

Delhi Cathedral 18th February 2001

Amos 9:7 and John 4:21

See also Isaiah 19:19-25 (J. Sacks, Dignity of Difference, p.204)

I came to India in 1982 and made contact with the Church of North India. The Rev. Pritam Santram was the General Secretary and The Rev. Ernest Talibuddin was treasurer. The Rev. Patrick Moti Lal was an up and coming young minister serving in Bhogal. I was made to feel very welcome by CNI and by all my colleagues here.

I remember chatting with Pritam Santram about Church, Christianity and other faiths. I was thinking through some ideas about Christianity from a world-wide perspective.

Among many wise things Pritam Santram said to me were these words. He said: "The way God relates to Israel is symbolic of how God relates to all nations." That was a shaft of great illumination for me. The thought has helped me enormously.

I returned to India in January 1984 when my father died while on a visit here. Pritam Santram made most of my travel arrangements in India with just 48 hours notice. I will never forget your wisdom, and kindness. It is a great privilege to return -as President of the British Methodist Conference. As President I greet you in the name of Christ. I greet you on behalf of the British Methodist Church and Conference.

As part of my year of office I am undertaking a Pilgrimage to visit people and places that have been special to me and are part of my story. So I have come to say I am at this point in my life because of CNI and all my sisters and brothers here. Thank you for all you have given me.

I have been nurtured by three great continents and two great faiths: India, Africa, Europe, Sikhism and Christianity. Coming to India is part of acknowledging that my roots are here too, and to touch my roots here. We all have to keep in touch with wells we drink from, and soil that feeds us.

My family is with me: Kathy, my wife and our children Liamarjit and Anjuli.

Also with me is my mother, and 25 members of the Methodist Church.

The Vice President of our Conference is here: Sister Eluned Williams.

The Assistant Secretary of our Conference: the Rev. Keith Reed is here too.

So, the way God relates to Israel is symbolic of the way God relates to all nations.

This is in keeping with the words of another prophet, Amos.

Amos 9:7

"Are you not like the people of Ethiopia to me, O children of Israel?" says the Lord.

"Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?"

Israel had come to declare that Yahweh is the one, the only one who saves. Moreover, this one and only Yahweh was also seen to have a one and only partner, namely Israel.

This one God;
could only be worshipped properly by one special people; and in one place only, -Jerusalem. One Holy God.
One Holy People. One Holy Place.

That is the summary of a strand of exclusive theology that emerged quite early in Israel.

“You are Great, O Lord God, for there is no one like you, and there is no God beside you” 2 Sam 7:22

“Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people...?” 2 Sam 7:23-24

There is only one Yahweh.

There is only one special people.

There is only one right place of worship (Deut 12: 5-7, 14)

“One Yahweh must be worshipped only in one place by the one people of Yahweh.” (Brueggeman p.91)

Israel was prepared to turn this particular theological claim of monotheism into an ideological claim for the singularity, peculiarity, and exclusive privilege of Israel as a political entity in the world (Brueggeman p.92)

God relates to Israel only.

God rescues Israel only.

There were, of course, those who were prepared to challenge this theological and ideological claim to exclusivity and privilege.

This challenge is demonstrated with incisive insight by Amos. He introduces a radical pluralism into Yahwehism, a pluralism that subverts Israel’s self-confident mono-faith.

Amos 9:7 “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?”

What a question!

1. Are you not like the Ethiopians to me O people of Israel? Don’t I treat others just as I treat you?
The Deuteronomic answer would be an emphatic NO!
2. Did I not bring up (save) Israel?
Did I not bring up (save) the Philistines?
Did I not bring up (save) the Arameans?

What a turn up = Yahweh saves our enemies too!!

The answer to all the questions is Yes. In fact the one who says Yes is Yahweh who refuses to be straight jacketed, and who refuses to be contained in an exclusivist theology and ideology.

Amos challenge subverts Israel’s mono-faith into a radical pluralism that resists every ideological containment.

So, Amos resists the idea of a single “salvation history” and is prepared to see God’s mighty deeds in other salvation histories too- in many places, among many peoples. What an eye opener.

Amos offers the Philistines and the Arameans as symbols of all nations, to say that all of human history is the location of God’s liberation action. We have to learn to see God at work in all nations, among all people.

Amos does not ridicule or deny Israel's special relationship with Yahweh, or Israel's self-identity as the exodus people. He denies only the monopolistic claim made as 'the only exodus subject of the only exodus event by the only exodus God.'

In the reference to Philistines and Arameans we are given a glimpse of Yahweh's hidden history and mission, Yahweh's long-term interaction with other people about which Israel knows nothing, and wants to know nothing. Visiting different nations can help us to uncover this scandalous, hidden history of God.

What more:

In all this engagement with other nations-
Yahweh does not convert these people to Yahwehism
Does not require them to worship him in Jerusalem
Does not require them to speak Hebrew.

Philistines come to know Yahweh in their own modes.
Arameans come to know Yahweh in their own modes.

Even Jesus is said to have declared to the Samaritans in John: "the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father." (Jn 4:21)

All this is deduced from only one verse. The one verse is evidence a challenge to Israel's mono-ideology, or at least of a debate on the issue. It says that- the majesty of Yahweh cannot be reduced to one understanding, people, and place; and that the exodus narrative may be symbolic of how God works with all nations.

Thank you Pritam Santram for showing this to me.