

Scripture and modernity

Editorial preface

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“To this end was I born, and for this cause
came I into the world, that I should
bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is
of the truth heareth my voice.” Pilate saith
unto him: “What is truth?”
(John, 18: 37–8)

Religious scripture in all cultures where it exists is habitually seen as the repository of Truth. It often explicitly claims this distinction for itself and offers explanations, instructions and promises which those who are “of the truth” – namely its followers – are encouraged to accept and make their own. A closer look at the exegetical traditions spawned by religious scripture in any of the great cultures shows, however, that the truth scripture purports to bring is far from easy to circumscribe. In fact, the ultimate elusiveness of the full and true meaning of scripture often becomes an article of faith in itself. With respect to the Quran, for instance, the elucidation of the first sura alone would, according to a saying attributed to the Caliph ‘Alī, require seventy camel loads of commentary.

While the nature of scriptural truth has thus been subject to much debate and often dissent within religious cultures, the rise of secularism in the wake of the European enlightenment has confronted the truth-value of religious scripture everywhere with an increasingly serious challenge from outside. Decolonization may have freed much of the world from political control by European powers, but the secular values Europe generated have not been eclipsed; on the contrary they have gained in strength and influence and have come to represent a body of “non-scriptural truths” whose accommodation with the truth of scripture is equally problematic for all religious cultures – including Europe’s own, much weakened, Christian heritage. How can human rights, democracy, gender equality, as well as modern science, capitalist consumerism and global free trade be reconciled with the religious truths enshrined in scripture? What do the answers to this question – for there are bound to be many – mean for the future of the distinct cultural identities which adherence to scripture has granted to different communities? Most importantly, what do these answers mean for the future coexistence of different religious communities in a global age?

Taking account of the importance of these issues, it was suggested that the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* might devote a special volume to the subject. Since this journal covers the regions of origin of the world’s major religions it seemed to offer the right forum for such an

enterprise. I am grateful to the editorial board of the *Bulletin* for agreeing to the proposal and for inviting me to act as guest editor. Since the *Bulletin* has only very occasionally devoted an issue to a single topic, the board decided to mark the occasion by dedicating it to the memory of John Wansbrough, formerly Professor of Semitic Studies at SOAS, whose scholarly legacy bears witness to his profound acquaintance with the scriptures and exegetical traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The care he for many years lavished on the SOAS *Bulletin* as contributor, reviewer and member of its editorial board provides further grounds for this dedication.

To prepare the issue a number of scholars were invited to contribute articles dealing with major scripture-based belief systems in the geographical regions covered by this journal. The principal focus was to be the contemporary interpretation or reinterpretation of canonical texts in the face of the challenges to which traditional communities have been exposed on account of modernity and globalization. Of particular interest was the extent to which such modern approaches aim to draw upon, amend or to invalidate prior stages in the interpretive history of their respective traditions. Since the aim of this special edition is to provide interested readers with a comparative insight into the issues at stake, contributors were asked to make their papers accessible also to non-specialists in the topic concerned.

Thanks to the generous response received, we have, in the nine articles gathered in this volume, been able to cover key scriptures of seven major belief systems, namely Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, to enumerate them moving from West to East and from more ancient to more recent. The approaches taken and the issues focused upon in these papers differ greatly and each offers no more than a snapshot of a particular aspect of the subject in question. It is all the more interesting that, despite this difference in focus, one key issue surfaces in all the papers: modern interpreters in all seven traditions turn to scripture with a view to finding therein the confirmation of answers to certain needs generated in their communities by the social, political and cultural transformations of modernity. The nature of those answers is, in most cases, determined not by scripture itself, but by extra-scriptural factors; scripture serves to legitimize them and grant them authority.

