring life in this world and the world to come, as the way to encounter God, as one of the three pillars that support the world (the others being the Temple sacrifices and deeds of kindness). In traditional Jewish society, the teacher—the sage or learned rabbi—was (and still is) universally respected and honoured; it is no accident that Moses' traditional title is 'Moshe Rabbenu', Moses our Teacher. Jewish literature abounds with stories of the rabbis and their disciples, some of whom even followed their teachers into the privy or hid under their beds to study their behaviour, asserting that 'It is a matter of Torah and I need to learn.' Torah study is central to life—is, indeed the whole point of life: 'If you have learned much Torah, do not claim merit for yourself, because for this purpose you were created', said Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai in the first century CE.

This thirst for study has characterized Jewish communities all over the world and throughout the ages. And this study is very much a shared practice—nobody really learns on their own. Fierce argument, lively discussion, and daring innovation are all part of the process. If people have no access to great teachers, they study with the great scholars of the past, whose commentaries are printed together on the same page in classic editions of the Torah and Talmud, clustering around the text under discussion and giving the effect of a very lively chat room. Or Jews learn from each other—as the modern teacher and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72) recalled from a visit to the synagogue of the Jewish cab drivers in Warsaw: 'It was then I found out ... that all the professions, the bakers, the butchers, the shoemakers, etc. have their own [small synagogue] ... and every free moment which can be taken off

from their work is given to the study of the Torah. And when they get together in intimate groups, one urges the other [in Yiddish]: '*Zog mir a shtikl toireh!* - Tell me a little Torah!'

In times of adversity in particular, Jews have turned to Torah study as a comfort and a refuge. In 1944 the 15-year-old David Weiss Halivni (now a leading scholar) was in a Nazi labour camp when he noticed that a guard was eating a sandwich wrapped in a page of the *Shulchan Arukh*, the great 16th-century law code. He begged the scrap from the guard and took it back to the camp: '[It] became a visible symbol of a connection between the camp and the activities of Jews throughout history. It was not important what the topic was ... [It] became a rallying point. We looked forward to studying it whenever we had free time ... Most of those who came to listen didn't understand the subject matter, but that was irrelevant. They all perceived [its] symbolic significance.'

The present Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, has noted: 'We are a people only because of the book. It is our constitution as a holy nation under the sovereignty of God. It is God's love letter to the children of Israel. We study it incessantly. We read it in the synagogue each week, completing it in a year. During the long centuries of Jewish exile, it was our ancestors' memory of the past and hope for the future. It was, said the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, the "portable homeland" of the Jew.'

For Jews, learning and teaching are a way of life, rather than optional activities. Ultimately the reason must be that God is encountered most fully in the Torah, in an ongoing revelation that speaks both to the individual and to the community. As another great modern scholar, Louis Finkelstein (1895-1992) noted, 'In prayer I speak to God, but in study God speaks to me.'

A Christian perspective on the Jewish Text

There are different images for teaching and learning swirling excitingly around here: it can be like eating honey, or having something cut into you (maybe!), or having something read to you which you hear and learn from. In Jewish tradition, this teaching and learning more typically happen in the 'very lively chat room' of Torah study. How come the biblical texts don't suggest this toing and froing, this vigorous argument and discussion, which have come to be such a feature of later Jewish text study? They seem to imply a more passive reception of Torah.

The Deuteronomy text seems to look forward—it gives the teaching in advance so that it may then be used in the land up ahead. The Psalm seems to look backward—reflecting on how good it has been to love and follow the divine instruction. This makes me wonder about when (if ever) teaching can really happen in advance—prior to experience. Do our lessons only ever make sense fully after we have tested them out in practice?

In Deuteronomy 13: 12, what does the phrase 'keep to do' mean?

