

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SOCIETY*

Antonie Wessels

It is my great pleasure to be invited to address this audience during this Academic Evening in honour of St. Thomas Aquinas. Although I will not deal directly with the thinking of St. Thomas, I will touch on some of his concerns in his time indirectly. He was a great scholar and theologian who made a great contribution in the multi-cultural society of his days, which will remain of value for us in order to be able to face similar challenges today in our multi-religious society.

Introduction

Jonathan Swift was a well-known seventeenth-century Irish clergyman. He was dean at the St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and was and is primarily known as the author of the famous *Gulliver's Travels*. This book is often viewed as just a children's book, but like fairy tales, it is also intended to be read by adults. In that book he criticized contemporary situations, a critique which still remains relevant today. By means of his figurative language presenting everything in relation to Lilliputians thus very small people – he brings the faults of his own society more sharply into focus. His description has relevance for our topic today: Holy Scriptures in a multi-cultural Society.

The fourth chapter describes the capital city of Liliput, and the reasons why the people Liliput was at war with another.

It (the war) began upon the following occasion. It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs before we eat them, was upon the larger end: but his present Majesty's grandfather, while he was a boy, going to eat an egg, and breaking it according to the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the Emperor his father published an edict,

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commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us there have been six rebellions raised on that account; wherein one emperor lost his life, and another his crown ... It is computed, that eleven thousand persons have, at several times, suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but these books have been long forbidden. During the course of these troubles, the Emperors of the other Empire did accuse us of making a schism in religion by offending against a fundamental doctrine of our great prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth chapter of the Bundercal (which is their Alcoran i.e. the Holy Scripture of Liliput). This, however, is thought to be a mere strain upon the text, for the words are these: *That all true believers shall break their eggs at the convenient end*: and which is the convenient end, seems in my humble opinion, to be left to every man's conscience,...

Having been raised myself in the Reformed tradition, the Bible was from my early youth of great significance for me personally in the daily rhythm of life. The Bible was read at all three meals. Although I no longer follow this custom precisely, the Bible nevertheless remains 'a constant companion'.

I know that this applies to many in the Reformation tradition, where living with Scriptures extended its significance into public life. We were reminded of this in connection with the fact that the Second World War ended over fifty years ago. At the time of the German occupation and persecution of Jews, one of the Reformed ministers, who was involved in the work of a Christian resistance during the Second World War, preached on such texts as Exodus 1, 15-21. The text relates the story of the two slave women, probably Egyptian midwives, who resisted Pharaoh's command to kill all newborn Hebrew boys. This minister wanted to motivate people to resist and to devote themselves to the welfare of others. Another text which he readily cited was intended to encourage people that evil would be overcome: " 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' " (Luke 10, 18). In addition, mastering one's fear of death was strengthened by different Scriptural texts, including one from Isaiah, which reads: "Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees" (16, 3). [The daily newspaper *Trouw* (24 March, 1995).]

My presentation is divided into three parts.

1. First, I want to say something about the fact that throughout the centuries, Jews, Christians and Moslems have lived with their respective scriptures in *different* ways in various places.

2. Secondly, I will inquire more specifically how Jews, Christians, and Moslems can live with their Holy Scriptures together. Are they able to go forward *together*, as a unity?

3. Finally, I will discuss a few concrete examples of how I myself attempt to deal with Holy Scriptures in the multireligious and multicultural context of my own country The Netherlands.

1. Living with the Scriptures Jews, Christians, Muslims

Throughout the centuries, rabbis, priests, ministers and imams have interpreted their Holy Scriptures in their respective communities through preaching. As far as the Christian community is concerned, church history offers an overwhelming panorama of interpretations.¹ The history of the church has been called a 'history of the interpretation of the Holy Scripture'.² The letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans, for example, could be called the high point of the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church, whereas in twentieth-century reflection on the cosmic significance of Christ, as discussed in the letter to the Colossians, played an important role.

There are various questions to be posed concerning the way in which people have lived with the Scripture. During the sixteenth century a struggle arose between 'Rome' and 'the Reformation' on the question of 'the meritoriousness of good works'. The polemics employed the Christian community on the significance of the Law were, if you will, transferred in the Reformational interpretation to the discussion with the Roman Catholics at the time. The same kind of arguments used against the Judaizers were used and are, by the way, still used not only against the Jews but also in Christian polemics against Islam. Both Judaism and Islam are judged and pre-judged as 'legalistic' religions.

