

Inaugural Address
President Iain R. Torrance
Princeton Theological Seminary
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Beyond Solipsism

My question is where to begin and how to use an occasion such as this. The congregation in front of me is ecumenical and international. It contains representatives from the church, from seminaries and universities. We are honored by the presence of believers from the other Abrahamic faiths. I thank those who have traveled far to come here. I thank those from here who have welcomed them and me, and especially those who have organized this remarkable service. In particular I would thank Tom Tewell from the Board of Trustees and James Kay from the Faculty who have given such meticulous attention to detail. We all thank Joan Lippincott, Eric Plutz, Penna Rose, Andrew Megill and Martin Tel for the music. I am grateful to John Ferguson for his wonderful arrangement of Saint Columba's hymn. None of us will forget the voices of William Nemon Heard and Angela Dienhart Hancock. Thank you. And I am grateful to Donna Kline, Kathy Matakas, Cheryl Gardner, Barbara Chaapel, Kathy Whalen and Sharon Kozlowski for the diplomacy, industry, skill and kindness they have shown in the complicated organization of these two days. And to Sandy McNutt and to Darrell Guder for their advice.

So where to begin and how to use such an occasion? The decision to place scripture at the center was deliberate. I mean 'scripture' as sacred text across the Abrahamic faiths, following from the seminars yesterday, and thus to allow the notion of scriptural reading to question our practices, institutions and curricula. I'll begin with a characteristically challenging quotation from Stanley Hauerwas, a friend from whom I have learned so much. Hauerwas suggested, "No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America". He continued, "North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their common sense is sufficient for the understanding of scripture"¹. It is Hauerwas' perception of individualized, idiosyncratic and possessive reading of the bible which interests me. When that is combined with great self-certainty we have several of the ingredients which have produced such divisions in western Christianity.

What strategies are there for moving beyond such individualistic readings? Let's begin from where I stand. To my left there is the banner of the University of Edinburgh. It is there because Edinburgh was the university of John Witherspoon who stands outside in

¹ Both quotations are from *Unleashing the Scripture* by Stanley Hauerwas (Abingdon: Nashville, 1993), page 15.

bronze. Witherspoon was such an interesting person that it is worth digressing for a moment. He was born in 1723 in Gifford, Scotland, so he came from the same village as John Knox. He graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1739, and actively supported the Hanoverians against the Jacobites in 1745. In 1752, a lobby in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland passed a measure for the expulsion of an orthodox and godly minister named Thomas Gillespie. I could hardly resist that! Tom, he must have been your forebear, and one to be proud of! Thomas Gillespie had fallen foul of his presbytery for refusing to participate in the installation of an unpopular clergyman in the parish of Inverkeithing. Now the issue at stake was ‘patronage’, the right of the landowner to present a nominee to a parish. Behind this was a growing conviction of the independence of the church as a distinct spiritual voice. Witherspoon sided with Gillespie against those who came to be known as the Moderates, that is the group which supported patronage. Witherspoon satirized his opponents in an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, and gaining influence, turned his sharp pen to other polemics. He was granted an honorary doctorate by the University of St Andrews in 1764, and two years later, as we all know, was called to the presidency of the Presbyterian College of New Jersey at Princeton. Here, unlike his moderate rivals, and true to his early instinct against patronage, Witherspoon supported the American cause. Again, as we all know, in 1776 he became the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence². Witherspoon, I suspect, was not good company, and he was famously lampooned by the urbane leader of the Moderates, Alexander Carlyle, who described him as ‘very sensible and shrewd, but of a disagreeable temper, which was irritated by a flat voice, and an awkward manner, which prevented his making an impression on his companions of either sex’³. Alexander Carlyle was one of John Cairns’ and my predecessors as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and his portrait encouraged me daily in the house in Edinburgh which John and I successively occupied.

But, more to the point, Witherspoon came out of the milieu of the Scottish philosophers of common sense, and that’s what I really want to talk about. Their greatest exponent was Thomas Reid, a professor from Aberdeen. Thomas Reid, above all else, defended a realist position with respect to our knowledge of the external world and of morality, and for him, the first step to be taken against David Hume was to recognize that ‘a faculty of sense is essentially a faculty of *judgment*, and a judgment is [quite] a different kind of thing from sensation or feeling’⁴. Let me turn next to James Frederick Ferrier, a St Andrews philosopher, who came just a little later, but offered a searching criticism of the thoroughgoing idealism or solipsism of Bishop Berkeley.

