



MOSES: UNITY AND DIVERSITY – ABRAHAMIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract : This contribution will explore the extent to which Abrahamic dialogue is dependent upon unity rather than diversity and will make reference to scriptural readings as well as interpretations about Moses. The setting of our conference is appropriate as it takes place near Mount Nebo, from where Moses is said to have seen the Promised Land and to have died nearby. Jews, Christians and Muslims share some of the same Scriptures and/or stories but read them in different ways. The Church Fathers, for example, were astonished at what they considered to be Jewish ‘blindness’: their failure to comprehend the truth proclaimed in their own sacred texts. This developed into what became known as the *Adversus Iudeos* literature. Likewise, Jewish writers were perturbed by Christian interpretations not rooted in the original Hebrew or that completely abandoned the simple meaning of the words in favour of other - especially messianic - significance. Muslims for their part would see their Scriptures, the Qur’an, as perfecting and fulfilling the other two.

The main argument of my essay is that apologetics and polemic may be features of scriptural hermeneutics, there is however a more positive story to tell. It is a combination of the search for common scriptural ground (‘unity’) as well as the need to take difference seriously, including polemic (‘diversity’) that provides a sound basis for interfaith dialogue today.

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UNITY: THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

INTRODUCTION

Because Jews, Christians and Muslims lived (and continue to live) in a scripturally orientated culture, common ground can be found not just in their holy scriptures but also in their interpretation. For example, Qur'anic commentary is contained in the Qur'an itself and *Tafsir*, commentary, begins with this principle. Like the rabbinic hermeneutical principle, 'Scripture explains Scripture', for Muslim commentators, the ways in which one verse (*āya*) clarifies another is regarded as the most significant. Another is how the Prophet interpreted the Qur'an, as recorded in the *hadith*. It is no coincidence that the word *tafsir*, which means 'explanation' or 'interpretation', is similar to *midrash*, a Hebrew term for asking, explaining and interpreting a sacred text.

In other words, interpretations of the same text albeit in different translations, (or as in the Jewish and Christian dialogue with Muslims, interpretations of a similar story) demonstrate

common ground, as evidenced in the writings of the commentators.

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Let us turn to the story of Moses, who led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt and at Sinai gave them their identity as 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6), familiar to Jews as it is to Christians and Muslims. For Muslims, Moses (Musa) is not only the most important prophet of the Torah but also the most named figure in the Qur'an. Indeed, more narrative is devoted to Musa than any other person, biblical or not. For Christians, Moses was primarily a lawgiver, while for Jews he is *Moshe rabbenu*, 'our teacher Moses', an affectionate term, sometimes used by Christians for Jesus. References to him in the Bible outside Exodus- Deuteronomy are predominantly to the 'Torah of Moses' or the 'Book of the Law of Moses', and it is clear that from a very early date that the laws in the Torah/Pentateuch were believed to have been revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. In the Gospels, Mosaic authority is frequently cited, and in rabbinic tradition the Torah revealed at Sinai included not just the written Torah but also the Oral Torah, that is to say, the wisdom handed down orally from generation to generation.

In a midrashic work, *Genesis Rabbah* (49:20), a legendary story is told about Moses being miraculously transported to the school of Rabbi Akiva (who lived in the first century CE) and listening to a discussion about the Torah. Moses could not understand a word. When one pupil said to Rabbi Akiva that he could not understand something, the pupil was told that the answer was found in the Torah Moses received at Sinai! As well as holding Moses in high esteem, the Qur'an considers the Torah a divine book: "It was We who revealed the Torah (to Moses); therein was guidance and light. By its standard have been judged the Jews, by the Prophet who bowed (as in Islam) to Allah's will, by the Rabbis and the Doctors of Law: for to them was entrusted the protection of Allah's Book" (*Surah Al-Mā'idah*, 5:44).