In what follows I will briefly present the nine papers of this volume while attempting to outline for each the most salient “needs” which function as motivating forces in the reinterpretations of the scriptural heritage concerned. Following the order given above, the first is Rabbi Jeremy Rosen’s paper on the Jewish exegetical tradition concerning “the biblical land covenant”. Readers of the *Bulletin* will need no prompting to recognize that behind this sober sounding title lurks the most intractable conflict of our time: the dispute over the rightful ownership of Palestine. Not all may be aware, however, that this issue has been a matter of debate within Judaism itself for over 2,000 years. As Rosen outlines, the divine covenant with Abraham uttered in Genesis 15: 18, according to which the prophet’s descendants would be given the land “from the river of Egypt to

the great river, the river Euphrates” has been subject to different interpretations and challenges ever since the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC. In particular, the question arose whether the biblical injunction to conquer the land still remained in force and should thus be actively pursued or whether Jews should wait passively in exile for the promise to be fulfilled through divine intervention. While the debate never ceased, the passive option, backed by a talmudic text, became prevalent until the nineteenth century when the opposing, proactive, interpretation came to be championed by the founding fathers of modern Zionism.

While surveying the exegetical debate over the land covenant from its origins to the present day, Rosen’s paper barely touches on the motivating factors which led to the ultimate ascendancy of the Zionist interpretation, in particular the perceived need to establish a national homeland for the Jewish people in response to the persistent anti-Semitism encountered in the diaspora.¹ Nevertheless his paper sets the stage for this special issue rather well, for it serves to highlight very effectively a contrast in the relationship between community and scripture also attested in the other articles: that between the instability of the meaning of scripture on the one hand, and the stability and persistence of communal identity on the other. The great antiquity of the Jewish tradition means that this contrast is here particularly striking. On repeated occasions, changing historical and political realities caused rabbinic legislators to “remove a biblical law from the realms of practicality and relevance”,² including the land covenant which is the subject of Rosen’s paper. Notwithstanding such reinterpretations of the truth-content of scripture – indeed perhaps precisely because of them – communal identity as such, and with it faith in scripture as the repository of ultimate truth, was able to persist and prevail. Indeed, it would seem that the vitality and persistence of a community resides in its ability to adapt the truth-content of the heritage to which it owes its identity to the changing needs which determine its survival.

Paul Gifford’s paper on “The Bible in Africa” provides us with a singular example of such vitality and adaptation. It discusses the effective use of biblical scripture in the sermons of Pentecostalist preachers which has helped them to gain a large and enthusiastic following in Africa. For them, the promises uttered in the Bible, indeed the biblical narrative as a whole, do not refer to a historical past, but to the lives, hopes and aspirations of their congregations here and now. The needs to be fulfilled by the promises of scripture thus reflect those of the poor in the urban slums of Africa: material betterment, educational prospects, travel abroad, release from jail or protection from HIV. The biblical promise is thus transformed into a resounding message of hope which lifts the spirits of the congregation and at the same time enhances the fame, status and material resources of the priest who performs the indispensable role of the “effector

1 For further details on the socio-cultural and political background to the rise of Zionism in the nineteenth century see Colin Shindler, *What Do Zionists Believe* (London: Granta Books), 2007.

2 Rosen, p. 193.

of scripture”.³ In highlighting the “performative, declarative use” of the Bible in the sermons of the Pentecostals,⁴ Gifford shows us how an ancient canonical text can be transformed into a medium of vital relevance to present-day material survival. The correlation hereby in evidence between the malleability of scriptural truth and the strength of community formation is no less striking: by transmuting scripture into a magical means to overcome poverty, by emptying it of its historical referents and imbuing it with the needs of the moment, the Pentecostalist congregation is supercharged with devotional allegiance.

As we pass from Christianity to Islam we encounter with Abdallah Saeed’s paper a very different and rather more sober approach to the challenge of making scripture relevant to the present. Yet the need which it answers also has direct practical relevance, for it aims to generate an interpretation of the ethico-religious passages of the Quran which is “less rigid and more relevant to the lives of Muslims today” and hence differs from the “legalistic-literalist manner” championed by more traditionally minded thinkers.⁵ The paper thus leads us into the heart of the exegetical debate ongoing within the sphere of contemporary Islam. Of particular interest are two contrasting approaches to scriptural truth outlined by Saeed: one considers it to be timeless, immutable and objectively determined, whereas the other sees it as conditioned by the socio-cultural context of its revelation and hence time-bound, undetermined and liable to subjective interpretations in accordance with changing historical perspectives. Saeed elucidates and exemplifies the latter, which he portrays as potentially compatible with contemporary values such as social justice, human rights, interfaith relations and gender equality. Relativizing scriptural truth by means of seeing its meaning not as absolute but as conditioned by context thus becomes a means to bring it into consonance with certain extra-scriptural truths widely recognized as valid in the modern world.

