

## Listen With Both Ears:

### Devotional I

THOMAS F. McDANIEL

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob: that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken it. (Micah 4:2b-4)

Kenneth Cragg in his book *The Wisdom of the Sufis* relates the following story from the Sufi wisdom tradition:

Moses once heard a shepherd praying:

“O God, show me where Thou art, that I may become Thy servant. I will clean Thy shoes, and comb Thy hair and sew Thy clothes and fetch Thee milk.”

When Moses heard him praying thus in a senseless manner, he rebuked him saying: “O foolish one, though your father was a Muslim you have become an infidel. God is Spirit and needs not such gross ministrations as, in your ignorance, you suppose.”

The Shepherd was abashed at his rebuke and tore his clothes and fled into the desert. Then a voice from heaven was heard saying: “O Moses, wherefore have you driven away my servant? Your office is to reconcile my people with me, not to drive them away from me.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Wisdom of the Sufis* (New York: New Directions, 1976).

DR. THOMAS McDANIEL is Professor of Old Testament Studies, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, PA. A specialist in Semitic languages, Dr. McDaniel remains a student of Japanese language and culture. While on sabbatical in 1976, he carried out research in early Hebrew poetry as a postdoctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins University.



Cragg told the story to demonstrate the Sufi notion that uncouth ideas, though they come not from the mystics with their superior knowledge, nevertheless reach heaven alright. I retell it for more obvious reasons. For me it is a reminder to listen with both ears, to listen at two levels; one ear attuned to the mind and the mouth, the words and their logic, and the other ear attuned to the heart and its passion. Moses overheard the shepherd's words, but he missed hearing his heartbeat of love. When the heart is right, appropriate words and informed logic take their proper place and serve their proper function. From the *haddith*, the traditions of the Prophet, comes the following wisdom about the power and primacy of the heart:

Should any among you see evil activities, he should change them with his hand. If he cannot do that, he should change them with his tongue. and if he cannot do that he should change them with his heart.<sup>2</sup>

But listening with both ears to the words and to the feelings, to the propositions and the passions, is no easier for us than it was for Moses. I find it especially difficult when I am offended by another's words and logic, or when the passion of love and the passion for truth has been replaced by apathy, despair, rage or hate. Two years ago, while visiting Saint John's Ophthalmologic Hospital in Jerusalem, I was graciously entertained by a Palestinian male nurse who insisted on my accepting as a gift, a tape recording of Arabic music I enjoyed while visiting in his room. When weeks later at home I played the flip-side of the tape, I was unprepared for the militant Palestinian lyrics:

Jerusalem—"City of Peace" says your name.  
And yet today your heart is afire and aflame.  
How long must you suffer?  
We can't let your soul be smothered or stand by to  
watch you fall under their oppression.  
The time has come to free you and let you really be you.  
We won't stop until we see you free again.

Jerusalem, you are Arab, you always were—a long time.  
Muslim and Christian living together side by side.  
Then the stranger came to take you;  
Foreigners, to only rape you.  
They live to desecrate you, O Holy Land.

<sup>2</sup> Tradition of the Prophet, noted by Muslim and by Ibn Khaldun, cited by Cragg, *The Wisdom of the Sufis*, p. 110.



They got no right to be here;  
 To steal, kill and cheat here.  
 O Palestine, we hear your desperate cry! Jerusalem!

I had prayed for the peace of Jerusalem, but never in this way. I wanted to argue with the words, the logic, the distortions. I was dismayed that Jews and Israelis were made nameless, but when I listened with the other ear to the passions, I had to acknowledge with Joan Peters that, "Enmity bred over decades cannot be easily defused."<sup>3</sup> S. D. Goitein's comment in his book, *Jews and Arabs*, wrote of Arabs who for centuries had endured imperialist oppression without an exile or Diaspora, helped me to put the lyrics in a broader historical context: "In many other respects, however, these Arabs have fared worse even than the Jews. They have, so to speak, suffered 'exile' while on their own soil."<sup>4</sup>

I have learned from those who have listened to the mind and to the heart. The office of reconciliation begins with such listening. Frank Epp in his book *The Palestinians* writes:

Peace, we believe, lies in the direction of deep, sensitive, and prolonged listening to the peoples on both sides, from both sides and by both sides. Such listening will reveal that justice for the Palestinian, security for the Israeli, and peace and fulfillment for both, are all a part of each other.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this context that the first imperative of Israel's call to faith, and the greatest commandment recognized by Jesus must be obeyed, if reconciliation and peace can be achieved: *Shema* "Listen!" *Shema we'ahavta* "Listen and love!" Without listening there may be no love; and without love, the *desperate passions of the heart will make themselves heard*.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial*, New York: Harper & Row, 1984, p. 407.

<sup>4</sup> S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, New York: Schocken Books, 1964, p. 212.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Epp, *The Palestinians*, Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976, p. 10.



## Listen With Both Ears:

### Devotional II

THOMAS F. McDANIEL

THE GOOD NEWS of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world," is challenged by the bad news of Malachi 1:2b-4:

Yet I have loved Jacob but hated Esau; I have laid waste his hill country and left his inheritance to the jackals of the desert. If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the Lord of hosts says, "They may build, but I will tear down, til they are called the wicked country, the people with whom the Lord is angry forever."

At first sight, Isaiah 19, like Malachi 1, does not appear to be an appropriate devotional text for a conference focused on understanding and reconciliation in the Middle East. The first sixteen verses read as though they were a compilation of this month's headlines and front page news. One need only substitute "Lebanon" or "Palestine" for the Egypt named by the prophet.

