Journal of Textual Reasoning (Old Series) 8:1 (1999)
ISSN: 1939-7518

INTRODUCTION TO "TEACHING TROUBLING TEXTS"

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This year's AAR session, entitled "Teaching Troubling Texts," will take up both the pedagogical and the hermeneutic issues and difficulties involved in reading/teaching texts which in some way challenge one's contemporary worldview. These difficulties can include challenges to one's working moral standpoint, such as the Bible's maxim of an eye for an eye or its apparent justification of the extermination of foreign cultures, challenges to one's social and political commitments, such as the Talmud's articulation of female inferiority or the Zohar's negative understanding of the humanity of non-Jews, and challenges to one's metaphysical assumptions, such as the Jewish medieval preoccupation with the incorporeality of the intellect and rationality.

What is at stake here are

a) Questions of authority: how should we regard such texts in relation to opposing voices in the same tradition?
b) Questions of interpretation: how have other readers seen these texts and what does it mean to find them difficult today? Does this require us to read them in a different way? How does one deal with the temptation to minimize (or maximize) their difficulty?

c) Questions of practice: if part of the goal of reading is understanding, preservation, and transmission, how are these desiderata balanced with goals such as those of repair and renewal? and
d) Questions of pedagogy: how does one present such texts in a way which does not obfuscate their dissonance with current views but which makes these dissonances alive for (instead of just offensive to) new readers?

We very much look forward to responses to these questions. They involve our relation to texts that focus our scholarly (and perhaps also personal) interest and they highlight the organic pedagogical connection to our scholarly work. The issue of the session foregrounds the question of whether these difficulties (especially the question of authority) are particular to the teaching of religious texts, while also seeking to shed further light on what a "religious text" is, and whether the prior conception of a text as distinct in this way forecloses other questions we might ask about it, or other ways of being troubled by it. While we can only begin to address such questions in this forum, the perspective of troubling texts is part of our on-going effort creatively to rethink disciplinary and methodological conventions, in order to challenge our own work but perhaps especially to become ever more responsive to our students.

Below, Shaul Magid presents the issues from the standpoint of their history within the tradition and the ways in which the very question may shed light on the enterprise of Textual Reasoning. Aryeh Cohen pursues some of the interpretive possibilities that are opened up by engaging with an unsettling midrash, exploring the intimacy of hermeneutic and political questions in a text understood to be 'Torah.' And Michael Zank reflects on the challenges of teaching the Bible to students, many of whom associate the scholarly effort to contextualize the text with the attempt to divest it of the authority it possesses in religious communities. Zank responds to this challenge by asking whether there are better ways of presenting the distinction between text and interpretation, focusing on the degree to which the Bible has always demanded interpretation, and challenging his

students to push themselves onto the perhaps even more troubling ground of deciding how to interpret and negotiate the wealth of interpretations.

At the session, there will be room to raise other relevant questions, standpoints, and concerns, as well as to represent different traditions (religious and secular) within which this is a live issue. Since the notion of what is troubling is inherently perspectival, it is an especially congenial issue with which to foster exchanges among as many participants as possible. We look forward, in particular, to the participation of Bishop Krister Stendahl, the Dean emeritus of Harvard Divinity School, and Robert Goldenberg, Professor of History and Judaic Studies at SUNY/Stony Brook, whom we would like to thank in advance for bringing their time and energy to bear on our exploration of the teaching of troubling texts.