

The Tent of Meeting and the Scaffolding of Wisdom

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*'And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.'*¹

[Chapter written for the forthcoming book *The Tent of Meeting* edited by David F. Ford, Daniel W. Hardy and Peter Ochs]

Introduction

Jacob's ladder is a sort of scaffolding. But scaffolding takes many forms and serves many purposes, and this ladder seems the strangest of all kinds of scaffolding, because by means of it God appears – whether standing in his transcendence at the top of it, as source of the descent and goal of the ascent; or standing with Jacob at the foot of it, identifying with him in his earthly position (the text suggests both these first two possibilities²); or with the angels who are *on* this scaffolding, in the unfolding movement of communication between things heavenly and things earthly. Christians may find themselves wondering whether God is present in this event in all three ways.

In this response to the 'Tent of Meeting' essay and its scriptural texts, I want to play with this idea of scaffolding in the service of an appreciation of what Scriptural Reasoning does. In a way that is itself typical of Scriptural Reasoning, this will involve paying closely-related attention to more than one thing. First, it will involve paying attention to *scriptural texts themselves*, both in their plain sense meanings and in the possibilities they open up for other seemingly latent meanings to emerge - perhaps through their being subject to 'deep' reading by individuals and communities, perhaps through their encounter with new situations over time that affect what they are able to 'say'. Such encounters often extend rather than reduce a scriptural text's capacity to speak, even when its author could not have envisaged the future circumstances that would have such effects on it (and cause it to effect so much). Second, in developing its ideas this essay will pay attention to *commentary* on scriptural texts (the way interpretation of these texts has developed through traditions

¹ Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 'Prologue', ll. 17-18.

² עָלָיו is translated both 'above it' and 'beside him'.

and over time), including in this context the way the New Testament comments on Israel's biblical texts, following many of the patterns in the way those texts comment on and rework each other. And third, this essay will pay attention to aspects of *the humanly-inhabited world*, particularly that world's present strengths and weaknesses. This is the world in which the reading of scriptural texts takes place and to which such reading ought properly to refer itself if it is true to Scripture's own injunctions and invitations. There is, you might say, room for ethnography in Scriptural Reasoning: SR describes the world in and as it describes the text, and finds each a stimulus and an aid to the other.

This response has begun, then, with a scriptural text itself: Genesis 28. As it progresses, it will also pay attention to the commentary on this text represented by the 'Tent of Meeting' essay; and later on it will look at New Testament commentary as well, in the early part of John's Gospel (itself, for Christians, a scriptural text). Towards the end, it will pay attention to a specific feature of a specific university setting, a Cambridge college, to see what part Scripture plays there, and what analogies that might have with the project of 'repair' that Scriptural Reasoning undertakes by its construction of a tent of meeting - a tent where sacred texts are read reverently and in the company of other worshipping scholars/scholarly worshippers.

Varieties of Scaffolding

Any medieval cathedral would have sported a good deal of scaffolding at any particular time in its life. In practical terms, this was because cathedrals took a long time to build – and the many variations in architectural style of a particular cathedral reflect the fact of its growth through different epochs, shaped by different minds and hands. But the scaffolding-clad character of these Christian buildings also represented something almost principled. They were not to be allowed to be so immodest as to claim adequacy or completion. Even if they could have been conceived in their totality as single diagrammatic schemes (the work of a single controlling mind) which were then transferred from paper to stone and mortar, they were not allowed by history and by the communities that sponsored them to be so. Even as they ascended vertically towards the heavens in pinnacles, towers and spires, they witnessed to a horizontal trajectory – a slow, laborious and revisable exploration

in time of what it means to know, relate to and glorify God in the things of the world. It was always more likely to be imperial architecture (right through to the modern period) that would tend to be more relentlessly ‘monological’; more concerned to deny its provisionality and to express single unified concepts in its forms.

