

## God and the gods: inter-faith relations in the Old Testament

A discussion paper by Ida Glaser

### 1. Introductory

The Old Testament is not often seen by Christians as an important resource for positive inter-faith relations. Typically, it is said that the Old Testament views other faiths almost entirely in terms of idolatry, but that (1) God uses other nations even when they do not acknowledge Him, (2) there are people from other faiths who learn about Israel's God and come to Him, (3) there is a vision of all nations coming to the One God, (4) there are Gentile individuals who appear to worship the One God and (5) the wisdom literature indicates use of materials from the other faiths[4]. Such an analysis may offer the beginnings of a framework for dealing with the traditional list of theological questions which western Christians have been asking about other faiths in recent years, but it scarcely begins to 'scratch the surface' of the wealth of Old Testament material.

Why is the Old Testament so useful here? In Muslim-Christian relations, it is obviously useful because it enables us to explore a great deal of commonality. One of my research interests has been comparison of parallel stories in the Bible and the Qur'an. These can function as a non-confrontational place to explore common ideas and divergent views of the world. However, this is not the focus of the current reflection. Here, I want to suggest that the OT is useful in our inter-faith relationships because it shows us so much about human nature, and can help us to deal with the national, ethnic, territorial and political dimensions of life which inevitably come into play when a faith is adopted by a large group of people. This is clearly crucial in Muslim-Christian relationships, and I hope that the present exploration will offer some foundation on which (1) we can challenge and build Christian understandings (2) we can help Christians better to understand political dimensions of Islam and (3), in co-operation with Muslim scholars, we can develop comparative understandings.

The NT deliberately challenges the link between faith and these dimensions. This is the thrust of Jesus' much quoted 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's' (Matt 22v21). This is not, as some have interpreted it, a separation of life into the sacred and the secular, but a challenge to those who would make religion a tool of nationalism, racism, territorialism or political and economic power.

The NT shows very little interest in the political entity of Israel as the people of God. Its focus is, rather, on a universalising of the faith that breaks down or relativises the markers of such identity. It calls individuals and families to personal faith in the Messiah. During its time, the followers of the Messiah are always minorities living under the rule of a non-Christian state: the NT never envisages the development of a predominantly Christian political entity. I suspect that this is the reason why Christians of my particular tradition find it so difficult to understand ideas of, for example, an Islamic state, and to work out, for example, whether they live in a 'Christian' country and what that might imply.

But this NT focus does not mean that there are no biblical resources for understanding the religious-political link or that it is unimportant. The very NT struggles with the issue are surely because the link was made so strongly by the Jews of Jesus' time. Consider, for example, Jesus' own description of His mission in Luke 4. He first declares His messianic mission by quoting Isaiah (Lk 4v17-19 cf Is 61v1-2) and then goes on to explain to His fellow Nazarenes why they will reject Him (v23-30).

What angers them is His choice of OT material about inter-faith relations. The Jews of Jesus' time had at least three reasons for not relating with Gentiles. There was a religious barrier: many believed that, in order to keep their faith pure, they had to keep separate from people who worshipped other gods. There was the political barrier: they were under the Roman occupation, and many wanted liberation. There was also the ethnic barrier: as the chosen people, many wanted to keep racial purity and saw close contact with Gentiles as polluting.

Jesus pointed to two OT incidents in which God chose to bless a needy foreigner rather than one of the many Israelites with the same needs. The two He chose were blessed in the context of religious and political tensions respectively. The widow of Zarephath story (1 Kings 17) is part of the story of Elijah's confrontation with Baal worship during the time of Ahab: the widow who was blessed was clearly a worshipper of another god than Yahweh – perhaps even of Baal. The story of Naaman the leper (2 Kings 5) is just as striking. It comes during Israel's long military conflict with Syrian, and Naaman was actually the commander of the Syrian army. The OT verdict on him is that he was a valiant man, and that 'through him the Lord had given victory to Aram' (2 Kings 5v1). It was this man who was healed of leprosy through the prophet Elisha. Both he and the widow eventually believe in the One God.

Jesus shows, then, God's concern to bless non-Israelites, including those who might appear to be a threat to the religious faithfulness or political stability of Israel. His mission is to cut across the nationalistic categories in which people so naturally think.