Of course, Muslims do not believe that the Torah as understood by Jews is the same as originally given to Moses and that the Qur'an supersedes it (as well as the Gospels) but I'll touch on this later. For now, I simply want to point out some commonalities, as this is the first step on the road of interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. Take for example the agreed position that Moses was born in Egypt and his life was in great danger: 'their sons he [Pharaoh] slew, but he kept alive their females: for he was indeed a maker of mischief' (Exodus 28:4). Another example is the role of Aaron (Hārūn). Assisted by his brother Harun, Moses was tasked to deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh's cruelty and although he had brought clear signs from God (verses 31-32), Pharaoh accused Moses of sorcery and continued to oppress the Children of Israel. Note also the agreement that mystery surrounds the death of Moses. An early Jewish tradition describes a dispute between the archangel Michael and the Devil over Moses' body (Jude 9) and another that, like Elijah, he ascended miraculously to heaven where he is said to have met the Messiah before his death (Assumption of Moses). Similarly, after leading the prayer in Jerusalem during the Night Journey and Ascension, Muhammad ascended to heaven, where he is depicted meeting Moses as well as the other prophets, with whom he consulted about how many prayers his followers should recite each day. According to the hadith collected by the 9th century figure al-Bukhari, God originally prescribed fifty prayers per day, but Moses convinced Muhammad to bargain with God and he eventually brought the number down to five. This is perhaps influenced by the biblical tradition of Moses as the intercessor who also negotiated with God (*on behalf of the Israelites*). Comparisons can also be made with Jesus. Matthew's Gospel follows the pattern of the life of Moses (e.g. massacre of the innocents, flight into Egypt, 40 days' temptation in the wilderness, sermon on the mount), while John specifically alludes to Moses' brazen serpent, manna in the wilderness and Passover. Notice also echoes of Jesus in the Golden Calf story - Moses offers to die for his people (Exodus

32:32), and he even plays the role of suffering servant bearing the sins of his people (Deuteronomy 1:12; Isaiah 53:4, 12; Matthew 8:17). And alongside Elijah, he appears at Jesus' side, in the Transfiguration scene (Mark 9:4), Lawgiver and Prophet both legitimizing Jesus as the Messiah. One final example of commonality is the burning bush, interpreted by Jews Christians and Muslims as the beginning of Moses' prophetic mission. In Exodus 3, he is confronted by the Lord speaking from a bush that burns but is not consumed and similarly, in the Qur'an, near Mount Tur, he walked towards a fire and saw 'a tree in hallowed ground: "O Moses! Verily I am Allah the Lord of the Worlds..." Surah, (*Al-Qaṣaṣ* 28:30).

Valiant efforts have been made to identify the bush botanically, but it is widely accepted that the identification of the bush (*Hebrew, seneh*) is linked to the name of the mountain, Sinai, in the biblical text. In early Christianity, it was regularly depicted in iconography, particularly at St Catherine's monastery at the foot of Sinai where early icons escaped the destruction of the iconoclasts, especially in 9th century. There is an icon of Moses removing his sandals before the bush in the Chapel of the Burning Bush and on Saturdays, the monks assemble for the Eucharist in the Chapel; by custom, they remove their shoes - an echo of the Muslim practice of removing shoes before prayer.

DIVERSITY: MANAGING DIFFERENCE AND SOMETIMES CONFLICT INTRODUCTION

Whilst I have pointed out examples of commonality, it is equally important to recognize the differences and where possible, create theological space so that 'fear of difference' becomes 'celebration of difference.' This approach is based on the principle of a multiplicity of interpretations and is borrowed from identity studies, notably the concept of hybrid or multiple identities. Hybrid identity defines identity as being constituted by a multiplicity of different identities—cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic

and national—that were once considered distinct identities. Muslims, Christians and Jews traditionally defined themselves in terms of their shared laws, values, and beliefs. If and when they had to move, they would take their laws, values, and beliefs with them. It was not so much territory that defined their identity but values and a way of life, a role often played by their religion. Their identities cut across various geographical and linguistic boundaries and so it was common to move freely between one territory and another alternating between languages without significantly losing any sense of belonging to the same community.

