

Your Karma has run over my Dogma: a biblical basis for a pluralist understanding of religions.

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Abstract - Intro

"The historic Christian church from its early centuries has been distinguished by the dominating dogmatic emphasis represented by the Creeds and catechisms and by the condemnation of heresy and heretics.

This is unexpected for a faith that emerged as a sect of Judaism, a faith that has always entertained multiple interpretations and has never imposed any doctrinal rule.

For this new century in which rapprochement between Judaism and Christianity is a growing trend, it is useful to identify elements of the Older Testament which affirm the acceptance of difference, i.e.. pluralism in relation to a faith tradition.

Primary among these texts are the stories of Abram and Lot in Genesis 11-19. Abram is the object of divine call, promise, blessing and covenant, and a model of faith. Lot is none of these, and lives on the edge but, according to the Jewish perspective on Genesis, Lot is singled out by God to be saved from Sodom. Subtle elements in his story affirm divine blessing in an indirect way.

The universal tendency in the Lot cycle narratives is enhanced by significant texts in Deuteronomy (and Jeremiah) and the story of Ruth the Moabitess.

The New Testament exhibits a plurality of perspectives, but mostly within a Christian viewpoint. A major divergence is found between a revealed theology and transcendent Christ on the one hand, and an existential theology and a teacher of wisdom on the other hand. One text in 1 John opens up to a more universal viewpoint by which people of other faiths may be understood as our spiritual siblings.

A. INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

1) Subjectivity and Motivation:

It is important to me that we acknowledge the temperamental factors that cause us to lean more to an orthodox or a progressive outlook in theology. By nature I am intrigued with difference ; 'Vive la difference' [originally between the sexes].

As an outcome of close fellowship with Jews and Muslims and my examination of their scriptures I have reached a more universal religious position.

However, as a person raised on reading the Bible every day, and as a UCA minister, it has remained important to me to establish a biblical foundation for my theology, hence this lecture topic.

2) Title – Dogma and Karma

This title comes from a visit to Akaroa, near Christchurch. Walking up a hill on a metal road to nowhere we found a rustic cottage presenting as a café in an overgrown garden, but there was no one home. We went in and found hundreds of aphorisms written all over the rafters and uprights including “Your karma has run over my dogma”.

Such a witty and succinct saying suggests a deliberate perspective.

It seems in Christianity we have to deal a lot with Dogma – “an established doctrine held by a religion, that is authoritative and not to be disputed, doubted, or diverged from, by the practitioner or believers”. The term derives from Greek *δόγμα* "that which seems to one, opinion or belief" and that from *δοκέω* (*dokeo*), "to think, to suppose, to imagine".

By contrast Karma in Buddhist thought is about the events of life and how they arise from cause and effect, and about choosing skilful actions that produce a good effect. ... “A skilful event is one that is not accompanied by craving, resistance or delusions; ... Therefore, the law of Karma teaches that responsibility for unskilful actions is born by the person who commits them”.

3) Belief constructions versus existential experience

I chose this saying as a title since it contrasts theoretical beliefs with practical experience. For our time it seems very appropriate that Christian dogma should answer to the reality of other religions, not least Buddhism. Orthodox beliefs set in concrete by one faith can fruitfully make themselves subject to examination by the different reality of other living faiths.

4) Bible as Scripture – historicity and metaphor

Behind this lecture lies a particular concept of the Bible as scripture. A negative way of explaining this concept is to say that it is NOT based on the assumption that the validity of scripture depends on harmonizing all its statements either with each other (literally), or with the facts of history established from other evidence (historicity).

Positively, I understand that 1) scripture understood as metaphor can convey meaning independent of historical considerations. 2) that the apparent differences of even conflicting historical statements add to our understanding of the texts; 3) that the different theological perspectives of various editors enrich our understanding; 4) that whatever revelatory character the scriptures possess, it is undiminished by the humanity, inconsistency and contingency of the writings.

5) Minority reports

There is much in Jewish and Christian scriptures that affirms exclusive conceptions about G_O_D and about the people of God and their covenant. We need to take this on board but I refer to it as the majority report. To understand it properly I will draw attention to alternative texts and themes in the Bible, that have a more inclusive nature, that I call the minority report.

B. SAMPLE EVIDENCE FROM THE HEBREW BIBLE

Lot and Abraham – contrasting themes

The development of my study of pluralism in the Bible began with a close examination of the contrasting traditions of Abraham and of Lot. Abraham is presented as the object of divine call, promise and blessing (Gen.12:1-3), who responded with faith and obedience. His relation to God is sealed with a covenant. None of these elements apply to his nephew/kinsman Lot. But with remarkable literary parallels, Gen.19 tells how the divine messengers go to Sodom to save Lot. He was saved earlier by Abraham (Gen.14), now he is saved twice by the divine messengers, with no quid pro quo.

