

NEW PRACTICES OF SCRIPTURAL READING— TOWARDS A COMMON FEASTING

Meetings of the *Society for Scriptural Reasoning*

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In the quiet days building up to the American Academy of Religion (AAR) meeting in Toronto this year a group of Jews, Christians and Muslims met together in a series of meetings which many will remember as having been the climax of the whole event. While the AAR did not begin its activities until November 23rd, the meetings between the Jews, Christians and Muslims began the day before on Thursday, Nov. 22nd. The first took place in the private house of Robert Gibbs, a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto. Graciously hosted by the said professor and his family, this meeting involved both the sharing of good food and a feasting upon the scriptures: Jewish and Christian sacred texts, side by side with Qur'anic ones. The purpose of the meeting was both to cement friendships and to see those with whom we have walked the strange path of 'scriptural reasoning'. At the centre of this activity was the 'feasting in common' which takes place where scriptures are shared and the discourse and practices of traditions other than one's own are valued and explored. The texts that were discussed were Genesis (28:10-22), Luke (9:28-36), and the visit to Medina by the Christians of Najran from the Seerah of Muhammad (saw). The common theme in the three narratives was the unexpected eruption of the Divine Word in the midst of an "ordinary" human activity.

There was a radical shift in the venue of the meeting the next day. From the warm, gracious and personal ambiance of the Gibbs residence, the meeting of the following day was held in one of the prime teaching rooms of the University of Toronto. This was a place of academic privilege: the centre of the highest intellectual and pedagogical values of the university system – where disinterested detachment and cool objectivity are considered the prime values. Even though there was a significant change in the character of the

venue, there was an undoubted continuity at work. The purpose of this meeting was not now to get down to the serious business, nor was it to forget about the proceedings of the evening before. Rather there was a carrying over of the hospitality of the preceding evening into the academic forum. The meeting on Friday morning centred on a document in the making titled "The Tent of Abraham." Prepared by the founders of the SSR, Peter Ochs of the University of Virginia, Dan Hardy and David Ford of Cambridge University – with contributions from Basit B. Koshul of Concordia College – this document will be the most coherent statement to date on the principles underlying the activity and methodology of Scriptural Reasoning. Besides being a statement of principles, it will contain a detailed description of the environment/principles of modern/secular academic inquiry in which SR has emerged and to which it is a response – and to which Scriptural Reasoning is an alternative/corrective.

The momentum of the Thursday and Friday meetings which was maintained at the formal session of the Societies of Scriptural Reasoning on Sunday night. This formal session was a part of the proceedings of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. That session focused upon readings within the Abrahamic faiths of the key theme in the Song of Song – love, divine and human and the relationship between the two. The presenters were Ellen Davis of Duke Divinity School, Alon Gottstein of the Elijah Institute in Jerusalem and Qamar al-Huda of Boston College. The papers delivered at this session and the responses to them (as well as the proceedings from previous SSR meetings) can be viewed at the following web-site: www.depts.drew.edu/ssr/nationalsr. Indeed, the combination of ideas which emerged from this session to do with feasting, community, sharing, the love of God and textuality itself as it becomes present to us in the reading of sacred texts seemed to sum up the experience and adventure of the group as a whole.

The Societies of Scriptural Reading is a new religious and intellectual movement which is grounded in a new way of sharing and enjoying the sacred texts of the Abrahamic tradition. It finds expression both at the highest intellectual level, and, importantly, also in the practice of reconciliation and peace resolution (through CHAI, or Children of Abraham Institute). One of the many things that makes this movement distinctive is precisely this link between the two arms. This is based not upon a determination or decision that the one must be seen in terms of the other:

there is nothing of an ideology here. But it is grounded rather in the *discovery* that scriptural reasoning entails peace-making of and in itself. This configuration is at the heart of the scriptural reasoning enterprise, which cannot be understood without some reflection upon what the intertwining of scriptural reading and peace-making mean.

Historically, the way that we Christians, Jews and Muslims have read our own scriptures has proved as divisive as it has been reconciliatory. Christian history, for instance, is severely marred by deep-seated and often violent oppositions around different ways of understanding scripture. The Protestant Reformation with its Catholic Counter-Reformation would be only one instance of this. One can also cite a myriad of examples from Jewish and Muslim history that shows partisans within each community condemning/fighting each other due to differing interpretations of the same sacred texts. And yet no true believer within an Abrahamic faith could hold that the divine self-communication in their own scriptural tradition is about anything other than the rule and triumph of peace. Is it not peace, the peace of God on earth (whether structured as Kingdom, Law or loving submission) which is the foundational movement of each of the three religions? And yet there are many matters of belief and practice that continue to divide us. No one – and certainly no one in the field of Scriptural Reasoning— can begin to claim to have solved such problems. The differences between us remain, and are likely to remain for the foreseeable future, quite intractable. But there is nevertheless the possibility of a different way of relating with each other, through the common practice of scriptural reading, or what we might call ‘scriptural sharing’. This is to read our own scriptures in the company of others and to read their scriptures together with them. The bedrock of this sharing is the common presupposition that these sacred texts communicate the divine presence and will. The outcome of this practice is not easily quantifiable in terms of things learned as data, but is experienced rather as a process of enrichment. Paradoxically, one of the key elements in that enrichment is the sense of a rediscovery of the scriptural inheritance in one’s own tradition. The practice of engaging in scriptural reading with others from different Abrahamic faiths does not efface one’s own scriptural tradition therefore, by forcing it into some common ground with other traditions in terms of articles of faith (or philosophies of religion). This is not a modernist enterprise. But it seems rather to strengthen our own scriptural sources by laying bare the call to peace, and asking us to submit ourselves to

it, as common feasting, which drives through all our scriptural traditions. Part of that is actually a return to our own sacred texts in a new way and with a new attentiveness to its message of peace, and to the fellowship of peace which Scriptural Reasoning sponsors and affirms.

It is impossible to know what the future of Scriptural Reasoning will be. But it is clear that the Abrahamic faiths are critically involved in many of the world's most damaging conflicts. It seems right therefore that a new way of peacefulness and sharing might emerge which draws not upon a common inheritance rooted in the secular order, but rather upon the calling to 'common feasting' which is rooted in our scriptural traditions themselves, and which is the ground of our common scriptural practice.

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