Scaffolding is also (as I have argued elsewhere) a feature of other human explorations of meaning and value. The ‘scaffold’ of the Elizabethan stage was set up so that characters and their actions could be judged against the experiences, the convictions and the hopes of the social world that came to watch them there. This is still true of the theatre. Horizons of meaning are described, and then tested. Are they friendly to human endeavours? Are they adequate to human aspirations? Do they permit flourishing, or instead render the struggles of the figures who act within their compass merely absurd? Normally, theatrical scaffolding is also temporary, and therefore a better witness to the temporality of drama’s explorations of meaning. Such scaffolding, like that of the cathedrals, witnesses to the unfinalisable task of embodying the truth; it is a physical reminder of the fact that there is no definitive production of any play, and that new situations will require new interpretations, new performers.

A last example: scaffolding is a good metaphor (and sometimes a literal necessity) for the staging of scientific experiments. ‘Laboratory conditions’ are a sort of paradigm of modern scientific method. For many scientists they represent an ideal: the empirical testing of objects in a controlled environment. But the scaffolding generated for this purpose, properly interpreted, is invested with human intentionality, and therefore with desires, ambitions, presumptions. The rationale may be expressed as disinterested enquiry, the search for ‘truth for its own sake’. But this is actually *interested* enquiry. How else could we explain the doing of this experiment rather than another? How else can we explain the enthusiasm (and funding) for certain areas of science at certain times as compared with others? In truth, the scaffolding of the scientist is a social product just as much as the scaffolding of the playwright, and this makes it highly time- and context-specific.

All this being granted, let us return to Jacob and to our first question: what peculiar sort of scaffolding is this dream-ladder³ by which the divine appears? It is a question deeply relevant to a consideration of the ‘tent of meeting’, with its hope that God’s light can shine in a new sort of provisional and mobile construction, and its intuition that what many modern institutions and practices need for their healing is an abandonment of their claims to timeless adequacy, and a recovery of a more explicit relation to questions of the human good (which is a good necessarily implicated in the good of the social and natural order) and to questions of historical development (the specific shaping stories that constitute human memories, describe their present possibilities, and generate their ultimate hopes). To put it in a more summary way (following David Ford), what many modern institutions and practices need is *wisdom*. The kinds of scaffolding I have been discussing so far are embodiments of the quest for wisdom – precarious, context-specific and open to revision. The ‘tent of meeting’ is a structure with the same qualities.

What Jacob’s ladder has in common with these other types of scaffolding, is that it is both ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ at once. It reaches between earth and heaven only because it is the product of a past and the promise of a future. In its horizontal dimension (as a construction in time) it has its ‘foot’ in a decidedly unprepossessing past: *the past of Jacob*. Jacob would not be where he is, in the middle of a wilderness, in the middle of the night, with his head on a stone, if he had not been the betrayer of his brother, the thief of entitlements not his, and the deceiver of his father. He is on the run. This morally ambiguous experience is a point from which certain actions, testings, experimentations, will follow. At the ‘head’ of the ladder is a promise of astonishing dimensions: *the future of Israel*. This is not yet here; this is yet to come. Indeed, until the eschaton, it may remain permanently under construction. Just in the terms of Jacob’s life, the approach towards this future will involve a lot more mistakes, re-evaluations, concessions, wrestlings, ruptures and reconciliations – all this before Jacob even receives the new name that goes with the promise. But there is the giving of that name, and a growth in wisdom which opens new possibilities in time for those who subsequently inhabit the story.

³ As Diana Lipton re-emphasizes in *Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), despite the popular interpretation of what Jacob sees as being a conventional ladder, there is a strong case for understanding it to be something more architectural in character: a ziggurat, for instance (see pp. 63 ff.).