1. H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids 1979) 92.
2. Cf. G. Ebeling, "Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der heiligen Schrift," in *Wort Gottes und Tradition, Kirche und Konfession* (Göttingen 1964) 9-27.

There are examples of the uses of Scripture, which are at the least disputable, that strike us today as strange. It is said of St. Benedict that he once in the church had a vision of the Virgin Mary, but when she wanted to address him, he did not want to listen to her, for, after all, Scripture states through the apostle that women are to be silent in the church (1 Cor 14, 34).

It is clear how much the reading of the Scriptures was determined by the period and culture in which they lived and their own personal and social context. There are numerous examples of how Christians live with the Bible in other parts of the world (i.e. outside Europe) and interpret it within their own African, Latin American or Asian context. One can cite, for example, James Cone explaining how the blacks in the United States sang about the crossing of the Red Sea or the Jordan River in their negro spirituals while intending the Mississippi. In the so-called *romeria*, i.e. pilgrimages or popular religious marches organized around the theme of land, Brazil's long history of internal migrations and the struggle of the landless poor is related to the biblical traditions of wandering in search of the promised land (Deut 26, 5b-9).³

The changes in dealing with the Scriptures arise in everyone's life, in which other elements from the same Scriptures take on precedence for him or her than was the case previously. An older church minister related that he had given someone else a Bible at the latter's request about thirty years ago, in which he had quoted John 3, 16 on the flyleaf: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." When he met this person again thirty years later and was referred to the text of the Bible that he had written at that time, he was asked to write again a text in his Bible. This time he cited a text from Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6, 8). It was not that he no longer, so to say, stood behind the first text, but the accent in his 'living with the Scripture' had shifted.

My few examples so far are taken from the Christian tradition, but I think that a Jew or a Moslem could tell a similar story about his or her living with the Scriptures:

3. A Brazilian theologian explains: the Bible is the history of a wandering people. The beginning of the people is in Exodus, that is, marching or wandering. This wandering became the symbol of the people's faith. It became a creed, i.e., a prayer of the people which helped them remember their history, illuminated and sustained by the power of God [Aldilcon Capigato, (1991) 15, cited by Roy May, in a forthcoming dissertation pp 194-95].

"Every manifestation of the Jewish mind is, in a very special sense interpretation of the Bible."⁴ Something similar could be said with respect to the ways in which Moslems 'live with the Koran'. It can also be stated that Islamic history is the history of the exegesis of the Koran, covering the exegesis given in the tradition literature until and including the so-called 'scientific exegesis'. Traditional, dogmatic, mystical, philosophical, Shi'itic and modernist exegeses of the Koran exist. At the time of modernism or reformism (the end of the nineteenth century/beginning of the twentieth) one text became for instance topical: "God does not change the destiny of any people who do not change themselves." As an Islamic reading approximating liberation theology, this is at odds with an exegesis in which the Koran is read in a fatalistic sense.⁵

In the fundamentalist exegesis of the Koran by contemporary fundamentalist Moslems, the *jihad* is interpreted not as a struggle that must be fought against every wrong desire but in a militant sense as a 'forgotten prescript'.⁶ On that basis it was condoned that the Egyptian president Sadat was killed in 1981.

There is a certain exegesis of the Koran that is apologetic in nature, in which it is asserted that modern science can not only be easily reconciled with the Islamic faith but that Islam itself has always advanced and stimulated it. The Koran is not only not in conflict with the modern discoveries of the natural sciences but already presupposes or predicts them. One is then doing something that was done with the exegesis of the Bible in a particular time and in particular circles. It was proposed that the Old Testament already spoke of the earth's being round and not flat, based on the text "God reigns over the round earth" (Isaiah 40, 22). In a similar way, the Moslems have asserted that the Koran already spoke of microbes or predicted travel to the moon, including three-step rockets. A Tunisian nuclear physicist believed himself to have discovered the laser in the Koran.

One can understand that in such an interpretation of the Koran the exegesis must always be adapted to new discoveries. One who has turned against such an exegesis is the Egyptian writer al-Shati'. She opposed this pseudo-scientific

4. W. C. Smith, *What is Scripture?*, p 111. Smith cites Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, "The Study of the Bible in Medieval Judaism," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Cambridge/New York, vol. 1-3, 1963-1970), p. 257 here.