Key themes: 1) divine mercy

To deepen our sense of the significance of Gen.19 as a salvation story (in which the judgment on Sodom is purely incidental) two further points. First, the affirmation of divine mercy, in the words of Lot to the

messengers. He uses the term *chesed* (19.17) meaning mercy or loving kindness. One classic study of this word establishes that the meaning may include an element of loyalty¹. Though he is outside of covenant, Lot is the object of divine love and loyalty. These divine qualities are precisely those claimed in the Hebrew Bible for the relationship of God and Israel; the language of divine love, that emerges first with the prophets such as Hosea (8th century), is cemented in the 7th century texts from Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. We know the Yahwist texts about Abraham emerged between the 10th and 8th centuries, and were edited until the 6th century in exile. Is it not striking then, the notion of divine mercy is never applied to Noah or Abraham but appears first in relation to Lot?

2) the divine hand

The second point from the Lot story is the way salvation is expressed twice there in terms of the divine hand. As Lot stands outside his door, he is vulnerable to the mob who show their established contempt for hospitality by the demand to rape his divine guests. Just in time, the divine messengers reach out 'their hand' (19.10) and save him back inside. Later while he is still lingering in Sodom, they take Lot and family by their hands (19.16) and lead them out to safety from Sodom. This image of the leading divine hand is rare in scripture. It appears elsewhere only in regard to God leading Israel by the hand out of Egypt (Jer.31.32).

Quote: Paul Tonson (1998) Beyond Abrahamism – a fresh reading of the Tanakh traditions respecting Lot, Moab and Ammon (PhD Thesis, Deakin Uni.) p.139:
<http://www.deakin.edu.au/dro/view/DU:30023472>

{Regarding Genesis 19:10,16}

The divine hand is a very common metaphor in Tanakh but generally refers to judgement and destruction. In the few texts which refer to a divine hand of salvation, the subject is always the people of Israel. Exodus and Deuteronomy refer eleven times to deliverance from Egypt by the hand of YHWH and this is echoed in Jer 32:21 // 32:21.

The second reference to hand (v. 16) refers to the human hands of Lot's family, which the messengers hold tight. This term has the same divine subject in Isaiah describing the deliverance of Israel: 'YHWH took hold of Israel from the ends of the earth' (Isa.41:9). The two terms appear together in Isa 41:13 with reference to Israel and also in Isa 42:6 with reference to YHWH's chosen servant. The compiler of Genesis 19 drew upon prophetic metaphors of the deliverance of Israel and her intimate relationship to God to recount the story of Lot's deliverance.

Lot placed on a par with Israel

The combination of these several literary and thematic elements in Genesis 19 seems hardly incidental to me. The writer appears to deliberately place the outsider Lot on a par under God not only with Abraham but also with God's own people. Who could this writer be? Surely not the Yahwist who affirms Call, Promise, Blessing, Covenant, Faith and Righteousness, but not salvation and mercy.

Deuteronomic theology

The theology of Gen.19 is represented by the affirmations of Deut.10:17f made by a God, Lord of Hosts, who has no favourites and loves the stranger. Lot represents the stranger, the outsider who is equally within the sight of the divine. In the Older Testament this is one of the most profound texts, and one which has enduring currency, not least for our own world of multicultural societies.

The universal theology of Deut 10 is illustrated by the affirmations of Deut.2:5,9,19, where Israel heading from Egypt to the land of promise is warned by God in turn NOT to trespass into Edom, Moab or Ammon because God has given these lands to these tribes. So Canaan given to Israel is NOT the only promised land. Moreover Moab and Ammon are the descendants of outsider Lot. Genesis 19 and Deut. 2 share the divine affirmation of Lot representing those who are outside the divine covenant with Abraham.

Ruth as an affirmation of Moab

¹ Glueck, Nelson (1967) *Hesed in the Bible*, Cincinnati: Hebrew Union Press. finds mutual reciprocity, or loyalty, to be a feature of both mercy and righteousness in pre-exilic biblical traditions

The Book of Ruth perpetuates this theology, where Ruth a Moabitess (a descendant of Lot) is not only of exemplary character, willing to acknowledge the God of her mother-in-law Naomi from Bethlehem, but also becomes the great grandmother of king David (Ruth 4.21). Stories of marriages between the Israelites of Bethlehem and people from Moab (1 Chron 4:21-3) stand against the exclusive policy of Ezra (10:1-19) and Nehemiah in the post-exilic community, who forced the Jews to divorce their Moabite and Ammonite wives.