CHRISTIAN TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The Book of Acts is a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke, taking the story on further from Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world, to Rome, the centre of the Gentile world. Framed in this way, it shows some of the key stages in the development of the Church as a missionary movement, narrating how it came to incorporate a Gentile membership as well as a Jewish one. The early chapters of the Book of Acts, as well as showing us the conversion of Saul and his commissioning (as Paul) to be an apostle, also show other early missionary encounters, like the one here. It is the encounter of the evangelist Philip (one of seven new leaders given authority by the Jerusalem Church in chapter 6 of Acts) with an Ethiopian dignitary who had been visiting Jerusalem and was on his way home. The eunuch is perhaps the first Gentile Christian—certainly he is the first Gentile whose conversion is explicitly narrated in the New Testament. His journey outwards from Jerusalem echoes the centrifugal movement of the Book of Acts as a whole, and his African destination signals that the gospel, having already spread northwards to Samaria, is truly on its way to ‘the ends of the earth’.

The scriptural text that the eunuch is reading is Isaiah 53: 7b-8c, and is from the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ that appear towards the end of that prophetic book.

Points to Consider

- What is taught and what is learnt in this episode?
- What do we learn here about how the Christian Scriptures (maybe others too) are themselves meditations on Scripture?
- How is the reading of Scripture we see in this passage related to the fostering of personal relationships?

The Text in Tradition and Today

What wisdom do our Scriptures hold about teaching and learning, their purpose and their practice? Here we have a narrative text, a *story* about teaching and learning.

It begins with someone struggling to understand Scripture, struggling to learn from it. It is interesting to note here how the difficulty of reading scriptural texts is therefore acknowledged *in* the Scriptures. It can be a laborious business; it can present real challenges. (And if this is true when we read our own Scriptures, how much more must it be true when we read those of other religious traditions?)

We see here that the full significance of scriptural texts does not simply lie on their surface, ready to be picked up and put to work by any passing reader. The texts arrest us; pull us up short. But might the difficulty of the texts be re-envisioned as their generosity? The eunuch sits alone in his carriage, arrested

by the text of Isaiah—arrested both in the sense that he is transfixed and fascinated by it, but also in the sense that he is *stuck*. There is something poignant about this solitary predicament. It gives the lie to the idea that the meaning of religious texts is easily available to any uninstructed individual reader. Philip, meanwhile, represents a tradition and a community of interpretation: the early Christian apostolic community. He offers this to the eunuch. The text opens up to the eunuch when he is given a framework and reference points to help him read it (though heavily Christian ones, which would not fit easily with a Jewish interpretation of Isaiah). Above all, perhaps, the text opens up to the eunuch when he is given fellowship. Maybe one of the most significant events in this little story is the moment when Philip climbs into the carriage *alongside* the eunuch, and they begin to read *together*. So the difficulty of the text becomes the occasion for conversation, deeper engagement with text and each other, and the generation of a ‘community’ of reading. This is what might make the difficulty of the text really the generosity of the text—the eunuch doesn’t simply find an answer in some intellectual sense; he enters into a new kind of relationship and (in his baptism) is given a new kind of practice.

There is mutual hospitality here too—another thing made possible by the difficulty of the text. The eunuch invites Philip into his space (the chariot); Philip invites the eunuch into his—a more metaphorical space: the space of his community of reading.

We must acknowledge that this New Testament text about the reading of texts is not without its own difficulties, and they are difficulties that come to the fore when it is read in the company of Jews and Muslims. It would be dishonest to disguise the fact that the story is told in the service of a distinctively Christian proclamation of the risen Christ—and a conviction that what Christians call the Old Testament everywhere speaks about him. But is there any point in inter-faith conversations if in the name of some superficial idea of convergence they pretend that significant differences of belief do not exist? Nonetheless, the difficulties this text throws up when it is read in the company of Jews and Muslims can perhaps themselves become generous difficulties—difficulties that provoke a new quality of conversation, discussion, debate, patience, hospitality, and fellowship between the faiths. They can perhaps generate a community of teaching and learning in which there is a mutual making room for the other—a budging up in the chariot to let the other sit alongside. These—like so many other scriptural texts—may tell us that this teaching and learning is not just an activity intended to generate the solutions to intellectual problems—mere knowledge or information—but a truth found in relationship, and a truth that transforms us.

ISLAMIC TEXTS

Introduction and Context

The first five *ayat* (verses) of *Surah al-‘Alaq* (‘The Clot’) made up the first revelation that the Prophet Muhammad received directly from the Archangel

Gabriel, while he was engaged in his regular pre-Islamic practice of meditation in the Cave of Hira at the top of the Mountain of Light a few miles outside Mecca.