That the process of reconciling scripture with extra-scriptural truths is not in itself a modern phenomenon is illustrated in Andrew Rippin’s paper, which provides us with a case study on the reception of the biblical Samson in medieval and modern quranic exegesis. The Quran does not mention Samson at all, but medieval commentators found ways and means to incorporate him into the text as yet one more pious exemplar in the perennial struggle between faith and unbelief. Some modern commentators, on the other hand, took the opposite line: for them, Samson is not in but out. His very absence from the Quran fits their motivation, which is driven by the need to find in scripture proof of Islamic disavowal of suicide as a tactic of war. Rippin’s paper thus impressively illustrates the extent to which “political realities ... underlie scriptural and historical interpretation of every era”.⁶ Concerning the modern era in particular, Rippin points to a

3 Gifford, p. 214.

4 Gifford, p. 206.

5 Saeed, p. 222.

6 Rippin, p. 248.

phenomenon also encountered in other cultures, namely the rejection of the exegetical traditions of the past in favour of a much more narrowly circumscribed notion of scripture which purports to be exclusively text-based and hence more authentic, while in reality reflecting “goals and values espoused at the moment”.⁷ Prominent among these are, we might add, the irredentist and exclusivist strategies of community formation so much in evidence at the present time. Rippin concludes with a thought-provoking critique of modern scholarship whose “textualist” bias in approaching the Quran appears unwittingly to underpin the tenets of conservative religion, including “a very particular non-progressive form of Islam”.⁸

The rejection of past tradition as a feature of modernist exegesis figures also in Sikhism, as is shown in the next paper authored by Christopher Shackle. It begins with a welcome introduction on the nature and origin of Sikh scripture before engaging in a historical overview of four centuries of Sikh exegesis. The wide range of styles and languages in evidence in the commentaries on the “divine message of truth” transmitted by Gurū Nānak⁹ reflect Sikhism’s geographical position on the divide between the cultural orbs of South Asia and the Middle East. Thus Shackle adduces examples aiming to harmonize the message of Sikh scripture with the Hindu pantheon on the one hand and with mystical Islam on the other. With the rise of the reformist movement of Sikhism in the twentieth century, however, such syncretistic approaches are no longer in evidence. What we find instead is an exegetical motivation in keeping with the needs of a nationalist and communalist agenda. Sikhism is now presented as a highly distinctive form of monotheism with its own language and communal power base and hence quite separate from Hinduism and Islam. Hand-in-hand with this go the rejection of earlier hagiographic traditions and a return to the text by way of detailed grammatical and lexicographic analysis, with a view to narrowing the meaning of scripture to “one and only one possible meaning to any given verse” and thus freeing it from the “sleep of polysemantic learning”.¹⁰ Shackle’s paper furthermore demonstrates the significant influence of the colonial encounter on the course taken by Sikh exegesis, including the seminal impact of the first English translation of the Ādi Granth which was undertaken in the nineteenth century: while the translator’s disparaging approach to his subject provoked resentment and dismay, his philological acumen inspired emulation.

Britain and the English language are major factors also in the next two papers which deal with modern reinterpretations of texts drawn from the vast scriptural legacy of Hinduism. At this point we leave behind the realm of scholarly exegesis in favour of epic poetry and comic strips, which appear here as two altogether different but no less effective means of

7 Rippin, p. 250.

8 Rippin, p. 253.

9 Shackle p. 257.

10 Shackle, pp. 271–2.

rendering scripture relevant to the exigencies of contemporary circumstance. They are, moreover, peculiarly suited to their cultural context since the narrative nature of the scriptural source texts lends itself well to creative retellings through other media.

