BEYOND LOGICS OF PRESERVATION AND BURIAL:

THE DISPLAY OF DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY OF TRADITIONS IN SCRIPTURAL REASONING

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Basit Koshul and Steve Kepnes have performed a wonderful service for us. Basit Koshul has argued not only that Islam 'squares the circle' (Murad) by being a vital dissenting voice within modern cultures, but also that scriptural reasoning may be a fruitful means of accomplishing this. One important task for me in this response is to show that non-Muslims are sufficiently attentive to this friendly dissent: an unheard voice is not an effective form of criticism, and circles remain unsquared. I shall make some remarks about this at the end. My more immediate, and very pleasurable, task is to respond directly to Steve Kepnes' paper.

Steve Kepnes has tried to show us how a Jew *understands* Islam. There are three things which he has not done, and I want to draw attention to these.

(1) Steve Kepnes has not tried to find a Western expert on Islam to tell him what Islam is. Ours is an age of hopeless generalisation, where *experts* appear at a moment's notice and pronounce about the *essence* of some phenomenon. It is possible, in today's universities, to be an *expert on Islam*. It is possible, in today's public sphere, to find people who will tell us *what Islam is*. But that is not what Steve Kepnes has done at all. He offers no overview of Islam; he makes no recourse to 'the facts', and he cites no Western ethnographies of Islamic culture. He has not sought to 'place' Islam in a theoretical context determined by non-Islamic political interests.

(2) Steve Kepnes has not tried to find a Muslim expert on Islam to tell him what Islam is. Ours is an age of tact and sensitivity, where we 'find space' for the other to speak for him- or herself, while we secretly make our own judgements but of course are not so crass as to articulate these in public. Steve Kepnes could have tried to find a Muslim expert behind whom he

could safely and respectably conceal his own understanding of Islam. He did not.

It is a mark of our cultural confusion that our age is marked both by hopeless generalisation, where concepts forged by the strong are imposed on the weak, and by tact and sensitivity, where judgements are indefinitely postponed, or made in a sinister fashion behind closed doors.

(3) Steve Kepnes has not tried to read a Muslim text and then say what he thinks of it. Ours is an age of 'the power of the reader'. No texts are forbidden to us; we have access to them all, so it seems, and our interpretations have infinite validity 'for us'. We are entitled to pick up any text from any time and to ventilate our 'response' to it. He has not tried, in this sense, to *understand* a Muslim text. Instead, he has read a Jewish text. He has tried to understand *that*.

Now, *understanding* is best pursued through conversation: through offers made, through offers accepted, through offer refused, and through offers transformed into new offers. Steve Kepnes has begun his act of understanding by making an offer: in this case, he *offers* a reading of Genesis 16 and Genesis 21.

Setting his face against a culture of generalisation, Steve Kepnes has offered a highly particular understanding of Islam. Setting his face against a culture of tact and sensitivity, Steve Kepnes has indeed made public judgements about Islam. Setting his face against the infinite power of the reader, Steve Kepnes has responded to texts that belong to his own tradition, and has allowed his interpretation of those texts to be disciplined by other readings in that same tradition.

This is all radical stuff: and it emerges just because Steve Kepnes has chosen to read a small part of Jewish scripture: a small part of Genesis 16 and Genesis 21.

His reasons for doing so are obvious: the Jewish texts appear to be, in his words, 'fairly negative about these figures'. The text thus appears, in an everyday kind of way, as a problem. And this thus raises a danger: for a Jew

to reflect on Hagar and Ishmael from within Jewish scripture may turn out to be to start with negativity, and to provide yet more negativity in the interpretation of these texts. Steve Kepnes starts with a problem.