Ferrier, who has been described as ‘lucid, learned and iconoclastic’⁵, was evidently fascinated by the thesis of Bishop Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision*, that distance may not be perceived by sight. Berkeley’s claim, which I think is true, is based on his

² See *New Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2004 (John Witherspoon).

³ *The Autobiography of Dr Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk, 1722-1805*, edited by John Hill Burton, T.N.Foulis: London and Edinburgh, 1910, page 34.

⁴ Alexander Broadie, ‘Reid making sense of moral sense’ in *Reid Studies*, vol 1, number 2, 1998, p15.

⁵ By Kirk Willis in the *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, 2004.

observation that a person born blind and later enabled to see, would not immediately understand perspective. Strictly, all we see is colour, and by sight alone we do not see what Ferrier called 'outness'. Ferrier then proceeded fairly effectively to undercut Berkeley's solipsism, by arguing that by use of the hand one can touch the eye, thereby blotting out the visual field, and teaching oneself to order visual perceptions in depth of field. One comes to see *objects*, not merely sense impressions⁶. Seeing objects is thus an act of judgment, as we have seen with Thomas Reid in the case of moral sentiments.

Now, why is Ferrier interesting, and what is the point of spending time on him? He is interesting because of his struggle to evade solipsism through breaking out of mono-lingual 'sight language', first through finding a way in which the eye is located within its own field of vision, and second by making use of another sense, in this case touch. This moves us to what I am really interested in: with Ferrier we have the beginning of an analogy for how Christian scriptural reading may be released from its own self-absorption, competitiveness and finality – the very difficulties cited by Hauerwas to which I referred at the beginning of this address. So what we are looking for are more constructive ways of reading scripture than many of those which are currently offered.

The Book of Jonah provides another kind of analogy for how a prevailing pattern of expectation may be shifted. It provides an example of scripture appraising itself. It may be seen as a contrived narrative intended creatively to reach out towards what had hitherto been inexpressible, namely the utterly unimaginable ability of God to forgive. If God could forgive Nineveh, could God not forgive Jerusalem?

About three weeks ago the Seminary shared with Mercer County Community College a day-long seminar on marriage organized by the M.Div senior Hui Chen and my colleague Nancy Duff. This was an exemplary collaboration between the Seminary and the community. Inevitably, issues of biblical interpretation came up. My colleague Peter Paris reminded us that in the war between the states, the pro-slavery biblical arguments were constructed not in the south, but from Yale, Harvard and Princeton. What could better illustrate a pattern of thinking which was closed in upon itself? At the same seminar, someone asked what message of the gospel could be given to the gay community. Faithfulness was suggested by someone else. Be like those who are married. All of this was well meant, and I'd heard it before, but nonetheless, I felt it jar. Speaking *a gospel* is rarely achieved without having one's heart in one's mouth. Did this not risk failing to observe the otherness of the other? Did it not risk neglecting the persistent biblical theme that much of human relating is to do with an aching yearning for a significant other? How are we to find a vocabulary so as to be more observant both of text and of humankind?

As part of that search, let me tell you a rabbinic story, which was given to me by Jacob Neusner. It comes from Lamentations Rabbati Petihta 24. The context is a debate about the destruction of the sanctuary. In the course of the debate, Abraham, pleading for his children, said to the Lord: 'Lord of the world! How come you have sent my children into

⁶ All of this is culled from James Frederick Ferrier, 'Berkeley and Idealism' in *Lectures and Philosophical Remains*, vol II, William Blackwood: Edinburgh, 1866, pp 291-350.

exile and handed them over to the nations? And they have killed them with all manner of disgusting forms of death! And you have destroyed the house of the sanctuary, the place on which I offered up my son Isaac as a burnt-offering before you!?’

The Lord replied to Abraham, 'Your children sinned and violated the whole Torah, transgressing the twenty-two letters that are used to write it', and the Lord then called in turn upon each of the letters of the alphabet to bring testimony against Israel.