Pamela Lothspeich's paper is first in line since its main focus is a work of pre-independence India which appeared in 1910 and represents the first modern poetic recasting of a theme drawn from Hindu mythology. The objective of its author Maithilisharan Gupta resides in transforming his source material, the story of the slaying of Abhimanyu's killer Jayadrath in the *Mahābhārata*, into a political allegory of India's confrontation with its colonial master, the British Empire. Lothspeich shows us how the poet remoulds the characters of the ancient epic to forge them into modern exemplars ready for sacrifice in the service of the nation. Community formation is the objective also here: cast in standard Hindi, the poem was directed at a wide audience and aimed to engender a national awakening. Its theme became emblematic for the independence struggle, for Lothspeich tells us of numerous subsequent treatments of the story of Abhimanyu, seemingly inspired by Gupta's poem, which appeared up to 1947 in various media including theatre and film.

If the struggle for independence provided the underlying motivation, the "need" to be met, in Gupta's recasting of Hindu mythology, the purpose of its reinterpretation in the comic books discussed by Karlene McLain springs from a different, rather less martial, context. For a start, the text accompanying the illustrations is rendered not in an Indian language but in English, and the intended audience is the middle-class children of post-independence India who are to be acquainted with Indian themes and values in an easily digestible medium inspired by the example of American comics such as *Tarzan* and *Classics Illustrated*. In analysing the methodology adopted by the authors McLain points out that their explicit aim was not to make the tales more relevant to modern times but rather to remain true to the original. Here too, however, the reproduction of scriptural authenticity turns out to be guided by extra-scriptural concerns, as illustrated with reference to the story of the Goddess Durga whose comic book retelling McLain shows to bear signs of subtle and yet significant innovation. The result is a "sanitized version" of the story which, McLain concludes, brings it in line with "modern middle-class, upper-caste Hindu beliefs and practices"¹¹ thought fitting to be imparted to the young.

With Francesca Tarocco's paper we find ourselves in the company of a Chinese text which ranks among the foremost canonical sources of East Asian Buddhism, the *Treatise of the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith*. Allegedly based on a Sanskrit original, it is first attested in two different versions in the sixth–seventh century CE, since when it has spawned a wealth of commentary both medieval and modern. As surveyed by Tarocco, nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to the treatise have served a bewildering range of agendas, though their objectives have a familiar ring in the light of the previous papers. One commentator, Ling

11 McLain, p. 320.

Qichao, approached the text as part of his strategy to endow China with a national religion so as to unite it under one ideological banner and enable it to rival the West. The English missionary Timothy Richard, on the other hand, approached the treatise as a proto-Christian text which seemed to offer hope for an eventual conversion of the Buddhist East. Yet another commentator and translator, the Japanese scholar Suzuki, resorted to the arsenal of Western scholarship to present his readers with a modern rehabilitation of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Significantly, each of them had a different view on the provenance of the text: Qichao saw it as authentically Chinese, Richard attributed it to the teachings of the apostle Thomas and Suzuki aimed to prove the historicity of a Sanskrit original. There is hardly a better illustration of the degree to which human agency determines the manner in which scriptural truth is remoulded in fulfilment of demands imposed by the perennial struggle to maintain or reshape communal identity.

Among the topics that surface in several of the papers here collected is that of gender. Abdullah Saeed mentions the American scholar Amina Wadud whose “gender jihad” aims to document that the Quran “liberates and empowers women” and hence upholds the principle of gender equality.¹² The modern Indian texts discussed by Lothspeich and McLain, on the other hand, reshape their scriptural sources in opposite ways in order to forge visions of femininity that conform to conventional social norms: one raises the profile of the female figures in the *Mahābhārata* to make them nobler and more pronounced but still deferential to the male,¹³ whereas the other removes the suggestion of female supremacy in the original by limiting the power of the goddess Durga and tempering her destructive zeal.¹⁴

Gender is also the principal subject of the final paper which deals with Confucianism and women’s rights in South Korea. Though not a religion, Confucianism is a system of ethics based upon a set of canonical scriptures which have been instrumental in forging a cultural identity. They can thus be validly discussed on the same footing as the religious scriptures that feature in this volume. Eunkang Koh, the author of the paper, writes not as an outside observer but as a participant in a debate in which the stakes are high: in her opinion, “Confucianism, which is an integral part of Korean culture, cannot survive if it is not compatible with gender equality”.¹⁵ Accordingly, she engages in an exegetical task along parameters that appear to characterize all quests for scriptural truth exemplified here: to align it with the perceived truth of the age and hence consolidate and preserve its foundational role. Koh’s methodology is first and foremost linguistic: by pointing out that the Chinese character used to denote a person in Confucian scriptures does not differentiate between male and female, she argues that the teachings which they express are equally