5. Cf. Smith, *What is Scripture*, p 6.

6. Cf. J. J. G. Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat's Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York).

reconciliation of faith and science. She writes that Mohammad was not a theologian or geologist. What he knew as prophet were the words that he had received from the Lord and passed on to people in the book of Islam. The heart of which the Koran speaks is not the organic heart that the anatomist studies. It is the instrument of the reflection of the conscience, work, and the place of belief and of unfaithfulness, folly, and hypocrisy. The 'sickness of the heart' is nothing but corruption, hypocrisy, cruelty, evil or betrayal. The youth of today should not study the natural sciences through the glasses of such an exegesis. They are not so ignorant and simple as to believe that one can discover jet airplanes in the Koranic verse. Neither do they expect to find the mysteries of the atom in the Koran: "... and whosoever has done an atom's weight of good shall see it (i.e. on the Day of Judgement). The young people are not so foolish and careless that they would take this sort of exegesis seriously" (*Al-Ahram*, 7 January, 1972).

How dangerous such a modern exegesis can be for some scholars was made very clear in the first half of this century. This was confirmed recently in the case of a contemporary scholar, Nasr Abu Zaid Nasr, a professor at the University of Cairo. Abu Zaid was branded an apostate by the court in June 1995 and his wife was to divorce him. A storm of protest had arisen in orthodox circles.

He sees the Koran as a holy text but its interpretation as human. It is written in the Koran that a man may have one, two, three or four wives and take his pleasure with all his female slaves. This dates from a time when slavery was a general custom. It belongs to the past. The text is historical and, in his view, no longer obtains. The judge stated that Abu Zaid thus denied and did not understand anything about Islam. At this, Abu Zaid appealed to the example of the second caliph, Umar ibn al Khattab, who, already soon after Mohammed's death, had no wish to interpret some Koranic texts literally, because the times had changed. Every Islamic scholar, in Abu Zaid's view, has the right to reinterpret the Koran (*Trouw*, 22 July, 1993).

Enough has been said to indicate that throughout the centuries, right up to the present, Jews, Christians and Moslems have lived and live with their respective Holy Scriptures in different ways. This brings us to the question of how it is possible today, in the midst of a pluralistic culture, we can live together with one another's Holy Scriptures.

2. How do we live together with the Scriptures?

"To us," W. C. Smith states, "It seems evident that all inherited ideologies

stand in need of significant development and revision in the light of today's new situation, especially today's pluralism (Smith, *What is Scripture*, p. 231). That every generation must re-read and reinterpret the Holy Scriptures in order to live with them seems clear. Such a re-reading will not only occur, as we say, in the history of one's own community but must increasingly occur in the light of the common community. One cannot deny that people must live differently with the Scriptures at this time because of the new challenges and developments due to the multireligious character of all societies.

An arbitrarily chosen example in the Netherlands on a political level can serve as an illustration in this context. How can now encounter political problems in the interpretation of Scripture was evident from the discussion on the "General Law of Equal Treatment". The discussion concerned, among other things, the question of the position of homosexual teachers in Christian education. The agitation by small Christian political factions in the Lower House were strengthened by the remark made by the then Minister of Internal Affairs that certain "interpretations" of the Bible could no longer be tolerated.⁷

If one is to accept homosexuality from a position of "living with the Scriptures", then one must relativize the meaning of Scripture with respect to this or else interpret the texts in question that were used or still are used to condemn homosexuality differently from how they were often understood in the past. A Christian theologian once said: "We can sometimes see these things better than the apostle (Paul)." Something similar can be heard in Jewish circles. A rabbi once remarked, although in a much more general and different context: "We could write better stories ourselves [than Moses]."

It is so that living together with the Scripture occurs on the basis of the relativization of one's own or mutual relativization of one another's Holy Scriptures? Is it as the Dutch cabaret performer once expressed it with regard to ecumenism: "Are the churches watering down one another's wine?" Or can Jews, Christians, and Moslems live 'together' with one another's Scriptures? My argument would be that Jews, Christians and Moslems must indeed be prepared to live together with one another's Scriptures by taking those Scriptures seriously. This does not entail that the mutual differences are to be denied.

7. Roel Kuiper, "De Algemene wet gelijke behandeling," in R.Kranenborg and W.Stoker, *Religies en (on) gelijkheid in een plurale samenleving* (Louvain/Apeldoorn 1995) 248-49.

As far as this latter comment is concerned, it makes an essential difference if *torah* is translated as 'law' (*nomos*). It makes a difference if one has the Old Testament end with 2 Chronicles as the Jews do and the edict that Cyrus issued to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, or arranges the books so that they would end with the prophet Malachi as the Christians do and a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah.