The situation which brings us all together is marked by precisely this problem. Our traditions are beset with practices of speech and political action which are 'fairly negative' about each other. To put it mildly! Our newspapers and pamphlets, our politicians and their researchers, our talk in cafés and bars: trouble is not just brewing. It has already begun. In my home country a law has just been passed that allows the Government to lock up British nationals without any evidence and without charging them with any crime. Pretty much 100% of these nationals are going to be Muslims. British Muslims can now be seen, in the eyes of the law, as an 'internal threat' to national security, before they have committed any crime, and before evidence is presented that shows they are about to commit a crime. Some of our Christian bishops spoke out against this legislation, to their credit, but they were not heeded. Muslims appear quite a lot in our national press, and I can tell you that the reporting is 'fairly negative about these figures'.

Genesis 16 is a kind of sign of our situation, and I think it is for this reason that Steve Kepnes has chosen that text. His method is to try to offer a reading of the text which acknowledges the problem and tries to repair it.

Instead of reading Genesis 16 and 21 in a way that minimises the problem, Steve Kepnes in some ways allows it to be exaggerated: Hagar *really is* the stranger; she is *emphatically* Egyptian. Yet, drawing on Frymer-Kensky, we are enabled to see that Hagar prefigures not just Israel's suffering in Egypt but Israel's redemption. Hagar, the mother of Islam, is also a type of Israel: one who receives the Lord's blessing in perpetuity. Going beyond Frymer-Kensky, Hagar is the only one— man or woman— who names God; going even further— by analogy with Rashi's description of Abraham, Hagar is one who makes known the revelation of God. Steve Kepnes daringly places Hagar as a 'counterpart' to Abraham as 'evangelist of the one God'.

Steve Kepnes' reading gives us Hagar as one who is emphatically *other* to Israel: she is the mother of Ishmael, the one who is given bread and water and sent away, the one who provides one of the wives for Esau, and whose

history is an alternative history: an *other history* to that of Israel. But she is also identified *as Israel*: in the blessing she receives from the Lord; in her prefigurement of the enslavement and redemption of Israel in Egypt; she is also, in Steve Kepnes' reading, *like* Abraham, as one who makes public the revelation of God.

The thing I notice here is how there is no question of playing down the otherness. There is no attempt to integrate Sarah's maternity and Hagar's maternity into *one history*. There remain two *histories*, or even three, as Genesis presents the contrasting lines of Isaac and Ishmael, and then the contrasting lines of Jacob and Esau. Neither is there an attempt to play down the identity: Hagar is not merely like *Sarah*. She is like *Abraham*. Her children are not merely *like* Sarah's: Hagar's very self is a type of Israel as the bearer of blessing, and a sign of suffering and redemption.

This daring interpretation is taken to a quite new level when Steve Kepnes suggests that just as the 'other' of Hagar and Ishmael is preserved in Genesis' narrative, so the 'other' of Judaism is preserved in Christian narrative. Just as Genesis includes the genealogy of Hagar, narrates Abraham's burial by his *two* sons, and records Isaac's settlement at Beer-la-hai-roi, so the New Testament preserves the Jews as bearers of the law, and Christian communities preserve the Tanakh (albeit now as *Old Testament*). Steve Kepnes recognises that there are problems with this, and sees at work in Christian theology a complex hermeneutic.

If I understand Steve Kepnes right, the crucial point is the preservation of one narrative within another: just as Genesis lists the offspring of Hagar, and keeps their names alive, so Christianity preserves the Tanakh as Old Testament, and 'keeps' the law in some sense; and so Islam…

…but here I want to venture a friendly disagreement. The logic of preservation which Steve Kepnes sets next to Peter Ochs' logic of dialogue, means paying attention to *who* is doing the preserving. I wonder if Steve Kepnes has in a way too *anxiously* anticipated what Christians are doing with the Tanakh, or too *hastily* cited ayat 62, 145 and 136 from Sura 2, and the opening ayat from Sura 3. For me, Steve Kepnes' reading of Genesis 16, 21, 25, should *evoke* a corresponding reading of New Testament texts from

Christians, and corresponding readings of Qur'anic texts from Muslims. I wonder if *Steve Kepnes* should be doing all the work for us here? But maybe it isn't anxiety or hastiness but rather enthusiasm, and an experience of trust that these readings *will be evoked*, and that this entitles Steve Kepnes to speak on our behalves with the joy of knowing that we do, indeed, say these things.