12 Saeed, p. 233.

13 Lothspeich, p. 291.

14 McLain, pp. 317–20.

15 Koh, p. 345.

applicable to both genders and hence do not give one preferential status over the other. By adopting this and other kindred arguments, the primary sources of Confucianism are effectively dissociated from the patriarchal system which is viewed as a social and historical reality not caused or even explicitly sanctioned by scripture. In the second part of her paper Koh shows that Confucian texts composed by Korean female authors even as far back as the fifteenth century gave voice to strategies aimed at maximizing female emancipation to the extent possible within the patriarchal strictures of the time. The conclusion is unequivocal: “Confucianism is compatible with gender equality” – provided its scriptures are restored to their original meaning and divested of misinterpretations.¹⁶

The papers assembled here are, inevitably, a random conglomeration that provides no more than a very partial insight into vast, complex and highly diversified cultural traditions. Nevertheless the parallels that are shown to exist between their approaches to scriptural truth are such that the temptation cannot be resisted to offer some concluding observations, however tentative they may be in the light of the limited evidence here presented. In sum, the impression one is left with after the perusal of this volume is perhaps best captured in a rabbinical story which John Wansbrough chose in order to illustrate what he called the “caducity of literary transmission”:¹⁷

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer – and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the “Maggid” of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers – and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs – and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down in his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.

While Wansbrough saw the parable as “eloquent testimony to the reconstruction of the past”¹⁸ engaged in by historians, it can be said to

16 Koh, p. 361.

17 The story concludes Wansbrough’s lecture entitled “*Res ipsa loquitur*: history and mimesis”, which appears in J. Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu – Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (foreword, translations and expanded notes by Gerald Hawting), (New York: Prometheus, 2006), 159–72.

18 *Ibid.*, 172.

apply with equal force to the interpreters of scripture. Scriptural truth is as vital and effective as “fire, prayer and place”, but also as intangible as these sacred implements had become by the time of the Rabbi of Rishin. The exegete is thus faced with the perennial need to re-narrate the story of truth in his effort to assist his community in the performance of the “difficult task” at hand: namely the task of charting the way ahead by reconciling the transient with the eternal. As noted above, a strange dialectic thereby emerges between permanence and transience: scripture, supposedly sacred and immutable, is in actual fact surprisingly malleable and unstable; the community on the other hand, though mortal and always in a state of flux, sustains and reasserts its exclusive identity anew from generation to generation.

What is, in actual fact, perhaps the most persistent and “immutable” factor in this process is human nature. While the interpreters of scripture often see it as their foremost task to construct and maintain difference and distinctiveness – an objective particularly in evidence in conflictive situations as illustrated in many of the papers – and while their medium of expression may range from scholarly hermeneutics to comic books, the actual process involved, the manner in which scripture and community are brought into relation, the manner in which the authority of scripture is invoked for the purpose of legitimization, is essentially one and the same. Categorical difference between humans is thus erected with means and methods which in themselves testify that we are not different at all.

What this teaches us about the function and nature of scriptural truth would seem to be a vindication of the approach developed by Abdullah Saeed with respect to the Quran: that scripture is indeed greatly conditioned by context, that its meaning is time-bound, undetermined and hence by definition polysemous and not narrowly defined and absolute. This realization alone, combined with the awareness that our interpretive strategies are conditioned by analogous concerns and follow kindred paths, cannot but help to open more widely the doors to dialogue, understanding and compromise.

In particular, it encourages an approach to scripture motivated not by the needs of one community in its opposition to, and struggle with, another, but motivated instead by the needs of the global community which is faced today with the daunting necessity of co-existence in conditions of mutual dependency, proximity and inter-mixture never previously experienced in history. If the scriptures of all cultures are approached with this objective in mind, the remarkable degree of convergence in the ethical and spiritual values to which they give expression may well appear as the most significant shared and tangible crystallization of scriptural truth. They also rank uppermost among the needs of the age.