

Two Invitations to Intercultural Living: The Pentateuch and the Letters of Paul

Our societies and communities are still increasingly being faced with the challenge of different cultures living together. This enterprise didn't just start yesterday; in point of fact, it can be detected in the Bible itself, as shown by Fr. Michel Proulx, O. PRAEM., in a recent article that I will outline in this article.¹ In the work of editing the Pentateuch and drafting the letters of Saint Paul, Fr. Proulx sees intercultural projects at work, that is to say the forming of new communities made up of people from different cultural backgrounds.

Composition of the Pentateuch

The Pentateuch acquired its current form in the mid-fifth century BCE, under the Persian Empire at the time of the return from the Exile... of *certain* members of the People of the Covenant! For not all followers of Yahweh were deportees to Babylon returning to Judea.

Some had stayed put, and had not benefited from the same theological developments as the deportees. Others would not return from Babylon or Egypt, where the upheaval caused by wars had taken them and where they had remade their lives while still aspiring to live as genuine members of the People of the Covenant. Still others came from the religious and cultural interbreeding that occurred under the Assyrian kingdom in the former Northern Kingdom: these were the Samaritans. To preserve these different "Israel" from breaking up, the composition of the Pentateuch seeks to give them a common homeland by defining a unique identity with multiple facets.

Three Literary Strategies

Father Proulx identifies three literary strategies that serve this project. Let us first note the conservation and even the articulation of two identity principles, two stories of the origins of the People of the Covenant.

The first is the story of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It founds a genealogical understanding of identity that recognizes the members of the people spared from deportation and who stayed in the land of their ancestors. On the other hand, those returning from Babylon or Egypt identify more with the people entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses. This Exodus-based understanding appeals in turn to a common voluntary adherence to a social contract, the Mosaic law, to unite a multiethnic population. These two principles of identity will be articulated at the cost of compromise and concessions without, however, eliminating all the tensions.

The second literary strategy was to place the conclusion of the Pentateuch, with the death of Moses outside of Canaan's borders, prior to entry into the Promised Land. This shows that one can be a member of the People of the Covenant even when inside other borders and in another culture. The example of Joseph illustrates this wonderfully: an inhabitant of Egypt against his will and married to an Egyptian woman, he still worked for the survival of his family from this land (Gen 37-50).

A third strategy, which is also a concession to the Jewish Diaspora, relates to the place of worship. The contributions of the tradition of the priests of Jerusalem to the Pentateuch find their culmination, surprisingly, not in the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, but in the Tent of Meeting. This portable shrine with no particular geographical place symbolizes the relationship of God with believers in the diaspora, who walk in faith without access to the

¹ "Deux invitations à l'interculturalité : le Pentateuque et les lettres de Paul," *Lumen vitae*, 70/4 (2015), p. 369-381.

Temple of Jerusalem. Deuteronomy even extends a hand to the Samaritans, with the invitation of Moses to go, after the entry into Canaan, to Mount Gerizim (Deut 11:29 and 27:11-12), which is their sanctuary.

From the Pentateuch to Saint Paul: The Same Call

If we go from the Pentateuch to St. Paul, the same call to recognize an identity that transcends cultural differences acquires new dimensions. The communities being addressed by Paul's letters are composed of Christians of Jewish and pagan origin. Yet between the Jews and the members of other ethnic groups and religions, there was traditionally a staunch divider, a "barrier" of separation and hostility (Eph 2:14). Therefore we see the powerful character of the Pauline call:

"For all of you are the children of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus, since every one of you that has been baptised has been clothed in Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female — for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3: 26-28)

An Invitation to Go Beyond Boundaries

The image of the garment, biblical symbol of profound identity, expresses the new identity of the believers: By faith in Christ and by the gift of the same Spirit that cries in their hearts "Abba, Father!" (Gal 4: 6), they are all sons of God.

This new identity transcends the other identity markers, without, however, erasing or denying cultural differences. Paul himself continues to introduce himself as a Jew (e.g., Rom 9:3; 11:1). And it is precisely on the basis of the founding element of the Jewish identity, the paternity of Abraham, that Paul invites us to go beyond the boundaries between Jews and pagans. Abraham was considered righteous, not because of his works but because of his faith (cf. Gen 15:6, quoted in Gal 3:6 and Rom 4:3). Arriving well before the law of Moses, it is thus by faith that the Father of all believers, Jews or pagans, with his progeny announced long before in Gen 17:5, is quoted in Rom 4:17 as "I have made you the father of many nations."

A Common Challenge

In Saint Paul, the common identity that puts things into perspective, that of the son of God, is of a new and radical depth. And yet from the Pentateuch to Saint Paul, and to us, the challenge is still the same: to recognize a common belonging which, without erasing the differences, enables us to transcend cultural differences. May we know how to gather the fruits of this biblical teaching in all our intercultural challenges.

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