

A Middle Eastern God

The further we delve into Scripture and arrive at some knowledge of the language, culture and worldview of various biblical writers the better we can understand the spiritual messages that lie in the texts.

For instance, we could come to appreciate that the ancient writers did not think like us and so did not try to express themselves as precisely and scientifically as 21st century writers may attempt to do. St Thomas Aquinas in the 1200s developed a theory of analogy and argued that all theological language is analogical. An example of what he was saying is, God is a transcendent reality completely beyond time and space, so words that we use to refer to God must by nature be inadequate, but, at the same time, they are not without meaning. So, we can say God is loving, but what we are doing is drawing on *our* human understanding of love; we are applying a human concept to a transcendent reality. The analogy is a comparison between two realities where we get an idea of God as love through a comparison with what we know – human love.

Aquinas noted that the Bible is written in metaphorical language that enables us to access, to some degree, the ideas of the inspired writers so that we could be spiritually enriched and seriously challenged by their words. The poetry of biblical Hebrew, for example, is multilayered and reveals various levels of meaning to the reader who reflects on individual texts, discerning them with the heart as much as with the mind. Writing about Scripture, Aquinas stated, ‘... in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery.’ (*Summa* 1.1.10). Over the next couple of weeks we might look at the poetry of Jesus to get some appreciation of the artistry and the depth of his thinking.

Applying these ideas to the way we approach biblical texts it is crucial to keep in mind that the writers saw God and divine activity through the lens of ancient Middle Eastern culture. In the Hebrew Bible God thinks, speaks and acts as a Middle Easterner of 2½ thousand years ago, which puts us 21st century westerners well behind the 8-ball when it comes to interpretation and understanding.

What we generally forget is that Jesus was one such Middle Easterner whose words were all addressed to his fellow daughters and sons of Israel. Jesus would not have called himself a Jew (*Yehudi*) because he was from Galilee, not Judea. He would have seen himself as a son of Israel (*ben/bar Yisrael*), descended from Abraham, committed to, and defined by the spirituality of Torah and the traditions of Moses.

Jesus belonged to a culture in which people thought of themselves collectively. Each person’s identity was drawn from their culture with its beliefs, traditions, opinions and worldview. He was concerned about his honour and was uncompromising in the pursuit of his values and priorities. He was also politically astute, and I could imagine him smiling in quiet disagreement with those who maintain that religion and politics should not mix.

Just one example to illustrate this. Some Pharisee disciples came to Jesus, as he was walking in the temple precinct, and asked him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Their ruse was obvious to him, so he replied with a cutting, ‘Why are you trying to trap me, you hypocrites?’ He then trapped them in return by asking for a coin. They produced a denarius, which they should not have had because it was unlawful to bring any kind of animal or human image into the temple area. The figure on the coin was that of Caesar so the coin was in the image of Caesar and rightfully belonged to him. The implication was that human beings are in the image of God and rightfully belong to God, and therefore deserve respect as living thinking beings made in the image of God.

In effect, Jesus was firing back and accusing these men of not living up to the Pharisaic standards as defined in Torah, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ (Leviticus 19:18). The Pharisees considered themselves experts in the Torah and yet many of them fell down in the practice of treating all people as belonging to God and therefore deserving of respect. A good number of them chose to discriminate against the lower classes and the downtrodden in society and here was Jesus reminding them of their failing. They were left gobsmacked and politically outdone by his comeback, and they went away and left him alone. It would serve us well to learn a little more about the political side of Jesus’ mission.