And I will stir up Egyptian against Egyptian, and they will fight every man against his brother, every man against his neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom—I will confound their plans . . . I will give over the Egyptians into the hands of a hard master, and a fierce king shall rule over them . . . The princes of Memphis are deluded . . . they have made Egypt stagger in all her doings as a man staggers in his vomit . . . there will be nothing for Egypt . . . they will be like women.

If we listen to *these* words with both ears, with one ear attuned to the *words* and the other ear to the *heart*, we hear also the pounding pulse of the human passions, of rage and revenge. Ancient Israelites were as human as modern Palestinians and Israelis and as human as contemporary Christians and Muslims. Oracle after oracle, page after page, many bib-



lical and non-biblical texts, in like manner call for death and destruction. By listening with only one ear, some find hope in these texts, that all such events will be fulfilled in our time in an apocalyptic fantasy for which they will enjoy box seats as sanctified spectators in the "Theater of Armageddon."

But when we move from the "headlines and front page" to the "editorial page" (Isaiah 19:17-25), we hear a different story, reflecting a different theology (though not necessarily a different theologian, for even theologians are known to change their minds). We are invited to look away from the valley of the shadow of death to holy places and international highways filled with people living and worshipping in a new Eden of freedom and toleration.

Listen with both ears!

In that day Israel will be a third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage." (19:24-25).

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria and the Assyrian will come to Egypt, and the Egyptian to Assyria, and the Egyptians will *worship* [Hebrew "*abad* work, serve, worship"] with the Assyrians. (19:23)

In that day there will be an altar to Yahweh in the midst of the land of Egypt and a pillar to Yahweh at its border . . . when they [the Egyptians] cry to the Lord because of oppressors he will send them [the Egyptians] a saviour and will defend and deliver them [the Egyptians]. The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians and the Egyptians will know the Lord. (19:19-21)

To be sure, these words could be interpreted as just another expression of ancient Israel's religious imperialism. But the exegetical tradition surrounding this chapter suggests the contrary. From the early Greek translations to contemporary commentators, there has been a tendency to harmonize the poetic words of doom for Egypt (19:1-16), as noted above, and the prose praise for Egypt and Assyria (19:17-25), noted here, transforming the chapter more or less into an oracle of doom. But to do this, harmonizers, ancient and modern, have been forced to rewrite the text. The Aramaic Targum, for example, reads in part:

At that time there shall be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians shall fight with the Egyptians and the Egyptians with the Assyrians; and Egypt shall serve the Assyrians . . . Blessed be my



people [Israel] whom I have brought forth out of Egypt. Because they sinned I carried them into exile to Assyria, but now that they have repented, they shall be called, my people and my inheritance, even Israel.

There is no recognition here that the Egyptians and Assyrians are God's people. Similarly, all translations surveyed by the writer, reverse the meaning of the prophet's words in 19:17, by translating, "The land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians." But the prophet's words were: "*And the land of Judah shall become [a place of] pilgrimages/ festivity (Hebrew *haq*. Arabic *ha*) 'festival,' not the word metathetic *giah* 'burst forth, write, reel, fight') for Egypt; everyone to whom it is mentioned will stand in awe because of the purpose which the Yahweh Sabaoth has planned concerning him.*"

In light of the struggle between the Selucids and the Ptolemies, or more ancient international rivalries, one can appreciate the historicized and contextualized interpretation of the Targum. But the prophet's words need to be heard apart from tradition. *Interpretations reflect history; but the text can shape history.*

Just as we need to listen to others and to each other with both ears, so we must hear the biblical word. We must have the ear in tune with the text and the other ear attuned to its interpretation; one ear sensitive to human pathology and the other ear sensitive to divine grace and good news; an ear for human passion and the other for divine compassion.

When I listen with both ears to all of Isaiah, I find a vision which matches the promise to Abraham. "In all three shall all of the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). But the vision begs for fulfillment: "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

And so, I pray,

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!  
for the peace of Egypt,  
and the peace of Assyria.

May they prosper who love you!  
Peace be within your walls and through your lands,  
and security within your towers,  
at your borders,  
and along open highways!

For my kinfolk and companions sake  
For the sake of the whole human family,  
I will say "Peace be within you! Peace surround you."

Psalm 122:6-7, modified



# Christianity and the Arab / Israeli Conflict



CONFERENCE

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# EASTERN'S WORLD

News and Views of Eastern College and The Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary

فِي ذَلِكَ الْيَوْمِ يَكُونُ إِسْرَائِيلُ ثَالِثًا فِي الْمَوْصِلَيْنِ وَفِي الْمِصْرَيْنِ  
مُبَارَكٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكَهَا رَبُّ أَكْبِيْشَ قَائِلًا مُبَارَكٌ سَعْيِي  
الَّذِي فِي مِصْرَ وَالَّذِي فِي الْمَوْصِلَيْنِ وَمِثْرَانِي إِسْرَائِيلُ

בְּיוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלִישִׁיָּה לַמְּצָרִים וּלְאַשּׁוּר  
בְּרִכָּה בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ: אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכְנוּ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת  
לֵאמֹר בְּרוּךְ עַמִּי מִצְרַיִם וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אֲשּׁוּר וְנַחֲלָתִי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל:



*In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria,  
a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts  
has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and  
Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."*

Isaiah 19:24-25 (RSV)

**The Evangelical Round Table—  
Christianity and the Arab/Israeli Conflict**