One consequence is that people regularly cross boundaries that divide insiders from outsiders, thus blurring identity boundaries. In the process, change occurs and because people have to readjust and redefine who they are, their identities can become fragile. It is no easy task to redefine one's identity, the fragility of which can lead to prejudice as a defensive mechanism. The reaction against rapidly shifting boundaries of identity, especially when one or more identities are 'perceived' to be under threat inevitably leads to an over-rootedness in one's identity and a subsequent decrease in a desire to engage in dialogue with the 'Other.' From then onwards, it is a small step to inculcate a negative perception of the 'Other'.

In these unsettled times, it is no easy task to manage differences because the more we perceive ourselves to be under threat, the greater the temptation to hold fast onto one aspect of identity and retreat from engaging in a genuine dialogue with others. This is, perhaps, one reason why too many of our co-religionists feel threatened by interfaith dialogue..

On the other hand, hybrid identity can also generate unusual results, such as changing religious architecture in immigrant areas. For example, in East London, a highly populated immigrant area, the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid (mosque) presently serves local Bangladeshi Muslims. It was originally built in 1743 as a French Protestant Church, made into a Methodist Chapel in 1819, converted into the Spitalfields Great Synagogue in 1898, and finally became the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid in 1976.

When the Jewish community decided to sell the building, they wanted it to continue being a house of worship. Therefore, they sold the building to the Bengali Muslim community for a low price, thus ensuring that the synagogue would become a mosque. As a relic of the inter-faith and communal past, there remains a sign in Hebrew commemorating some of its former Jewish community members.

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In the New Testament, St Paul draws a contrast between the old covenant of Moses, written on tablets of stone, and Christ's new covenant in the hearts of believers. If the face of Moses shone when he appeared to Israel with the tablets of the old law, how much more splendid will be the light of Christ, the new Moses. From Paul, there grew up the belief that Moses actually placed a veil over the faces of the Israelites (2 Corinthians 3:12–15) so that when the messiah came, they could not recognize him: hence the image of the synagogue as a woman blindfolded, graphically depicted in numerous works of art from the early Middle Ages onwards, called *ecclesia/synagoga*. Christian artists fashioned female figures to represent the triumphant 'Ecclesia' and the defeated 'Synagoga'. Well-known depictions represent the proud Ecclesia

standing erect in contrast to the bowed, blindfolded figure of the defeated yet dignified Synagoga (such as the 13th cathedrals of Strasbourg and Notre Dame, Paris). Similar tropes can be found in the *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition.

The Torah had been given to Israel (Romans 9:4), and obedience to it was seen as Israel's response to what God had done at the Exodus. Now he had saved his people again – not Israel alone, but the Gentiles also – and the response expected of them was obedience to 'the law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2). Paradoxically, however, it was fulfilled, not by striving to keep the Torah, but by obeying God's Spirit at work in the human heart (Romans 8:3–4). Although God revealed himself to Moses, and His glory was seen on Sinai, He had revealed himself

more fully in Christ, who is the very image of God (2 Corinthians 3:2–4:6). It is, then, in Christ, not in the Torah, that Christians see the supreme revelation of God's purpose. To many of Paul's Jewish contemporaries, this seemed like an *attack* on the Torah. It was not. But to later Christian commentators, it was understood as such.

Another example of difference concerns interpretations of the Golden Calf, (Exodus 32:1–35; cf. Deuteronomy 9:7–29) which tells how, while Moses was on top of Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites on the plain below worshipped a Golden Calf. Israel's unfaithfulness at this pivotal moment in her history, when she was entering into a solemn covenant with God, perplexed and embarrassed Jewish commentators.