I take this challenge of Jesus as one of my hermeneutic keys for the examination of the OT. Another is Paul's summary of the Gospel according to the OT in Gal 3v8. He quotes God's first call to Abraham in Genesis 12v3, where the purpose of the calling and blessing of Abraham's family is that all nations of the earth should be blessed through him. These 'NT' eyes make us read the whole OT on the basis that Israel is part of God's overall purpose for His world, which is NOT to establish a special political group, but to open the way to Himself for all peoples, and which reaches its climax in the Messiah. Israel is but the means to this blessing.

## 2. Reading the Old Testament

There are many ways of reading the Old Testament. We can read it as the history of the Jewish people, or as the first instalment of the great story of salvation, or as a devotional book through which God speaks to us. That is, in hermeneutical terms, we can focus on the world behind the text, the world of the text, or the world in front of the text. To find resources for inter-faith relations, I want to suggest that we need to do all three. The world behind the text tells us about the religions of the peoples surrounding Israel, which act as a backdrop for the development of Israel. The world of the text then helps us to see how the biblical writers interacted with those religions. The world in front of the text encourages us to reflect on the implications of all this for today.

If we want to use the OT to guide us in inter-faith relations, we need to read it in all these ways. Because it does not function by giving us a set of rules, but by showing us the slow development of Israel and her interactions with other faiths in many different contexts, we also need to read the whole OT in this way in order to get a balanced view. The problem for scholars is that this is impossible for one person to do rigorously. A biblical scholar can spend a lifetime looking only at one aspect of the world behind the text. The literature is immense. But I am risking an attempt at the impossible. I am trying to get some sort of framework for thinking, in the hopes that others will fill in the gaps and help to correct it. Here, I will give three tasters of my explorations.

### 2.1 Genesis

The world behind the text of Genesis is one of varied religions. It takes us into Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt, all of which had many gods, with their stories, their temples, their rituals, their sacrifices and their priests. The striking thing is that the world of the text has virtually no mention of these. In the whole of Genesis, the only explicit mentions of other gods are Laban's household gods (30v31ff), Jacob's call to get rid of gods when he finally went to worship at Bethel (35v2) and the statement that Joseph's wife was the daughter of a priest of On (41v50).

#### 2.1.1 Creation

Compare the creation in Genesis 1 with the Babylonian creation epic. (see chapter 5 of book).

Monotheism is taught by the re-telling of the story without any mention of spiritual powers other than God. In fact, such aspects of nature as stars, moon and monsters, that are supernatural beings in the other stories, are reduced to parts of creation under the total control of the living God.

### 2.1.2 Abraham

The Genesis story of Abraham makes no mention of the other faiths at all. This is in stark contrast with the Qur'an, which presents Abraham as a prophet of monotheism who argues with his polytheistic father and people. We have the story of his conversion, as he sees stars, then the moon, then the sun. In each case, he wonders whether this should be his god. It sets, and he realises that the true God is the creator of all these heavenly bodies. There is the story of his breaking the idols. When the people ask who did it, he suggests they ask the chief idol, who has seen everything. They respond that the idols cannot speak, and Abraham chides them for their foolishness in worshipping them.

Genesis uses the opposite strategy in establishing monotheism[1]. It simply deals with the other gods as if they did not exist. They do not seem to matter. However, a close examination indicates their influence. Most obvious here is the name most often used for God: El. El was known in both Mesopotamia and Canaan as the high god, the creator, the wise, the ancient one. The word can simply refer to a deity, as well as being the name of a particular god. This was a name Abraham knew before God called him, and it was also the name that God accepted from him.

Further, the patterns of Abraham's worship reflect local patterns of worship. The building of altars and the offering of prayers, tithes, vows and libations were all part of the local tradition. There is no record of God's giving Abraham specific religious practices or laws, with the one exception of circumcision. Rather, what seems to be happening is that God calls Abraham personally, and continues to speak personally to him. He gives personal instructions rather than teachings about beliefs and practices. The centre of this is the covenant, which is an unconditional promise of blessing for his family and, through them, blessing for the world. Circumcision is the sign of this. To this promise and personal interaction, Abraham responds by worshipping in the way he already knows. However, he slowly learns that God is not entirely as El was known to the other peoples. It is interesting that Abraham builds an altar near, and not in, Bethel, where the Canaanite altar was. Most striking is the story of the Binding of Isaac, where God makes it clear that He does not want the sort of human sacrifice that seems sometimes to have been practised in the worship of El.