In sum, this ‘laddering’ or ‘scaffolding’ forward through time connects past and future, memory and hope, just as much as the dream-ladder it gives rise to connects earth and heaven, and this means that the story in Genesis has succeeded in displaying a third sort of connection, the connection between history and the God-relation. History is connected with the divine light’s appearing – it is even the vehicle of it. It is not that the scaffolding we cobble together in time on the basis of our experiences and practices and ideas is in itself able to *compel* the divine light’s appearing. This is the crucial feature of the scaffolding of Jacob’s dream-ladder: it is not just thrown up from earth – fragile, requiring that we tread upon it carefully, and maybe going nowhere – it is simultaneously suspended from heaven. It is met by a free divine descent. But if this is true of Jacob’s ladder, then perhaps it can be true of other of our forms of scaffolding, by God’s free grace. Perhaps it has in the past been true of our labours of religious, artistic, scientific construction, and perhaps it can be true again despite the impurity of our starting-points as builders (which is another way of saying, the ‘embroiled’ character of our creaturely history – our sin). For God does not come to us otherwise than as creatures who are temporal, social, rational and finite. To put this another way, he always uses scaffolding, though not all scaffolding is graced in this way just because someone put it up. Some kinds of scaffolding are better than others for their assigned task. The ‘tent’ offers itself as a better form of scaffolding than some others – one of ‘religious study, academic inquiry, and community-formation’. And the people who have ‘dreamed it up’ pray that the gracious gift of God’s light will be manifest by means of it.

Christ as Ladder

In the opening chapter of John’s Gospel, almost as a prelude to chapter two’s discussion of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Temple which is Christ’s Body, there is a christological interpretation of Genesis 28.⁴ Christ’s light is beginning to be manifest to his first followers: it is the beginning of the disclosure of God’s glory in him. For his first disciples (Andrew and through him Peter; Philip and through him Nathanael) a new kind of vision is opening up, as a new kind of vision opened up for

⁴ I am grateful to Diana Lipton for directing me towards some of the more subtle links with the Genesis text.

Jacob in the desert:

⁴⁰ One of the two which heard John [the Baptist] speak, and followed [Jesus], was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

⁴¹ He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ.

⁴² And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.

⁴³ The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me.

⁴⁴ Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

⁴⁵ Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

⁴⁶ And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see.

⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!

⁴⁸ Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.

⁴⁹ Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.

⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.

⁵¹ And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

(John 1)

There is of course more 'scriptural reasoning' going on in this passage than simply an interpretation of Genesis 28. To take just one other example: as Diana Lipton has pointed out, John's text picks up Zechariah's references to the eschatological meeting of each person with his neighbour under the vine and the fig tree.⁵ Nathanael is under his fig tree when Jesus mysteriously 'sees' him. This can be read as a sign of eschatological fulfillment, a fulfillment concentrated in Jesus' very person.

But it is with Genesis 28 that the chapter comes to a climax. In the title by which Jesus so often designates himself in John's Gospel ('Son of Man'), he claims that he himself is a new ladder on whom the angels will ascend and descend. In him, there is

⁵ 'In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, shall ye call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree.' (Zechariah 3:10). Again, I owe this insight to conversation with Diana Lipton; indeed, she argues that Zechariah 3 itself alludes to Genesis 28, which would make the intra-scriptural 'reasoning' here even more dense and interesting.

a link, a wonderful exchange, between earth and heaven. He is not Jacob dreaming the ladder (Jacob's place is occupied by the new visionaries, and in particular that otherwise rather obscure disciple Nathanael). Rather, he is the ladder itself. What can this mean? In my terms, it suggests that Christ's person is a sort of scaffolding. The legibility of God is demonstrated in a complex, 'embroiled' unfolding of events – and this despite the unprepossessing place of Jesus' origins ('can anything good come out of Nazareth?'); Jacob, we recall, also found the ladder in an apparently unprepossessing place⁶). This is at the heart of the theology of the Incarnation for Christians. Christ adopts, enters into and accompanies time, space and matter – as well as language, a human family, his specifically Jewish religious tradition, and a complex political situation in an occupied country - and all of these are used for the exposition of God's life and God's ways. Christ is scaffolding in which heaven comes to earth respecting creaturely temporality, social life, reason and finitude,⁷ and earth thereby discovers what it is to be related to heaven.