What unites Christians and Moslems is that both, aside from being themselves related, are primarily related to Judaism and thus to the 'Old Testament' or *Tawra*. There is no doubt as to how dangerous it has been that there has been an interpretation, however Christian, in which the Jews no longer have a right to exist. There is a fine line between having no place for Jews theologically and having no place for them physically. There are Christian roots to antisemitism and there was the so-called catechism of abuse.

The Koran is involved here because of the accusation directed at Jews and Christians that they have distorted the Scriptures. As is well known, the idea of the distortion of the Scriptures by Jews and Christians, is open to different interpretations. There is one that suggests that it means that there have been Jews and Christians who distorted either the text or the intentions of the text. The first case, of course, constitutes a great obstacle for interreligious dialogue. The common task would be to question one another about the meaning and intention of the text, a task to which the Koran explicitly calls its readers.

There now exists in all the communities in question (Jewish, Christian and Moslem) the inclination to think or to assert that they have no need of one another. The Jews are not inclined to occupy themselves theologically with those who came after them – the Christians and the Moslems. Christians believed or still believe that they do not need Jews because the latter are 'behind', and they ask, with respect to Moslems, "Can anything good come out of Mecca?"

I would like to consider it a response to the 'order of the day' that Jews, Christians and Moslems take all three 'Testaments', if I can use that term, seriously: *Tanakh* or Old Testament or *Tawra*, as the Moslems call it, the New Testament (*Injil*) and the Koran. The latter also entails taking Mohammed seriously as a prophet. These three should explore one another's Holy Scriptures. In our time there is a growing need and necessity for an interreligious interpretation and an intertextual reading. The one Scripture applies to the other and vice versa. Just as the Old

Testament has not become antiquated for Christians and Moslems or the old people of Israel been taken out of the picture, as many Christians have held, so there must, in my view, be room for Jewish and Christian respect for a third 'Testament', the Qur'an.

How are the three related? Are they related in the way that is often cited using the words of Rudyard Kipling: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet?" If it does not obtain for two, how could it obtain for three? Nevertheless, it is good in this context to remember that Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West" (1889) says something more important than what is often cited. He writes:

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they
come from the ends of the Earth!

The Jewish philosopher David Hartman states somewhere that Jews "are not the only show in town" (sc. Jerusalem). Could not all three say something similar?

The alternative to walking a common path is, in my view, a kind of fundamentalism, isolationism, or ghettoization. There are advocates for, and examples of walking such a path, even though it seems to me that those are ultimately disastrous. I would see as one of the tasks of hermeneutics a "critical-liberating re-reading of the faith tradition" (L. Boff), but then in the sense of the necessity of a reading together the Holy Scriptures.

3. Living with the Scriptures in the Dutch Multicultural Context

It is again a challenge for Christians, and I think that it can hardly be different for Jews and Moslems, to respond in a new situation with respect to the interpretation of the Scriptures to the challenges of the continually changing times – unless one wants to look for the solution simply in a fundamentalistic direction and believe that one will be able to find the solution there. In my view, we must, however, look for a way between the Scylla of secularism, which is spiritually empty, and the Charybdis of a religious fundamentalism, which is spiritually paralyzing.

One of the most important challenges of today is that we live in a world which

can be called multicultural and multireligious (as well as a-religious). People from different ethnical, racial, national and religious backgrounds live here together, in particular in the big cities.

In what follows I will give two examples of 'living with the Scriptures' in the liturgy of two services that were held in the Westerkerk in Amsterdam, on Sunday, 19 June 1994 and 26 March 1995. The first time I was invited to lead the worship service, in which a child of a Christian mother and a Moslem father would be dedicated to God: A second example concerned a request to act as liturgist in a cantata service, which proved to contain a text that was clearly directed against Turks.

I will begin with the second example. It seems to me very meaningful that both examples occur in the context of the liturgy. After all, it is in the liturgy that we touch on one of the most important ways in which not only individual believers but religious communities as well have lived and still live with their respective Holy Scriptures.

Preserve us, O Lord, by your Word

The hundred and twenty-sixth cantata by Johan Sebastian Bach for the eighth Sunday before Easter, Sexagesima, is composed around the Gospel reading for that Sunday – the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8, 4-8) and the text from Isaiah concerning the irresistible Word of God (55, 10-11). In this cantata the text of one of the chorales to be sung reads:

Preserve us, Lord, by your Word
 Rein in the Pope and the murders of the Turks
 Who would cast from your throne
 Jesus Christ your son.