Jewish narrative theology balance

It is most compelling that Jewish writers who wrote these scriptures are the ones who preserved these universal elements. The Jews cannot be accused of an elitist theology. To be chosen by the divine, as they experience it, is not a favour but a burden. Moreover the call of Abraham, as described by the Yahwist was from the beginning an expression of the divine purpose to bless all people (Gen 12.3).

C. THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Signs of theological difference are also evident in the New Testament, most of which are internal to Christianity. Christians are used to harmonizing this variety into one story. Nevertheless note the contrasts (I do not say conflicts):

- 1) between a Jewish baby born in a stable and the Word of God manifest cosmically as the light of the world,
- 2) between the emphasis of John and Luke's gospel on believing in Jesus (Jn 1.49f; 2.11) and the emphasis of Mark 1.15 'Repent and believe the gospel (of the kingdom)'
- 3) between Jesus' affirmation of Judaism and the Torah (teaching the laws of love from Deuteronomy and Leviticus and the democratization of religion from Jeremiah), and Paul's proclamation of Christ the king / son of God, presented in terms of Greek and Roman culture and metaphors; [eg. in Matt.19:17 Jesus denies that he is good and urges observance of the commandments.]
- 4) between Jesus the rabbi announcing the kingdom of God as a new community emerging on earth within people (Luke 17:21) and the apostle Paul proclaiming a Messiah who will come again from elsewhere. [Dominic Crossan contrasts apocalyptic eschatology with sapiential eschatology.]
- 5) between the notion of salvation from sin by propitiation, as taught by Paul (Romans 3:25), and the gospel account of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8f), to whom salvation came that day following his encounter with Jesus. The first is a salvation from sin and guilt, the second is salvation to a changed life.

The uniqueness claims of Christianity - resurrection

As Christian teaching develops, the focus moves from belief in the good news of the kingdom – open to all, to belief in Jesus as Messiah, which is eventually based on belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:17). For Paul this becomes the *sine qua non* of Christian faith (1 Cor.15:17). The significance of the resurrection was moderated for me inadvertently by William Barclay who speaking about some of the common values of different religions then commented: "But the leaders of all of these great religions have died while we have a saviour alive today". I was suddenly aware that this was truly a *non sequitur*. If the Buddha or Muhammad or Gandhi by their charismatic and sacrificial living could transform nations and leave a lasting legacy without being resurrected or deified, certainly Jesus could do the same.

One universal text in the NT

There is one NT text that affirms a knowledge of God based not on dogma but on personal experience. It is 1 John 4:7f– 'anyone who loves is born of God and knows God, ... for God is love. This verse is significant for two reasons. 1) It takes for its gold standard a major theme from the Torah, the knowledge of God. In Exodus God effects Israel's escape from Egypt so that 'Pharaoh will know I am the Lord' (Ex.14:4), and that the Israelites will know also (16.6). 2) At the same time 1 John affirms an existential knowledge of God, rather than a revealed knowledge (or is this a false dichotomy). John's knowing God contrasts with Paul's emphasis on 'knowing Christ' (Phil.3:10).

The challenge of our task of demythologizing and reconstruction is plain when we read the next two verses in 1 John 4:9f. They move from God is love to God shows love, by sending his son as a sacrifice for our sins.' (1 Jn.4:10 // 2.2). Somehow the brilliant comet 'God is Love' is hidden behind the cloud of sacrificial atonement theology. Is this necessary? Can this be the same writer/theology?

Democratization of religion

To some degree, I John is a restatement of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, affirming the democratization of religious experience, the idea that every Israelite may experience an individual heart knowledge of the Torah (Jer.31:33). This personal knowledge is strongly linked in Deut. and Jeremiah (31:3) to the notion of a loving God, completely lacking in Exodus; Deuteronomy (7.7f, 13; 10.15) affirms that God chose Israel and delivered her from Egypt because of God's love for their ancestors. It is another big step to the affirmation of John, drawing on the Greek conception of forms, that God is love (as also that God is Spirit Jn 4.24); these texts are rare gems with enduring currency for all cultures and times. Paul comes close to this perspective in Athens when he affirms the Greek conception of God "in whom we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Contrast the idea of God as our Father in heaven.

Dogma in Christian history

My reading of Christian history leaves me with a rather jaundiced view. Generally speaking, Christianity has had far too much to say! For the sake of integrity in a post-modern, multi-faith world, I believe Christians need to say no to the crumbling edifice of accrued dogma. We need to strongly assert that the way of faith is NOT the way of ticking the boxes on a signed doctrinal statements. Rather it is the way of agnosticism –of unknowing, in response to the mystery of life in which we apprehend God. In material terms, Jesus followed the way of relinquishment and self-emptying. We need to take this way in the field of dogma. For a life of faith in a multicultural world I offer this rule of thumb regarding dogma: "Believe as little as possible".