In sharing these features, Christ has much in common with the sorts of scaffolding that I outlined in the previous section. But given that all those kinds of scaffolding represent quests for wisdom, to call Christ Jacob's ladder is really to say that Christ in his person is like a framework for the disclosure of wisdom. And, of course, wisdom is a New Testament name for Christ. For Christians, Christ is not just any scaffolding; like Jacob's ladder (and unlike some ladders) he is scaffolding graced in such a way that the divine light appears there ('in Him was light, and the light was the life of men' (John 1:4)). He is scaffolding for the disclosure of a particular kind of truth, the deepest truth (which is a truth of salvation, not just of scholarship). As wisdom, part of the saving truth he discloses is the proper relationship between knowledge and the fear and love of God, which entails love of others too. By shaping the scaffolding of his own historical person, his own life lived through from beginning

⁶ Although in another way a highly significant one, Bethel having been a major Canaanite sanctuary.

⁷ As the one whose life is directed towards what John calls his 'hour' (John 2:4, 5:25, 7:30, 8:20, 12:23-27, 13:1, 17:1), Jesus is time's companion and inhabitant. He is not the insertion into time of something simply *timeless* (heaven comes to earth respecting creaturely temporality). As the one who calls his disciples 'friends' (John 15:14-15), and who makes a community in which to dwell, Jesus's way of being in the world is depicted by John as utterly relational (heaven comes to earth respecting sociality). As the 'Word', the *Logos* (John 1:1ff.), Jesus is claimed to be reason's truest ground, not its contradiction (heaven comes to earth respecting rationality). And as one who sleeps (Luke 8:23), weeps (John 11:35), thirsts (John 19:28), and dies, Jesus's eternal life is interpreted as not straightforwardly antithetical to the bounded terms of human life (heaven comes to earth respecting finitude).

to end, to convey this deepest truth, Jesus relativises the virtues both of ahistorical reasonings and (their close relatives) of reasonings not orientated to relationship with God and with others. The truth that he is, as *Logos*, is a truth that is a time-taking being-with the world *in love*.

There is a curious additional aspect to John 1's relationship to Genesis 28. In Genesis 28, as a prelude to his sleep and his vision, Jacob takes a stone for a pillow. It might be coincidence, it might not, but before the revelation of the ladder in verse 51 of John's Gospel there is also the setting up of a stone. We hear of it in verse 42: 'And he brought [Simon] to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.'

In Genesis, the stone is associated very closely with the ladder – it becomes holy by association with the ladder. Jacob anoints the stone,⁸ and it is thenceforth the marker of a holy place – a place to which Jacob himself returns,⁹ and which Israel will continue to revere. In John, as we have seen, Peter is 'set up' as the stone on which, it is promised, the *Church* (Christ's Body) will be established – the scaffolding of Christ's continuing presence in the world after his ascension.¹⁰ By association with Christ the ladder, this stone will be holy too, as the stone at Bethel was by association with *its* ladder. It hardly needs to be said that like the foot of Jacob's ladder (both in its vertical and in its horizontal aspects) this basis is an unprepossessing one. Peter will fail often, and betray his new name and the promise attached to it. But, as we learn from Genesis, imperfect beginnings need not prevent God's approach.

Peter stands for the incorporation of human activity into the disclosure of divine wisdom. He is allowed to contribute – room is made for him to do so. He may also remind Christians, through the way John 1 thinks out of Genesis 28, that this 'room to contribute' was also a feature of Jacob's initial, quite simple action of placing the stone as a pillow. That action became part of the 'construction' of the ladder.

But the schematism developed in the 'Tent of Meeting' helps us to see that, whatever

⁸ Genesis 28:18.

⁹ Cf. Genesis 35.

¹⁰ Matthew 16:18.

came afterwards, Jacob's action in itself was not the building of a Temple, and Peter is not the monolithic cornerstone of a timeless edifice. Jacob's action was something more modest than Temple-construction – this is so even though some traditions evoke associations between his setting up of the stone and the building of the future Temple.¹¹ The same holds for Peter. His identification (as stone) with the ladder whose weight he bears as an apostle of Christ – though it involves a genuine contribution on his part – need not lead to an idealisation of his function. His rock-like role need not be used as the excuse for the dismissal of the idea of church-as-scaffolding. He is one among many collaborators. In the Gospel accounts he is often as much a hindrance as a help to Jesus's work. He himself is constantly required to revise his judgements in the light of new experiences and conversations. It makes sense, in Gospel terms, to think of Peter in relation to a scaffolding-clad construction site, not a pristine architectonic idea.