In the performance of this cantata the text was adapted and only 'enemies' were mentioned. Nevertheless, it is good to remember which concrete enemies they originally had in mind. The writer of the text of this song was no one less than Martin Luther. In his time, this Reformer had three enemies in mind: the Papists (Roman Catholics, primarily the Pope), the Jews, and the Turks (the usual term for Moslems at the time). As far the latter are concerned, according to Luther, any Christian soldier who fought the Turks did not have to be afraid that he would shed

innocent blood: in killing one of them he would be killing an enemy of God and a blasphemer of Christ who was condemned to hell by God himself. Although Luther acknowledged that the Turks had a few virtues, the Moslem saints in his eyes were 'demonic' saints. The God they served was the devil.

One could ask oneself whether such a cantata could still have evoked a crusade or holy war in the time of Bach. Or was it the intention to bless the weapons in one way or another? The answer to this must be, of course, in the negative. If it was so, then this cantata naturally could not and should not be performed. One can hardly imagine doing this in the central Amsterdam church, which is a stone's throw from the largest Turkish mosque (seating 1400 people) in Amsterdam, which previously, as a Roman Catholic Church, bore the name of the story from the Gospel reading that is read on the Sunday of This cantata: The Sower!

The content of such a text in Luther's time can be understood and explained in the context of the Turkish threat of the time and also makes one think of the way in which some psalms speak about enemies and can be used in the liturgy of the church.

It is certainly dangerous to mention what has sometimes been said or done (and still is) in the name of the Word of God. Christian history is full of examples of this just as, incidentally, Islamic history is. Therefore, it seems important to point out that the cantata composed around the Gospel reading (the Parable of the Sower, Luke 8, 4-8) and the text about the irresistible Word of God from Isaiah 55, 10.11, however, are concerned about something other than a crusade.

The Parable of the Sower ends with the words: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Obviously, one needs to listen closely to it. This parable can appear as quite somber to many. Much of the seed is eaten by the birds alongside the path, the seed falls on rocky ground and is choked by thorns. Is nothing said about all that labour gone to waste? How much seed fails to produce a crop? How much work does the human being not destroy through his work? How many lives of numberless people are characterized by tragedy? Do the hearers of this story wish to be discouraged? Such a reading of the parable, however, is a mistaken one. The parable of the sower is a story of a farmer who sows with a generous hand. It is inevitable that much of the seed is lost: the birds eat it, the thorns choke it, what falls on rocky ground cannot grow any roots. All of this is obvious. No farmer would succeed that way.

One can expect something like this to happen. But that does not discourage any farmer from taking in his harvest, even though there are barren pieces of land. Some seed also falls onto good ground. And in spite of everything, the harvest proves to be overflowing. This parable is primarily intended as encouragement.

My second example is the 'Dedication' of a child from a mixed muslim-christian background.

One of the consequences of people from various religious backgrounds living together is that these people also marry each other. How should a religious community deal with its members pastorally if one of them marries someone from a different tradition?

It is possible that in a mixed marriage one partner or the other converts to the religion of his or her partner. It happens quite often that one or both become alienated from their own tradition or ignore each other's tradition. If this does not happen, each one adheres to his or her own tradition. It is also conceivable that one respects the authenticity and singularity of the other's belief and looks for ways to live together with the Holy Scriptures of the other. Particularly if there are children involved, the question as to how they are to grow up in a multicultural and multireligious world is all the more urgent.

Using the example from my own practice I wish to linger over and indicate how this is determined by means of the interpretation of the Holy Scripture. I will present it as an example of "living with the Holy Scripture in a pluralistic society". The couple in question did not want to have their child baptized or circumcised, because doing either would mean that the child would be incorporated into one tradition or the other. The parents did not want to have one tradition imposed, as it were, on the child. Both wanted to pass on both traditions. "If he only believes that God exists," the Moslem father said, "he can choose for himself later." In their upbringing of the child they wanted to enrich the child with what they both had interiorized, as the Christian mother formulated it. For these reasons they chose simply to 'dedicate' the child to God.

I chose, for the sermon for this dedication, a text from the prophet Zechariah. The third and shortest vision, "A man with a Measuring Line," contains both what the prophet *heard* as well as what he *saw*.

Zechariah 2, 1-5

Then I looked up.