The Talmud expresses the enormity of the sin by comparing Israel to 'a shameless bride who plays the harlot within her bridal canopy' (Babylonian Talmud (BT), Shabbat 88b). The repercussions of this apostasy were felt throughout Jewish history: 'there is not a misfortune that Israel has suffered, which is not partly retribution for the sin of the Calf' (BT Sanhedrin 102a). In the 2nd century CE the Rabbis stipulated that although the story could be read publicly in Hebrew in synagogue, only parts of it could be translated into Aramaic in the Targum (Mishnah Megillah 4:10).

Christian writers exploited the Golden Calf for polemical ends. In the *Epistle of Barnabas* 4:6–8, Moses' breaking of the Tablets represented the nullification of the covenant to Israel, which was later re-offered in Jesus, the new Moses. This covenant was rejected by Israel who spurned God's new emissary but was accepted by the Church, who was the true heir of Sinai. The sin of the Golden Calf regularly appears in Christian catalogues of the sins of Israel, which purport to prove Jewish depravity (demonstrated in the writings of 3rd century Church Father, Cyprian of Carthage, and especially his *Testimonia ad Quirinum*).

A Jewish response was to teach that the Torah comprised not only the Written Torah (*Torah she-bikhtav*) the first five books of Tanakh, but

also the Oral Torah (*Torah she-be'al peh*), a body of teaching equally deriving from Moses on Sinai, which gives the true interpretation of the Written Torah. The concept of the Oral Torah, embodied in the Mishnah, Talmud and other authoritative rabbinic texts, can be accessed only by studying with the right teachers in a chain of tradition going back to Moses. In this way, the rabbis asserted their legitimacy against alternative interpretations, such as those advanced by Christians and Muslims.

Rabbinic texts, while acknowledging the enormity of the sin, attempted to mitigate its impact in various ways. They stressed the efficacy of Moses' intercession on Israel's behalf, the cleansing of the camp of the idolaters, and the re-offering of the covenant in the second set of Tablets (Exodus Rabbah 41–45). They blame the apostasy on the 'mixed multitude' of Egyptians who came up with the Israelites from Egypt – possibly an implicit attack on proselytes or even on Christians as leading Israel astray from its allegiance to God (Targum Canticles 1:12).

Unlike the biblical account of the Golden Calf episode where God orders 3,000 of the worst offenders to be killed, the Qur'an moved in a different direction, as all the human characters – Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites – experienced God's mercy. Despite the many trials and tribulations that came their way, Moses and Aaron, continued to submit themselves completely to the will of God. Indeed, God exonerates Moses and Aaron of any wrongdoing and depicts them as His grateful servants.

In Islamic interpretation, just as Jesus fulfilled Moses, so too did Muhammad. Islamic literature also identified parallels between the Exodus of the Israelites and the migration of the followers of Muhammad. Another example is the drowning and the destruction of Pharaoh and his army, which was contrasted to the Battle of Badr.

CONCLUSION

For Christians, Moses remains a legendary biblical champion of law and justice

who looks forward to the coming of Christ, while in Judaism he is unique, both as a source of legal and ethical authority and as an inspiration to the community he created; and for Muslims he is a messenger of God, lawgiver and leader of his community who foreshadows that of Muhammad.

Yet, there is also ambivalence about Moses. For Christians, whilst his name stands as a symbol for the Law in the New Testament and the term 'Moses and the prophets' is a designation for Scripture, Jesus is presented as a new Moses who is superseded. 'The Law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (Gospel of John, 1.17), relegating Moses to the past and Jesus to the New.

For Muslims, just as Muhammad invited pagan Arabs to worship the One God, so Moses also kept steering his people toward monotheism. Yet the Qur'an is understood as correcting biblical misconceptions about Moses, for example, God elevates Moses to a position of honour (33:69) and frees him from any blame for the actions of his people.