A fully-fledged Temple scheme risks obscuring the fact that the constructions of humans have the provisionality of scaffolding – and they cannot *demand* the divine light's appearing. A fully-fledged Temple scheme might not honour the fact that the truth of God takes up its abode ('tents' itself¹²), in unprepossessing places and in the movement of time. God's truth is a truth that is a being-with the world in love. It might, therefore, be harder to see than a Temple, and it might be rather flimsier. It is interesting how John's Gospel shows itself far more concerned with ladders and suffering bodies than with great stones in the movement through chapters one and two of his Gospel.¹³ Christians have not always learnt this wisdom very well.

We turn now to another kind of construction with aspirations to be wise, to see what analogies there might be with SR's tent.

Colleges

In this section, I want to look at a specific human institution where study goes on and is related to the demands of a wider world: the College in the University of

¹¹ Cf. Lipton, op. cit., pp. 95 ff.

¹² ἐσκηνώσεν (John 1:14).

¹³ Cf. John 2:18-21.

Cambridge where I work and spend much of my daily life.

The incentive to do this is generated out of the 'Tent of Meeting' essay, and out of Scriptural Reasoning more generally, because of the way that SR explicitly calls the activity of the intellect and the conversation of scholars back to questions of human flourishing. SR challenges knowledge to rise to the level of wisdom. Wisdom is tested by more than whether it provides correct answers to factual questions; it is tested by whether it makes for good, fosters peace, enhances life. SR explicitly concerns itself with the health of the contemporary human world and especially the institutions which ought to be serving it by articulating meaning for it (places of higher education among them). It expresses deep concern for what it sees as unhealthy aspects of that world, and sharply criticises the institutional and intellectual failures that contribute to the malaise (if not the crisis) that humans in the 21st century find themselves facing in a whole range of inter-connected areas (environmental, geopolitical, economic, and so on). It makes a link between reasoning (as a practice or set of practices) and the embrace and healing of pain (as a task).

That this linkage should sound so surprising to us at first is a sign of the trouble we are in. My College recently went through the process of revising and updating its admissions prospectus, and many of us were disturbed by an early draft that began with these words (or something like them): 'Studying here at Peterhouse is an unparalleled opportunity to realise your full potential and to go on to make your mark in the world'. The kind of formation in intellectual community which an institution of higher education aims to offer was presented here largely in terms of self-fulfillment and conquest, or the attainment of personal glory. There was not a trace (in this early draft at any rate; we changed the second one) of the idea that intellectual development might lead to forms of service and collective renewal for wider society. Or, to put it another way, that reasoning might be related to love.

There is not space here for a full-scale analysis of my College's history, its structures, its finances, and its place in the work of the University more generally – nor of the way that political pressures and the demands of delivering higher education in a contemporary British context impact on its life. Rather, what follows is intended to function evocatively, highlighting especially aspects of the founding narratives that

have fed the College's ethos and self-understanding, and that could potentially still inform its future. For even this evocation to work, however, it is important for a reader to know some basics; that Peterhouse is made up of few hundred people (undergraduates, post-graduates and Fellows) who live and work in the College, and through the College study in the wider University as well, in its various faculties and departments. So the College community is a community of people working in a whole range of different academic disciplines, but sharing much of their daily routine with each other, and coming into frequent personal contact.

It is the oldest of the Cambridge colleges, founded (like almost all of the early colleges) as a religious community. It was founded in 1284 by a bishop and inhabited by monks. When the first scholars assembled here, it was pretty much the middle of nowhere. The terrain was unprepossessing marshland ('fens') - much of it under water. It was perhaps a sort of Fenland equivalent of the 'wilderness' where Jacob decided to stop and sleep. And as the College's name suggests, it was dedicated to St Peter - the Stone. So we can enjoy here a kind of analogy to the story of Jacob's ladder and the New Testament commentary on it. The College was founded in a wilderness; and it was founded on a 'stone'. Moreover, it was set up to be a place where study served the understanding and love of God. It was a religious construction. It was a place where, it was hoped, wisdom would be found, fostered, and passed on. It was a place of enquiry into beauty, goodness and truth. To return to the imagery we began with, it was a sort of scaffolding.