It is these five *ayat* that are relevant to the theme, although the rest of the *surah* (chapter) is provided for context, and to give an idea of the flow of short *surahs*.

Surah al-Kahf ('The Cave') is traditionally recited on Fridays; memorising and reciting it was said by the Prophet to protect one from the inevitable tests of faith brought by the Antichrist. The story of Moses and the unnamed saint (named in *hadith* as Khidr or Khadir) is the third of four major stories in the *surah*. (Both these versions of his name mean 'green'. In one authentic *hadith*, Khidr is said to have acquired the name after he sat on a barren piece of land which immediately turned green with foliage due to the life-giving blessings of his person.) The other three stories are: the (seven) sleepers in the cave (which is also found in Christian sources), the two farmers with their orchards, and the 'two-horned one', a just king who undertakes three epic journeys and is variously understood to be King Cyrus of Persia or Alexander the Great, among other explanations.

In a Scriptural Reasoning session, it might be more practical for someone to tell the story of Moses and Khidr in paraphrase, rather than reading the lengthy passage, although the latter is of course a rewarding experience. Time constraints and the nature of the audience will probably help to decide which way to proceed.

Points to Consider

- What is the impact of the teaching that God taught mankind via the pen?
- What is the impact of the teaching that God taught mankind everything?
- What kind of a person is Khidr?
- What lessons do we learn from the three incidents involving Khidr and Moses?
- What is the nature of the knowledge possessed by Moses and Khidr?
- What is the nature of the teaching and learning taking place here?

The Text in Tradition and Today

'The Clot', *ayah* 4: God taught us through the use of the pen, which gives its name to another *surah* (no. 68) that begins: '*Nun*—By the pen, and what they write!' Writing has helped us as human beings to preserve the knowledge and collective memory of different cultures and civilisations from antiquity until the present.

A modern interpretation of 'The Pen' would include the printing press, the keyboard and magnetic or laser-based memory-writing devices, the

ubiquitous technology that has transformed our world and needs to be embraced as a gift from God to be used for goodness and not evil.

'The Clot', *ayah* 5: All human knowledge ultimately comes from God, who is the source of all knowledge. In particular, God-given knowledge reaches us through both nature and nurture, both revelation and reason, both tradition and logic, both theology and philosophy. This assertion is controversial, of course, but seems to me to be the only tenable one. One way of expressing the mystic goal, that is the inner goal behind all major world religions, is that knower, knowledge and known become (and are) One. The apparent clash between different forms of knowledge explains much, perhaps all, of human controversies, conflicts that can only ultimately be resolved by a true intellectual and experiential contact with unity.

'The Cave', *ayat* 65-66: Khidr was taught by God directly from His own Presence, hence the interpretation of the truth that Moses wished to learn from him as higher truth. But Moses is one of the five great Messengers of the Qur'an who do not include Khidr, so this may seem problematic. The general Sunni view here is that Khidr is also a prophet of God, and that both Moses and Khidr have knowledge from God that the other does not possess. Khidr tells Moses about the diversity of their knowledge in an authentic *hadith* transmitted in this regard; in that account, a bird lands on the edge of their boat and dips its beak in the water, upon which Khidr remarks to Moses that 'my knowledge and your knowledge compared to God's knowledge is like the water taken by this bird out of the ocean'. An extreme, heretical Sufi view is that Khidr is a saint but not a prophet, and that this story illustrates that a mystic who understands higher truths is allowed to violate prophetic law, just as Khidr violates Mosaic law.

Another Sufi view is that Khidr is still alive, much like Elias or Ilyas. The perpetual life of Khidr and/or Ilyas is controversial, and rejected outright by many Sunnis on the basis that neither of them came to meet and supported the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and it would have been their duty to do so had they been alive at his time. But to this day, many Sufi teachers claim to meet Khidr in a dream or waking state; there is a contemporary Sufi leader from Pakistan, who has centres and thousands of followers in the UK, Europe and America, who once claimed that he met Khidr on the banks of the river Chenab near Lahore (where his headquarters are based), just as Moses met Khidr on the banks of another river or sea thousands of years ago! (I have heard an audio tape of the public discourse where this claim is made.)