Eventually, when they had all given evidence and Israel stood utterly condemned, Rachel sprang to Israel's defence.

The pericope reads:

‘Then Rachel, our mother, leapt to the fray and said to the Holy One, blessed be He, “Lord of the world! It is perfectly self-evident to you that your servant, Jacob, loved me with a mighty love, and worked for me for [my] father for seven years, but when those seven years were fulfilled, and the time came for my wedding to my husband, [my] father planned to substitute my sister for me in the marriage to my husband. Now that matter was very hard for me, for I knew the deceit, and I told my husband and gave him a sign by which he would know the difference between me and my sister, so that my father would not be able to trade me off. But then I regretted it and I bore my passion, and I had mercy for my sister, that she should not be shamed. So in the evening for my husband they substituted my sister for me, and I gave my sister all the signs that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she was Rachel.

And not only so, but I crawled under the bed on which he was lying with my sister, while she remained silent, and I made all the replies so that he would not discern the voice of my sister.

I paid my sister only kindness, and I was not jealous of her, and I did not allow her to be shamed, and I am a mere mortal, dust and ashes. I had no envy of my rival, and I did not place her at risk for shame and humiliation. But you are the King, living and enduring and merciful. How come then you are jealous of idolatry, which is nothing, and so have sent my children into exile, allowed them to be killed by the sword, permitted the enemy to do whatever they wanted to them?!’”

The pericope continues: ‘Forthwith the mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, welled up, and he said, “For Rachel I am going to bring the Israelites back to their land.”’

That is in line with this verse of Scripture: “Thus said the Lord: A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. Thus said the Lord, Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor, declares the Lord; they shall return from the enemy's land, and there is hope for your future, declares the Lord: your children shall return to their country”’

(Jer. 31:15-17).”

Clearly, this pericope is not a speech about the ordination issue and I am not pretending that it is. Yet we are now in a context in which our tradition, the Christian tradition, has reached virtual deadlock over a whole series of issues, a zero sum game in which if there are winners there are losers also. There are certain questions which we seem incapable of resolving so long as those issues are posed legalistically. When faced with the question,

‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’, Jesus evaded the question ‘Is it lawful to do this or that?’ and instead reached back to a fundamental vision or awareness for humankind. Jesus said: ‘In the beginning it was not so ...’. The Rachel pericope, of course, is much later. Jacob Neusner described it to me as being unique in the canon of formative Judaism. He wrote to me: ‘I cannot point in Midrash compilations that reached closure prior to this one to a passage of the narrative ambition and power of Samuel bar Nahman’s. We are in a completely different literary situation when we come to so long and so carefully formed a story as this one’⁷. The Rachel pericope is not definitive in the sense that it has no ambition for finality, but it is observant of human love at such a different level that it succeeded, in literary form, in eclipsing shortsightedness even in the Lord. I think it is that daring.

It is the eclipse of human shortsightedness in our sight-language only reading of sacred text which is my concern. God knows that we have need of such imagination in today’s world. Torture is a stain upon the integrity of the Christian cultures of the west. It is evident that torture takes place when functionalism is given its head. Functionalism is another locking of oneself into a single dimension or sense. In the introduction to the massive book entitled *The Torture Papers*, published by Cambridge University Press early this year, reference is made to Jacobo Timerman, an Argentinian prisoner who was saved from likely death by pressure, and after release went to Israel. Anthony Lewis, who wrote the introduction to *The Torture Papers*, recalled meeting him subsequently, and discussing the interrogation of prisoners. Timerman asked whether Lewis would agree to torture a prisoner if he knew of a terrorist outrage which would shortly take place. Lewis attempted to avoid the question, but eventually said, Yes, he would. Timerman replied: ‘You cannot start down that road’. The volume notes that ‘the Supreme Court of Israel, with many painful examples of terror, agreed with Timerman’s view when it considered the question of torture. It rejected the use of torture, even when a suspect is thought to know the location of a “ticking bomb”’⁸. What is at stake, as the book later remarks, is ‘the judgment of good men and women who flinch less from fear than from the loss of respect for one another’⁹.