The monks who founded the College, and other communities like it, enjoyed building. The sort of scaffolding they put up as they experimented with this new form of community drew on wise patterns of experience learned elsewhere. They built gardens, and wine cellars, and communal places to eat and to meet. All of those still exist over 700 years later. And at the middle of the College stands a Chapel. Like the other buildings, the scholar-monks' place of worship was made from stone and wood; but this was a construction of a physical kind that facilitated construction of a spiritual kind - what might be called the building of God's dwelling place in the hearts of individual people and in the heart of the community. In the Chapel, the studying community came to hear Scripture read day by day, and to celebrate the revealed presence of the Lord. It had its eyes directed beyond its own achievements, and the

work of getting and keeping knowledge for its own sake. The wider apparatus of the institution was at every point related to the practice of worship and attentiveness to God. The scaffolding put up by the college-builders incorporated spaces which were not filled by the flurry of human activity, but by waiting for and listening to God.

Of course it must be admitted that this is a picture that has been idealised a little. And of course it must be admitted that Cambridge colleges, then as now, are morally ambiguous places beset by failures of vision. Nevertheless, though idealised, the preceding description is probably a fair impression of the 'imaginal space' that inspired college-builders.

Now, in 2004, Peterhouse is part of a large, modern, wealthy University, far from immune to the critique of the modern university that is set out in the 'Tent of Meeting' essay. In David Ford's words, speaking about Cambridge's situation: 'The explosion of knowledge and publication in all fields, and the development of new disciplines and subdisciplines, has not been matched by their interrelation'.¹⁴ It can be accused of serving values that might once have been considered alien to the free pursuit of truth (sometimes brutal economic values and priorities, for example), and thus of instrumentalizing its knowledge and handling it like a market commodity.

However, what Cambridge's peculiar collegiate characteristics show is that, although they are under huge pressures from within and from without to conform even more narrowly to prevailing orthodoxies than they currently do (instrumentalization, objectification, atomization and so on), some (perhaps even many) universities may still retain practices and habits that could be reparative. Some of the forms of wisdom in universities are not dead but rather hidden, or simply 'on ice' with the potential to be reactivated. Not all Fellows of my College will be able to say why they are encouraged to spend time eating and drinking together; few will get as far as saying that friendship is one of the things the pursuit of knowledge both is served by and (in a wise world) should serve. But these practices still go on, and are part-way towards wisdom. Many Fellows will admit the value (at least in principle) of conversing from

¹⁴ David F. Ford, 'Knowledge, Meaning and the World's Greatest Challenges: Reinventing Cambridge University in the Twenty-first Century' (Gomes Lecture delivered at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, on 14th February 2003).

time to time with people working at a high level in disciplines other than their own. David Ford celebrates this in the following words: ‘Colleges gather together from different generations and from all disciplines *people* who are dedicated to learning, teaching and research. Knowledge resides primarily in people, rather than in the storage facilities of books and computers.’ And again:

The intellectual values that are at the heart of education and research are extraordinarily long-term ideals and practices in our civilization: truth-seeking, rationality in argument, balanced judgement, integrity, linguistic precision, and critical questioning. Their cultivation is greatly assisted by lively traditions of practising them in physical and social settings designed for their flourishing across generations. (...) the thriving of those intellectual values is intrinsically linked to quality of collegiality; and, because these socially-embedded values aim at knowledge and understanding that are cumulative, and in principle unlimited in breadth and depth, they are served best by long term collegial settings dedicated to their practice.¹⁵

But more might be hoped for even than this description of collegiality explicitly allows. An even fuller measure of wisdom might come to those of us working in institutions of higher education if the disciplined setting aside of preoccupations with our various activities of making and doing (the ‘work of our hands’¹⁶) led to a deep and regular attentiveness to the one who is the condition of our doing anything at all. By this discipline it could be acknowledged without self-abasement that we only do a little bit of the construction of the scaffolding on which wisdom appears – perhaps just move a stone a little way. By this discipline we are helped not to make the mistake of worshipping the work of our own hands. To put it in a more traditionally theological way: the answer to the very present danger we face of falling into idolatry is the true recognition of God. A college or a university is as prone as any other human institution (perhaps more) to regard itself as an end in itself. It needs reminding – and this reminder will come through attentiveness to God’s self-disclosure - that it is scaffolding, not a Temple to its own finality.

