EDITORIAL

Jews were designated as the 'People of the Book' in the Qur'an and we have been happy to adopt the title. It meant that, like Muslims, we had been the recipients of a divine revelation cast in the form of the written word. The designation is correct, but we might argue about what precisely that 'book' is. In one sense it is the Hebrew Bible, or more specifically, the written Torah, the Five Books of Moses. However from its outset rabbinic Judaism drew its authority from another 'book', originally perceived as the 'oral Torah', the oral tradition that accompanied the revelation at Mt. Sinai. It found its concrete expression within the Mishnah and Talmud, recording the arguments and decisions of emerging rabbinic Judaism. So the Talmud is the 'book' of received tradition that defined what constituted the Hebrew Bible itself, and virtually every aspect of Jewish life.

The written Torah was understood to be the word of God, given at a certain time and place and thus was a 'closed' book, which could neither be added to nor subtracted from. However such a view immediately opens the door to interpretation so as to relate Torah teachings and laws to contemporary situations. So the genre of Midrash, exegesis, constitutes further volumes to the 'book' and generates in its turn interpretations of interpretations *ad infinitum*. The Zohar became yet another Jewish 'book', authoritative for some Jewish communities with a mystical orientation; and the various 'Codes', culminating in the *Shulchan Arukh* and subsequent Responsa literature, yet another.

But what of the Hebrew Bible as actually, and directly, alive in Jewish life? What is read and studied? What continues to reverberate in Jewish communities? What actually affects what Jews think and do?

The question was raised recently in examining the Bible section of the Leo Baeck College Library. The shelves dedicated to modern biblical scholarship inevitably reflect which books are of greatest interest. Of Torah only Genesis, and perhaps Exodus have acquired major collections. Of the rest of the Bible it is primarily Isaiah amongst the 'prophets' and Psalms amongst the 'writings' that have similar prominence. The reason for this is not hard to seek. These are the volumes favoured by Christians and most comprehensively studied – and therefore the ones where, at least in some instances in the past, Jews felt forced to offer alternative interpretations.

So what biblical texts would feature in a Jewish agenda? Clearly still the Torah, if only because the regular reading in the synagogue keeps it at the forefront of our thinking, together with a few prophetic passages that serve as *Haf-tarot*. The Five *megillot* feature in the festivals, so also have their place. Indeed Emil Fackenheim has suggested that one of them, the Book of Esther, ought to

take a far more prominent place as the one book that speaks to a Jewish world deeply aware of the absence of God in our time and the need for radical self-sufficiency after the Shoah.¹ Joshua and Judges have acquired a disturbing new reality in defining the potential borders of the State of Israel. The remaining biblical books, apart perhaps from the Psalms, are the domain of scholars, novelists and movie-makers. But what reality, or indeed influence, do the volumes of the Hebrew Bible have on our thinking or actions, whether we feel ourselves committed to Judaism as a religion or a peoplehood or even as a culture? To be part of a culture suggests a certain pride in and knowledge of that culture, but that seems remarkably absent where the Hebrew Bible, our founding document, is concerned.

This issue is not designed to make right this lack. Rather it is an opportunity to hear different voices responding to different parts of the Hebrew Bible. Many of them arise out of the annual Jewish-Christian Bible Week in Bendorf, Germany, celebrating in 1999 its thirty-first anniversary. (The Leo Baeck College is a 'Partner in Dialogue' with the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus where the conference and other joint programmes are held.) By inviting people from a variety of 'disciplines' such as the arts or psychotherapy, as well as more conventional biblical scholarship, we have tried to open up the dimensions of the Hebrew Bible for the Week itself and we offer a few of these examples here. There is no attempt at being comprehensive. Many of the articles focus on the prophetic writings as these have been most studied over the past few years. But their range and the quality of the responses evoked are a measure of the extraordinary power of these texts, despite all their technical, linguistic and sometimes moral, difficulties.

The articles gathered in this issue point to the many directions in which biblical passages can lead us and the many disciplines that can illuminate them. Howard Cooper and Judith Elkan bring insights from the world of psychotherapy but open up universal issues. Jeremiah comes in for a variety of treatments appropriate to the most self-revealing of the prophets (Jonathan Magonet), whose suffering for his convictions made him a central figure this century for writers like Stefan Zweig and Franz Werfel (Leon Yudkin). The number of pieces on Ezekiel reflect the most recent Bible Week conferences in Bendorf, but lead to such diverse places as Jewish mysticism (Meira Pollick), biblical history (Carl Ehrlich) and the mystery of creation (Diana Lipton), as well as celebrating the sheer poetry of his language (John Launer). The varied nature of biblical materials is well illustrated by Alexander Duchovny's analysis of I Kings as 'theatre', the theological issues behind Deuteronomy (Susan Haber) and the political incorrectness of Hosea's treatment of his wife Gomer (Mark Solomon). The Book of Esther remains the most provocative of biblical books for its depiction of the dangers of exile and

its apparent vengefulness, political issues explored in very different ways by Athalya Brenner and Jeremy Schonfield.

The rabbinic saying remains true: 'Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it'.

Jonathan Magonet

Note

1. Fackenheim, Emil L., *The Jewish Bible after The Holocaust: A Re-Reading*, Sherman Studies of Judaism in Modern Times, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990.