I mention this, because I think those who may be curious about scriptural reasoning may be surprised by the swiftness and confidence of Steve Kepnes' moves outward from Genesis to the New Testament and to the Qur'an. This is not something guaranteed in advance: it is a task and a responsibility that is undertaken by members of each tradition. Steve Kepnes has generously refrained from offering any scripture from the New Testament, and so I want to offer the first beginnings of such an offer.

The most obvious place to do this would be through a reading of Romans 3 and 4. These deal with the relationship between Judaism, the law, and faith. The texts are long and complex, however, and this is just a little response. I will focus, then, on part of Romans 4

> ***For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness (Rom 4: 3-5)***

Paul here is a wonderful example of the logic of preservation. He 'preserves' Genesis 15.6. Let us turn to that text:

> ***And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendents be." And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:5-6)***

It is appropriate that Romans 4 should be evoked by Steve Kepnes' reading of Genesis 15, 21, 25: it is another passage narrating God's blessing. The moment of Torah which Paul 'preserves' is not just of Abraham's faith, but of Abraham's blessing by the Lord: the descendants as numberless as the

stars. It is not only the law that is preserved by Paul, but the descendants too, just as Genesis 16 preserves the generations of Hagar, and Genesis 17 and 25 preserves the generations of Ishmael. And, I should say, as Genesis 36 preserves the generations of Esau. It is not just 'material' that is preserved: the logic of preservation is the preservation of *peoples*. But at the same time, something more worrying may be at work in the texts. It is a in some ways the logic of burial: the preservation of *names* at the same time as the marking of their *passing away*. And this is why it is such a dangerous business. If Christians see their theology as a means of *burying* Judaism, this will mean something darkly different from remembering the blessings poured by God on the different families. In some sense, there is a *passing away* between the traditions: this is their *otherness*. But there is also a *memory of names*: this is the memory of familial blessings and the generations which are meant to continue. The logic of burial, which we see in Christian theology again and again, is more than a theoretical danger when its consequence is that traditions are buried alive. It is difficult to say whether one sees this in Genesis 17 and 25 or in Romans 4. The urgent task is to find interpretations which do not follow this bleak logic.

I think Steve Kepnes struggles a little to see the significance of his own logic of preservation when he sees Christian hermeneutics as complex and perhaps even self-contradictory. Of course he is right: but I think it is misleading to give all the credit to Christians here, and I'd like to share the wealth. It is the logic of preservation that *seems* complex and self-contradictory when viewed from the perspective of the logic of binary opposition. Drawing out the riches of Steve Kepnes' analysis, I would say that the logic of preservation is an *alternative* to a logic of binary opposition. It is precisely a logic of binary opposition that forces the reader to choose: Hagar *or* Sarai; Ishmael *or* Isaac; Esau *or* Jacob. And, indeed, the text does rehearse this possibility: there is genuine expulsion, of Hagar, Ishmael and Esau. But there is also a logic of preservation: the genealogies, the burial of Abraham, the tribes of Edom.

What we see in Scriptural Reasoning is a re-reading of texts; these texts practise a logic of burial; scriptural reasoning develops a logic of preservation into another form of a logic of dialogue: a logic of scripture, and here I simply echo Steve Kepnes' reminder of the importance of the work of Peter

Ochs. Our texts may practise a logic of burial, but the generations of the different families have continued, as God commanded them to do. Our texts have merely preserved the other. But when we gather, today, to read together these testimonies of preservation, we practise *more than preservation*. We do not have a vocabulary, yet, to say what this *more* might be. But we do have the practice which teaches us, together, how we might hold our otherness and our identity together, through the reading of scripture.