This is why scriptural reading matters, and why it is so imperative that we are enabled to move beyond the current impasse. That is why, as part of the celebration of this transition, we invited David Ford, Peter Ochs and Aref Nayed yesterday to speak specifically about their project entitled Scriptural Reasoning. I don’t plan to describe the project, because, like all projects attempting to change a perspective, it is busy defining itself and finding its feet. But I want to make some reference to the vision of Peter Ochs.

In his delineation of it, the aim of scriptural reasoning is to reconstitute modern thought as a practice of reflection upon our actions, and thereby to discern in them traces of the divine will. Scriptural Reasoning questions and seeks to interrupt the contemporary process which polarizes on the one hand secular modernism, and on the other anti-

⁷ In a personal email, dated 8 February 2003.

⁸ *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Graib*, edited by Karen J Greenberg and Joshua L Dratel, Cambridge University Press, 2005, page xvi.

⁹ *Ibid*, page xx.

modern religious orthodoxy. Peter Ochs maintains that truth claims are not impossible, but are more indirect than either side of such polarization permits. A sense of the indirectness of truth claims is what I have argued for throughout this address. As Peter Ochs puts it, and here I quote him, rather than mangle and objectify a subtle argument further: ‘Truth is recovered in Jesus’ parabolic tradition, or in the Midrashic tradition, but certainly not through rude attempts to reassert a religious axiology by restating varieties of the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount as propositional creeds’¹⁰. Consequently, in a process of what he calls ‘redemptive reasoning’, Peter Ochs seeks to locate truth, now understood indirectly, with respect to its success or failure in resolving the problem or suffering which gave rise to the inquiry.

What is the very best thing which we can do for good in this Seminary, not only for the church, but also, I believe, for the benefit of the world at this juncture?

In my first convocation address last September, I referred to the founding charisms of this school. Beyond doubt, part of our reason for being here is to acknowledge the gifts which we have been given and the remarkable leadership provided by my three immediate predecessors, all of whom were different, and each of whom led the school through times of turbulence. Part of our being here is to give thanks to God for their work.

Yet history moves on, and each generation faces the challenges of its own time.

The vision of the first Thomas Gillespie and of John Witherspoon to uphold spiritual independence and to criticize patronage – the vision which subsequently became the American experiment – that vision trembles if it ever becomes a persecuting force. It is here that we have to take account of the scandal of extraordinary rendition¹¹.

There are things which a seminary of the stature and quality of this can do to help at a time of changing values. We can make it our purpose to feed the imagination of our students and to wean it from the cultural narcissism to which I have referred. We can pay critical attention to our curriculum so as to prepare people who do not fear or demonize difference; we can provide a context within which that which is controversial may be debated safely. We can teach about the indirectness of truth, whether in the thought of Peter Ochs or in Anselm’s *De Veritate*¹². We can teach our students to avoid intellectual complacency and to relate abstraction to practice. The church has always proceeded through argument and that will not change. Most importantly, in an intellectual climate

¹⁰ See Peter Ochs, ‘The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning’ at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume2/number1/ssr02-01-e01.html>. My comments on Peter Ochs are attempts to summarize thrusts of his argument from this article. The text is found there in its entirety.

¹¹ See *The New Yorker*, 14 + 21 February 2005, pages 106-123, and *The Sunday Times* of 6 February 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2089-1471913,00.html>. I am grateful to my colleagues Dr Stacy Johnson and Dr George Hunsinger for bringing these to my attention.

¹² Cf Thomas F Torrance: ‘The Ethical Implications of Anselm’s *De Veritate*’, in *Theologische Zeitschrift* (Basel), volume 24, 1968, pages 309-319. The *style* of my father’s relentlessly critical realism and quest for open structures shaped my thinking, and continues to evade his scholastic imitators. It was no accident that James Iley McCord, Fourth President of the Seminary, was my father’s closest friend.

which lends itself to polarization, we can teach the virtues which militate against slippage from appropriate defense to crusade, from moral stance to demonisation of the other, from caution before the evidence to intransigence and prejudice. I have been and am assisted by my colleagues in the Seminary. But I am also helped by other dialogue partners. Cornel West, Jeff Stout, Al Raboteau and Peter Brown have all reached out to show me friendship. I am glad to be installed in office in the chapel of this university and will do whatsoever I can to continue and to foster the links between our two institutions.