Zechariah lived in a time of occupation, wars and exiles ('asylum seekers') who were attempting to begin a new life and were returning to Jerusalem. Zechariah prophesied in the second year of Darius the king of Persia. This great Persian king appears in the Old Testament in connection with the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem by returning exiles.

Then I looked up – and there before me was a man with a measuring line in his hand.

What does that mean, the prophet wondered? Will God's promise be fulfilled? Will God turn to Jerusalem in mercy? Will His House be built there?

I asked, "Where are you going?" He answered me, "To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is."

The *width* and *length* refer to the total surface. Obviously, the man with the measuring line represents the exiles from Babylon. He wishes to know how many migrants the city can accommodate. Will there be sufficient room for a whole mass of people? Will Jerusalem not be too full? Is there sufficient room? Can a sufficient allotment of space be found for each person?

But then something unexpected and quite strange happens in this vision. A *second* angel appears. The first is a messenger angel, the *second* belongs to the host which surrounds God and are constantly waiting on God. He is "one of the powerful heroes who execute his word, listening to the sound of his voice," one of "his servants who do his will" (Psalm 103, 21). The message that the second angel brings is the point of this vision.

"Run, tell that young man."

Running is the specific task of a prophet (Jer 23, 21). The other angel is given the task of running as fast as possible to that man with the measuring line in order to tell him to stop measuring.

This means that there will be no boundaries, no walls to the city. The message of God, which the angel must pass on, signifies that Jerusalem will be an *open place* without walls. The enormous multitude of people and livestock for which Jerusalem is waiting, will not tolerate any limitation of its space (Is 49, 19ff.; 54, 1ff). The population of Jerusalem will be so great that it will fill the surrounding villages.

A city without borders? Without walls? What about security? Are 'safe borders' not necessary? Could those who heard Zechariah ask such questions? A city without borders or walls does not mean, according to the prophet, that it will be without protection? Think about the many examples here on Malta with its fortified cities. *"Run, tell that young man, Jerusalem will be like a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it."*

"And I myself will be a wall of fire around it," declares the Lord, "and I will be its glory within."

A wall of fire: *fire* is the vehicle of the divine presence, like the burning bush. The divine presence is expressed in the column of fire that lighted the Israelites' journey through the desert (Ex 13, 21ff.). The Lord went before them during the day in a pillar of cloud to lead them through the desert and at night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day and night (Numbers 9, 15-23). As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord will surround his people (Psalm 125, 2). The word of God does not mean only the fulfilment of a promise for the returning exiles. God will devote himself to his people, both humans and animals – and in a liberated Jerusalem without any walls. Their only protection will be the presence of God (cf. Ezek 36, 11).

In his excessive zeal the 'man with the measuring line' wishes to set limits to God's mercy (Zechariah 1, 16). But what God wants to happen is that all boundaries will be breached. His grace knows no boundaries. Jerusalem will accommodate an abundance of people and animals.

It is important to ask what the returning exiles at the time did with Zechariah's dream. Actually we do know that in a way. A few decades after Zechariah (445 BCE) there was a certain Nehemiah, a zealot – today we would perhaps call him a 'fundamentalist'. He energetically undertakes the building of the wall of Jerusalem and completes it in 52 days (Nehemiah 6, 15). But there are all kinds of people in his time who oppose him. Nehemiah ascribes this resistance to malice. But there are also prophets among those who resist rebuilding the wall (Nehemiah 6, 14). Was it ill will? Or is it perhaps that some of the opponents of the walls that were once again built around Jerusalem were thinking of what Zechariah had said: "Jerusalem will be an open place; the Lord himself will be wall of fire around it"? Did they not perhaps have religious grounds for objecting to rebuilding the wall?

I come to my conclusion as to my pleas for reading Holy Scriptures together in a multi-cultural society. Can the dilemma before which we stand in the multicultural society of today not be presented in the question: Will people orient themselves to that vision of Zechariah or will they follow the example of Nehemiah? One can imagine what the arguments are for connecting up with the example of Nehemiah: secure and safe behind one's walls ... But choosing for Zechariah's vision places all – the church and perhaps also *mutatis mutandis* the synagogue and the mosque – before a great challenge. How much room is there in our country, in our city, in our church, synagogue or mosque, in our heart for those of other races, cultures and religions?

Living with the Scripture in a multicultural society: Why can people not live together today with the Holy Scripture and be able to and allow themselves to be inspired by Zechariah's vision, a place without borders where people can live without fear, in safety, ... with only one security: God will be the wall of fire around it.

**Free University
Amsterdam
Netherlands**