Did he know at this stage that the God who was speaking to him was the only god? Scholars have discussed this. The answer from the text is, I think, that it is difficult to know what was in Abraham's mind. But, from the point of view of the author, the god who was speaking to Abraham was the one and only God who would reveal Himself as Yahweh. This God also spoke to other people, such as the slave Hagar and the king Abimelech.

The pattern continues throughout Genesis, as this one God speaks to all sorts of people, and acts in sometimes spectacular ways. The story of Joseph merits some attention here. He moves amongst the people of Egypt, always serving the One God. He brings messages even to Pharaoh, who seems simply to accept them, and there is no mention of Pharaoh's having a different god. Pharaoh even accepts a blessing from Jacob (47v7).

What are we to make of all this? I would suggest that, at the deepest level, the other gods simply do not matter. Maybe God is not very interested in our religions! What matters is the One God who really exists, and his dealings with human kind. Genesis 1-11 establishes that this is a world of

human beings, all descended from Noah, and therefore all of one race and under the rainbow covenant. He deals with us all as human beings.

The story of Abraham is also an interesting missiological study. This is how God started his mission to a polytheistic world.

## 2.2 The rest of the Old Testament: an overview

Genesis shows us the start of God's mission to His world. The rest of the OT tells of the establishment of the nation of Israel, and its interactions with God and with its neighbours. At each stage, we can see important patterns relevant to inter-faith relations.

### 2.2.1 The establishment of a people

The rest of the Pentateuch establishes Israel as a people among peoples. It also establishes Yahweh as the One God over all the other gods.

In Egypt, the argument with Pharaoh and the plagues are clearly a competition between Yahweh and the other gods. Even a surface reading indicates the competition with the wise men and with Pharaoh in his usurpation of divinity. Reading in the context of ancient Egyptian religion suggests that the plagues deliberately defeat the Egyptian gods.

In the law, the Israelites are repeatedly told that they must avoid the worship of other gods. This is, after all, the first of the ten commandments (Ex 20v2-3). This is God: the One who brought them out of Egypt. They are not to worship anyone else. Neither are they to make images of Him - this signals that not only is Yahweh the only One, but that He is also different from the other gods.

An examination of the various ordinances of Exodus – Deuteronomy confirms this. Israel has laws and sacrifices and priests and a place of worship, just as the surrounding nations do. But throughout it all there are key differences. For example, there is the ark with its carrying poles, which seems similar to the thrones of gods and kings, but with a difference: there is no image on the throne.

There are two important principles other than the prohibition of images. One is the idea of COVENANT on which the whole idea of Israel is based. God has chosen, called and established this particular people, and is committed to them in steadfast love, no matter what happens. It is interesting that the Israelite laws are also much more centred on relationships than are, say, the laws of Hammurabi, which are much more about property. The second is the idea of HOLINESS. Israel as God's special people is called to reflect His character of pure moral holiness. They are to be different from the nations, to show that God is different[2].

In summary, Israel is a nation like other nations, but her God is not like their gods. There are therefore areas in which, although Israel as a human community is inevitably like other human communities, she is to be different. This will be a tension throughout the OT, it was at the heart of the tendencies towards nationalism that Jesus challenged, and it is a tension for us today.

### 2.2.2 The People in the land

Joshua sees the people at last established in the land. The story of the conquest is, on the one hand, a story of God's faithfulness in giving His people a place to live. On the other hand, it is a terrifying story of destruction of the peoples who were already living in the land. The destruction is because of their idolatry, and the idea is that God's holiness requires the land to be purified from idols, not least so that Israel will not be tempted to idolatry. It is not a comfortable book for those who want to see good inter-faith relations!

There are many things that we need to explore, but here are some pointers:

FIRST, this is seen as a judgement on the Canaanites at the right time. God's words to Abraham in Gen 15v16 indicate that one of the reasons for Israel staying in Egypt for 400 years was that the Canaanites were not ready for judgement. God's justice is real.

SECOND, this is clearly a unique event in the Bible, and it is not the only pattern for inter-faith relations. These are, presumably, descendants of the same Canaanites with whom Abraham was friendly!

THIRD, God's justice is not partial. Israel is frequently warned that, should she be unfaithful to Yahweh and turn to other gods, she will be forfeit the land. Further, it is not only Canaanites who are destroyed by God's holiness. The story of Achan in Joshua 7 is a sobering account of judgement on a disobedient Jewish family. God's holiness puts demands on Jew and Gentile alike.