The analogy between SR and colleges is only partial of course. But the complex interrelation that can be seen in a Cambridge college between academic study, community formation, concern for social ‘virtue’ (and social joy!), and (in many cases) religious practice is an interrelation that has significant parallels with SR’s own

¹⁵ Ford, ‘Knowledge, Meaning and the World’s Greatest Challenges’.

¹⁶ Psalm 90:17.

vision. The college is constantly being challenged by its past (and in many cases the presence of a place of worship in its midst) to envision itself as ‘a divinely-informed sociality’ (p.***) that cultivates meaning and value and that fosters long-term commitments, all with a view to its responsibilities to wider society. It cannot therefore rest with a self-enclosed view of itself. If it does so it faces stultification, loss of vision (loss of divine light), and an unsustainable self-serving that Jews, Christians and Muslims call idolatry.

Institutions of higher learning might rediscover in the practices of SR – and maybe practices like it – a vocation. Putting it boldly, this vocation could be imagined in terms I used earlier in this essay: it could be the exploration in time of what it means to know, relate to and glorify God in the things of the world. It could be pursuit of the truths of salvation, which will not always be different from but will often be more than the truths of ordinary scholarship: the cultivation of faith, hope and charity; the rejection of false gods; the recognition of the need and possibility of reconciliation with God and neighbour; the search for peace.

Conclusion

If it is conceivable that a university like Cambridge could rediscover in its own (religious) traditions the resources for renewing in itself the ideal of purposive enquiry, humility about the limits of that enquiry, and concern about how the fruits of that enquiry might contribute to human flourishing – and if it is conceivable that an institution like the Cambridge college might still be a vessel for transmitting those renewing resources – then perhaps it is conceivable that SR’s return to the traditions of its three faiths will unlock comparable resources for the renewal of other kinds of reasoning activity, and through its construction of a tent (or many tents; or the tent in many places) find means to transmit them. That was the hope of the preceding section in drawing an analogy between college and tent. Both the idea of the college and SR’s imagined tent have this in common: they stand against the tendencies touched on already towards the objectification and the atomization of knowledge. The college is a place where scholarship’s relation to human social well-being, to friendship, to service to the wider world, and to worship of God receives institutional articulation. SR’s tent of meeting is similarly a place where reason and study are

ordered to love, and this love is expressed in diagnosis of contemporary ills, criticism of their causes, examination of their roots, and imagination of their solutions - this too for the sake of human social well-being and in concern for the wider world.

Moreover, not unlike the college at its best, SR maintains that friendship is the framework vital for the success of its intellectual activity – its members read Scripture and think together because they like each other, and they think better together as a result of trust, affection, humour and sympathy between them. These things release energy for their thought. And ultimately, SR relates its study and thought to God, in relationship to whom knowledge is not fragmented but is given its deepest integration and purpose. There is nothing ‘neutral’ about knowledge. Viewed as SR views it, in the light cast by Jacob’s ladder, knowledge is indebted at every point to revelation (to that which it did not command, but which brought all its possibilities into being), and answerable to wisdom.

It might be asked: why construct a tent in which Jews, Christians and Muslims meet together? Why not simply build up the role of the various distinct religious ‘Houses’ (Church, Mosque, Synagogue) in various institutions of higher learning? If the criticisms of the modern university put forward in this essay and in the ‘Tent of Meeting’ could be met by returning to some of the vision that motivated the early monks in Cambridge, then why not let it rest at that, and leave the tent well alone?