Our discussion about Moses demonstrates that it is not enough for Jews, Christians and Muslims solely to discuss what we hold in common because too much emphasis on Common Ground, without taking seriously difference, results in fictitious conversations. The danger for interfaith dialogue is that it can lead – and all-too frequently does lead – to vacuous conversations. Certainly, we need to begin by building bridges, by establishing common ground but then it is vital to move onto managing differences. By seeking both, we will engage in a 'genuine' interfaith encounter. Dependence upon commonality leads to assimilation and syncretism; managing differences is not about being the same; having some values in common does not mean sharing all values. Interfaith Dialogue therefore involves a respect that takes the other as seriously as one demands to be taken oneself. This is an immensely difficult and costly exercise.

Similarly, for Wilfred Cantwell Smith religion should not be treated as a system, an "ism," a simplistic and sterile, overly conceptualized,

static entity which has little to do with the personal and historical reality that we label "religion." Understanding religion does not lie in religious systems, he argues, but in persons. 'Ask not what religion a person belongs to but ask rather what religion belongs to that person', he famously wrote.

To know another, contends Smith, we must be able to stand in that human situation realizing that there is no person on earth we can fully understand, and yet, no person that we cannot understand at least somewhat. Humane knowledge is integrative of the person and the community, in contrast to objective knowledge that presumes separation and leads to fragmentation. Objective knowledge stresses method and implies that what is known is both dominant and dominated. By way of contrast, humane learning involves being open to a greater-than-oneself, which Smith calls "transcendence"; it is a process of becoming, not simply one of knowing.

Smith assigns priority to "faith" as a category of understanding religion. Faith for him is much like Martin Buber's "Between," that sense of essential connectedness that underlies all apparent me-and-thems, us- and-theys, which transforms the objective "I-It" attitude toward the world into an "I-Thou" attitude. Therefore, interfaith dialogue should be directed towards the 'inter', from faith to faith. Some level of commonality is necessary for generating solidarity but genuine interfaith dialogue requires a constructive interfaith tension. It takes a high degree of maturity to let opposites co-exist without pretending that they can be made compatible. At the same time, it takes the same degree of maturity to respect an opinion that conflicts with one's own without attempting to achieve a naïve accommodation.

AFTERWORD

Let me end and speak personally as a Jewish theologian engaged in the practice of interfaith dialogue. The Nobel prize-winning scientist, Niels Bohr suggested "The opposite of a simple truth is a falsehood. The opposite of a profound truth is very often another profound

truth.” I understand Jewish interpretation as an embrace of both sides and what often looks like a contradiction. Judaism is not concerned with a two-dimensional world but rather with three and four-dimensional reality.

When you see everything in terms of two dimensions, it is either true or it is false. And there can only be one perspective! That is what I reject. There is always more than one perspective. If I am standing here, the things look different from what you see if you are sitting there. We are seeing the world from different perspectives and Judaism wants to confer dignity on how the world looks to me and how the world looks to you. The world is an irreducible multiplicity of perspectives which are held in tension.

There is, in other words, the view of Hillel. But there is also the view of Shammai. There is the view of Jacob. But there is also the point of view of Esau. There is the point of view of Isaac but also Ishmael. There is also the point of view of Adam but also Eve. And, ultimately, there is the point of view of us down here and there is the point of view of God up there. Judaism is an

attempt to do justice to the fact that there is more than one point of view.

Now supposing you and I see things differently. We have different perspectives on reality. Is that it? What can we do under those circumstances? Well, we can talk. We can converse. We can meet. You can tell me how the world looks to you. I can tell you how the world looks to me. We can have a conversation. We can, through that conversation, learn what it feels like to be different. One way of bridging the distance between perspectives is through dialogue and giving dignity to the multiple perspectives from which we perceive reality. This is nothing less than embracing the principle of the ‘irreducible multiplicity of perspectives.’

The Jewish theological approach to dialogue is based on a proclamation of the unity of God and the diversity of human existence. Jews do not believe that out of the many comes one. We do believe that out of the One come many. That, it seems to me, is the goal of a genuine interfaith dialogue.