'The Cave', *ayat* 67-68: The latter verse is the Qur'anic basis for the common Arabic proverb, 'Whoever is ignorant of something, opposes it,' or as we might say in English, 'Ignorance breeds opposition.'

Note the key form of teaching and learning here, i.e. by journeying to seek knowledge, accompanying the teacher and by waiting for the teacher to speak rather than asking too many questions. According to the same *hadith* quoted earlier, the background to this story is that one of the Israelites asked Moses,

'Is there anyone on this earth more knowledgeable than you?' Moses replied, 'No.' God then inspired Moses to undertake this journey in order to increase his knowledge. The teacher-disciple journey is common to all religious traditions, and is in serious danger of collapse in the modern world with the increase of internet-based 'virtual learning environments', websites etc., to the extent that we now even have purely virtual classrooms and universities! A key point that many caught in this technology-driven bandwagon forget is that no virtual environment can even approach the transmission of outer and inner knowledge that occurs with respectful and reverential companionship.

'The Cave', *ayat* 71-82: Apart from the interesting moral lessons and justifications given by Khidr for his three apparently outrageous actions, there is a subtle choice of words that are related by theologians to the problem of free will and divine predestination. In explaining the three incidents, Khidr refers to his own will, 'our will' (Khidr and God), and God's will respectively. This may refer to the stages via which human understanding develops through spiritual progress to begin to comprehend predestination, 'God's mysterious secret in His Creation', according to Islamic tradition.

In his *Bezels of Wisdom*,¹ a deep spiritual commentary on the stories of the prophets in the Qur'an, Ibn Arabi quotes from earlier Sufi masters that the three incidents reflected earlier ones in Moses' own life, and hence provided another way for him to reflect and learn. The vulnerable boat was a reminder of the basket that carried Moses as a baby in the river; Moses' protestation at the young man's killing reminded him of his own accidental killing of an Egyptian; Khidr's generous repairing of the wall without reward echoed Moses' own selfless effort in drawing water for the young maidens of Midian. The Prophet Muhammad remarked about this story, 'May God have mercy on Moses. Had he shown more patience with Khidr, God would have taught us more through their story!' Ibn Arabi quotes a Sufi who said that had Moses persevered, there were a thousand incidents from his own life that would have been reflected in his encounter with Khidr. The idea is that this is an aspect of reality that every one of us experiences.

The final point worth stating is that Moses meets Khidr is akin to Wahhabi meets Sufi: rather than the polarised hatred that is the usual case in contemporary Muslim discourse, there should be a mutual process of journey and discovery. Moses initially attacks what he does not understand, but accepts the truth with humility once it is patiently explained to him. Note that Moses remains the leader and lawgiver, while Khidr remains the individual wandering mystic!

¹ The famous (or notorious) *Fusus al-Hikam*. The best English translation I have seen of this difficult text is by Ralph J. Austin.

A Christian perspective on the Muslim Text

In 'The Cave', Moses really wants to be an interrupter! He wants to object, ask questions, and wrestle with his teacher—and so he pushes towards a more interactive kind of learning process. His teacher seems to ask him for to learn in obedient silence and trust—more like 'learning by rote', maybe? Or, in the image from 'The Clot' (96: 15), more like being *led* by the forelock, as a strong-willed animal is. I have to say I admire Moses's passionate outbursts, especially in the face of the killing of the young man, and I find it hard to be satisfied by the eventual explanation that this young man was bad (and, from his parents' point of view replaceable).

Could it all be an elaborate test for Moses? Could it be that his persistent refusal to take everything on trust is actually part of his learning process, and that he is in the end doing the *right* thing by coming back at his teacher? After all, he is one of the great prophets of the Qur'an. When his teacher parts company from him at the end of the narrative, could it be that he is saying that Moses has now 'graduated', and can go on without a teacher, because he has shown a suitably persistent and enquiring attitude (in the same way as, in the New Testament text from Acts, Philip and the eunuch go their separate ways when the eunuch has received the instruction he needs)?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Copyright

Jewish Commentary: *Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, London School of Jewish Studies © 2008*

Christian Commentary: *Prof. Ben Quash, Kings College London © 2008*

Muslim Commentary: *Dr Usama Hasan, The Islamic Foundation UK © 2008*

www.scripturalreasoning.org