The answer here has to do with the difference time makes. When human enquiry takes the form of *scaffolding* in the terms I set out initially, rather than something more impersonal and allegedly pure, it exhibits two main virtues (which are also Scriptural Reasoning’s two main virtues). First it acknowledges the legitimate place of *interests* in the scholarly task (the desire to make knowledge serve some good), and second it respects *time*. In the above consideration of the modern university, we have argued strongly for the first virtue – the recovery of a more explicit relation to questions of the human good. Here, briefly and by way of conclusion, we turn to the second. SR’s tent, as a special form of scaffolding that demonstrates an awareness of its provisionality and a close attention to its context, respects time. It is not nostalgic (nostalgia shows disrespect for time), and it is not in the business of simply recreating the past. In the reading of Genesis 28 with which this chapter began, it became clear that the vertical relation between earth and heaven and the horizontal relation between

compromised past and future hope in turn demonstrated a third relation: a relation between the first two relations. There is a relation between history (the horizontal) and the God-relation (the vertical). The ladder by which God approaches is constructed as past is opened up to future, not just as earth is opened up to heaven.

If revelation can be carried by time in this way, then those charged with the construction of scaffolding must be responsive, and ready to build in different ways when new situations require it. The monastically-founded college is one remarkably durable piece of scaffolding, partly because it has adapted itself so successfully to the challenges and opportunities of new times, while retaining its deepest wisdom to guide it. But new sorts of scaffolding may also now be required, alongside those that already exist.

The way that the three faiths who currently do Scriptural Reasoning - Islam, Christianity and Judaism – are today configured in relation to one another is unprecedented. This is true both of their geopolitical configuration and of their configuration in the university. Their common recognition of problems in the contemporary situation (economic, political, environmental as well as scholarly) may also be unprecedented. Scholarly practitioners of these faiths – inhabitants of their respective traditions – now often gather under a single university roof, and may well read and be shaped by the same philosophical, ethical and hermeneutical currents of thought. All three see the capacity of what is thought and transmitted within their respective traditions to affect the peace of the world as a whole; they see the need for right and responsible reasonings. All three have been victims of a modern rationality (enthroned in many universities) that pretends that it is from nowhere and claims universal validity, seeming to meet no resistances in the complexities of human experience or the uniqueness of particular pockets of historical circumstance and local variation. Many thinkers in the three faiths who now share in SR find this sort of rationality dangerously inattentive: it undermines truthfulness because of the sheer amount it is prepared to leave out of its descriptions (sometimes even concealing the fact that there is a residue at all), and it is humanly destructive because it makes certain meanings, values and practices 'invisible', or apparently indefensible – their own religious ones included.

Muslims, Christians and Jews in SR insists that responsible thought only ever proves itself by the quality of attention it is able to pay to the concrete and the particular, by the adequacy of its descriptions of the world around it, just as by the adequacy of its descriptions of texts. They find a new possibility for cooperation in this insight, in the urgency of the need to use reason in the service of peace, and in the common experience of having their wisdom disregarded or even suppressed by modern ideologies of knowledge. As far as Scriptural Reasoning is concerned, there is no reason to apologise for speaking from a particular place; there is every reason to acknowledge it. Unlike some forms of inter-religious dialogue, the members of SR speak confidently and enthusiastically from their own distinctive viewpoints, finding in the specificity of their traditions, their scriptural texts and their convictions the energy that directs them into one another's company. They do not try to find 'neutral' ground (usually characterised by the fact that it belongs to none of the religions rather than that it is shared by them all) as a prerequisite for reasoning together. They also readily admit the limits of their competence in discussing each other's texts (very few of the participants are fluent in Greek, Hebrew *and* Arabic!). Paradoxically, what they most share is their particularity and their readiness to acknowledge that particularity. What they most share is not a *single* text, it is the fact that they live and think out of their *respective* texts, and love those texts

They are undertaking some new building as a consequence: a tent. Its similarity to scaffolding – not always tidy or well-ordered - is both pragmatic and principled. It almost proudly displays its own workings, making its theory acknowledge the process that led to it. The builders do not know how long the tent they are building will last, or how often it will need to be taken down and put up again somewhere or somehow different; this type of building hasn't been undertaken before. But time seems to have made it necessary to create such a space, and so they are doing it. They respect time. Believing that God also respects time, and scaffolding, they hope that when they meet in this tent, God will be there too.