FOURTH, this illustrates the problems for a monotheistic faith relating to people who worship different gods when that faith takes the form of a nation and needs territory. The main problem identified here is the need to keep the faith pure. Of course, the conquest of the Canaanites was actually quite limited, but the principle that the very presence of idolatry can be a stumbling block is clear. The other issue, that emerges more clearly in Judges, is the security and stability of the nation. There, the presence of other nations, in particular the more technologically advanced Philistines, was a constant threat.

FIFTHLY, and most importantly, we need to read Joshua in the light of the rest of the Bible, not least the NT which, as we have said, cuts the territory-faith links, as Jesus refuses to restore the land to Israeli rule.

The tensions with surrounding nations continued through the time of the judges, until eventually David was able to extend his rule and to establish Israel securely among the other nations. There is a pattern throughout. It is that the relationships with the other nations depended not on military power but on relations with Yahweh. When the people kept their part of the covenant, they were victorious and then able to live at peace. When they practised injustice and idolatry, they were attacked by other nations.

### 2.2.3 The monarchy

Israel as originally constituted did not have a king, and there are indications that this was because Yahweh was her King. 1 Sam 8 tells us that the request for a king was a rejection of Yahweh's kingship. The reason for it was a desire to be 'like the other nations', specifically in having a king to lead into battle. There were good socio-political grounds for this at the time, and God allowed them what they wanted and even made a covenant with the second king (David) and sent the Messiah through him. However, having a king DID make them like the nations in linking the religion to political power. There were the prophets, and the good kings listened to the prophets and so put themselves under God[3]. Sadly, most of the kings, especially of the northern kingdom, did not listen to the prophets, and they led Israel to be like the nations in other ways.

From the beginning of the northern kingdom, they led the people to worship Yahweh as if He were like the other gods, through the calf idols. This opened the way to associating a consort with Yahweh, and to the actual worship of other gods. The ultimate consequence of this was ejection from the land through the exile.

We see again the tensions produced by the faith-politics link.

### 2.2.4 Exile

Next to the exodus, I see the exile as the most important aspect of Israel's history. A large proportion of the OT is concerned with it. It is key to any biblical understanding of inter-faith relationships. This is because it removes Israel from its God-given land. This (1) breaks the ties between the faith and the territory and between faith and political power, and (2) forces the Jews to live amongst peoples of different faiths.

(1) The defeat of the Jews was interpreted by their conquerors, and sometimes by the Jews themselves, as the defeat of their god. The prophets insisted that this was not so: rather, God was doing as He had said He would. He was not the national god of Israel, but the God of all nations, who gave victory to whichever nation He would, and, in particular, used other nations to judge Israel. The book of Daniel in particular shows Yahweh as the one true God in the very centre of the Babylonian empire.

(2) The Jews discovered that they needed neither land nor temple nor power in order to faithfully worship Yahweh. This is again seen in Daniel, but also in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Esther is also relevant here, showing that God is able to protect Israel under hostile foreign domination.

### 2.2.5 Return

Part of the demonstration of God's sovereignty is the return of His people to their land and the rebuilding of the temple. (There is also the prophecy of a greater return, which Christians see as having been accomplished through Jesus Christ.) Just as God ruled the nations in Israel's exile, He ruled them in her return. The foreign King Cyrus is Yahweh's servant.

On Israel's return, we find her trying to find a way of being holy. We see a return to the law of God, and also an attempt to keep racial purity. The idea is that, as the presence of the Canaanites led to idolatry before the exile, Israel should now keep pure. In particular, marriages to people of other faiths were completely forbidden. We can see here the beginnings of a movement that led to the situation that Jesus challenged in Nazareth, where many Jews wanted to ensure purity by keeping religious separation and gaining political power.

Also included in the OT is a collection of the literature that grew up during these times.

### 2.2.6 The Prophets

The commentary on history

The use of imagery from other faiths – Hosea and Ezekiel

The condemnation of idolatry

The call to justice

### 2.2.7 Wisdom literature

The gathering and use of common wisdom.

The commonality of concerns and poetic images.

### 2.2.8 Stories of individuals

The Gentiles who came to faith in the God of Israel – Rahab, Ruth, Uriah and Hushai etc, Naaman, the Ninevites, King Nebuchadnezzar.