For me, Steve Kepnes achieves— with remarkable clarity and skill— a logic of preservation where both otherness and identity are *both* evoked with respect to the one who binds them together: the one Lord of Genesis 16, 21, 25 and the God of Romans 4. The otherness and identity are not overcome or absorbed into some super-reality where differences are obliterated, and nations are assimilated into each other. Instead, they are preserved, not just for the same of preservation, but as the preservation of a set of family relations *before God. More than preservation is the result*. And that is why we are meeting here, today, in Hartford…

With these issues in mind, I want to return to the *negative* remarks I began with: the things that Steve Kepnes did not do. But the perspective I wish to introduce now is the crucial contribution that Muslims and Qur'anic reasoning make to scriptural reasoning.

Two things are worth clarifying. First, those who do scriptural reasoning are typically not experts in the other religious traditions: so the Muslims who do scriptural reasoning are not typically experts in Rabbinics or in Patristics. Second, scriptural reasoning might look to an outsider like an exercise where members of one tradition *teach* members of other traditions about the tradition to which they belong. This is not the case at all, and I think the Muslim contribution shows very clearly how this is so. At this juncture I would like to attempt, in a preliminary way, to show that non-Muslims are attentive to practices of squaring the circle.

Let us take another look at the list of 'DON'T's.

(1) Muslims do not approach their sacred texts in the dominating attitude of an expert, one who has *command* over the text, and can bend it to his or

her will. They neither assimilate to Western liberal paradigms and present their texts as mere historical documents, nor do they adopt the hermetic attitude of the middle eastern seer who claims that none but the initiated can understand them. Rather, they approach the texts with an exemplary humility, reverence and intimacy, as God's gift which evokes study and wonder.

(2) Muslims do not approach their sacred texts in the dominating attitude of the absolutely free reader, whose interpretations are always valid because they arise from his or her own personal *experience*. They do not force the texts to submit to the demands of their own infinite subjectivity, or distort them into meaning whatever they want them to mean. Rather, they approach the texts with a sense that their own subjectivity is evoked by the texts, and made possible by the divine love that shines in those texts.

In other words, our Muslim colleagues display forms of reading that have nothing to do with the tact and sensitivity that would place the Qur'an under glass, in a display case. Nor do they fling the text about as if its relevance to discussion can be magicked into being by the superpowers of the reader. The texts are objects of love— both reverentially distant and therefore a matter of both humility and astonishing intimacy and therefore a matter of love and delight.

Our Muslim colleagues display forms of reading that have nothing to do with the vatic posture of the expert who claims to know the text's secrets: this would transform other participants into sponges for knowledge. Scriptural reasoning does not degenerate into a forum for explaining 'what the Qur'an means' in the manner of a rather bad undergraduate lecture. Rather, it becomes an opportunity for displaying distance and proximity, reverence and delight, humility and love. Muslim colleagues have, of course, a deep knowledge of the tradition of interpretation of Qur'an, but this knowledge is not the medium in which the text study takes place. Instead, it functions as an inspiration for the detailed attention to the texts, and the surprises they hold not just for Christians and Jews (for whom, at least in my case, everything comes as a surprise) but even— and perhaps *especially*— for Muslims who find new and different things in the texts: aspects that may be muted in the tradition but which fizz to the surface in scriptural reasoning.

And it is infectious. The effect of being in the presence of Muslims who are generous-hearted to their brothers and sisters from other religions and who share this humility and love with us is quite shocking. It is different from what I might have anticipated and has fundamentally shaped how I approach not just the Qur'an but even texts in my own tradition. This needs saying carefully: I do not mean that I read the New Testament as if it were the Qur'an. Instead, I mean that I become conscious just how seductive the postures of the expert, or the empowered reader, or the imperatives of tact and sensitivity have become for the reading of scripture in my own tradition, and I find I have learned resources from my Muslim colleagues in how to overcome these contradictions. It is an extraordinary thing.

But most of all, I have begun to make friends with Muslim members of the Abrahamic family of faiths. Not just casual friendships rooted in shared interest, but relationships that are somehow characterised by the distance and proximity, humility and intimacy that the texts themselves evoke. I do not have any clever theories for how this happens: it is always a surprise to me, each time we do scriptural reasoning together. And for that, I give thanks to God.