The Jews who kept faith among the Gentiles – Mordecai and Esther, Daniel and his friends

## 2.3 In front of the text: Two examples

### 2.3.1 Co-belligerence?

There is at present a correspondence in the magazine of the UK Evangelical Alliance about what is called 'co-belligerence', that is, Christians working together with people of other faiths (and none) for the good of society. Some say that, of course, as fellow human beings, we can work together. Others say that we must be very careful of making alliances with non-believers.

What has the OT to offer? Should we turn, for example, to Joshua and Nehemiah say that we must keep apart to keep holy?

I think it is helpful here to look at two contrasting situations in which co-operation with Gentiles was envisaged. These are the temple building of Solomon and Nehemiah. There cannot be any greater test case, I think. The interesting thing is that the two had opposite policies. Solomon actually asked for help from the King of Tyre, and used his best workmen. Nehemiah refused the request of the Samaritans to help with the building.

I think this is helpful because it warns us against trying to make hard and fast rules for all situations. In fact, a NT reading of the OT should discourage us from thinking that the rules are primary anyway.

Nehemiah was in a very insecure position, and he realised that his Samaritan neighbours were wanting to help in order to bring trouble. Solomon was at the height of Israel's strength, and King Hiram was friendly towards him and towards Israel. Further, the early part of Solomon's reign shows us more, I think, than anything else in the OT, a picture of Israel as a blessing to the nations. The nations are involved in the very building of the temple of God, and when Solomon dedicates the temple his prayer includes the vision of people of many nations coming to worship and being heard by Yahweh. We also see how Solomon collected wisdom – clearly from the other nations as well as from Israel, how God gave him the discerning heart to be able to do this, and how people from many nations came to hear it. The Queen of Sheba is the great example here.

The latter part of Solomon's reign shows how even such a great king could go astray. This was through a different kind of inter-faith co-operation – his marriages to many foreign women, which made a door for the worship of their gods.

As so often, the OT gives us stories of human actions to think about, rather than a set of rules to work from. The 'right and wrong' dimension here is that God requires of us faithful worship of Himself and no other, and that He wants to bring blessing to other peoples. The stories then give an understanding of our nature, our strengths and our weaknesses that can help us prayerfully to judge how to act in particular situations.

### 2.3.1 Judgement?

The big question that people of my Christian tradition often ask is about the judgement of people of other faiths. If, as we believe, salvation is available only through the cross of Christ, does that mean that everyone from other faiths will go to hell?

Personally, I think this is God's business rather than mine, and exploring what the Bible has to say on the subject would take at least a whole seminar. But I would like to look briefly at an OT clue that can

help us. The OT does not, of course, have much to say about the judgement of individuals after death. It does, however, have a lot to say about the judgement of nations in this life.

Amos 1 and 2 sets the pattern. One after the other, judgement is pronounced on Israel's enemies. The reason? What we would call today 'crimes against humanity'. Israel is being assured that God has seen what these nations have done to her, and that He will bring them to justice. (The OT gives very little information about how the nations might be judged apart from their relation to Israel.) However, the focus of these chapters is not on the other nations. Their judgement leads up to the judgement on Israel. She is judged for breaking God's laws, for injustice, for empty religion and for idolatry.

This is the general pattern. There is almost no suggestion that the nations will be judged for their wrong religion (the only hints of this I have found are in Jer 48 and 50). But again and again and again Israel is judged for wrong religion – and this is as much right ritual without the right attitudes and actions that go with it as it is worship of other gods or worship of Yahweh as if He were like the other gods.

Amos summarises this in 3v2: You only have a chosen of all the nations of the earth. Therefore I will judge you for all your sins. This we could take as a motto for our inter-faith relations – if we think that we know God, or, rather, that God knows us, our first business is to live in His way rather than to criticise others. We will then be free to work for the blessing of all peoples, and to rejoice in Jesus' vision of God's generosity towards individuals who might otherwise be seen as threats to our religious purity or political stability.

#### Notes

[1] Note that the Rabbis added the stories of Abraham and the idols in the Midrash on Gen 11v28.

[2] Some of the laws appear to have the establishment of difference as their main aim. For example, the food laws made Israel different. They also ensured that Israelites could not join the other nations' religious feasts without becoming unclean.

[3] This is particularly characteristic of David. Note that Saul was rejected as king primarily because he did not keep his place as king but trespassed into the prophet's territory (1 Sam 15). The principle seems to be that kingship if it is not conflated with the priestly office. Cf. Ideas of separation of church and state.

[4] Such an analysis is offered succinctly in the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England's report, *The Mystery of Salvation*, Church Publishing House, 1995.