

Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible through Aboriginal Eyes

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"Emu Dreaming, Lajamanu" Photo Mark Brett

Introduction

This paper grew out of a meeting between Aboriginal leaders and church leaders who believe that two-way education is strong learning. We believe that two-way learning is also important for the church. For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, culture is part of our being before God, and we follow Jesus in each of our different cultures. Jesus is the one who can bring many cultures together into the full potential of wellbeing, although our life in Christ also brings a necessary transformation of cultures.

The Aboriginal churches need to engage with our contemporary challenges on the basis of biblical principles. Yet how we understand those principles is always shaped by the history, culture and even denomination of biblical interpreters. Interpreters

may be convinced that they are not doing interpretation at all, but simply reading the Bible. But in practice, people from other cultures can discern the Western bias in many traditions of preaching, prayer and Bible study passed on through the missions. In effect, each denomination has developed its own syncretistic engagement with the unfolding of Western culture, and we need to be careful to avoid new versions of syncretism that make it difficult to hear the gospel.

In discerning the biblical principles that are going to bring life to the Aboriginal churches, we need to find a reading process that does justice both to the Bible and to Aboriginal experience.

Through conversation with a number of Aboriginal leaders, we have discerned that there are five key themes which are commonly understood to be the foundational principles of Aboriginal culture: family, land, law, language, and ceremony.¹ In some ways, it is difficult to separate these principles, since each of them is related to all the others. But we will focus on each element one at a time, showing how they are inter-related.

We will briefly do this in relation to Aboriginal cultures, but for Christians we will also describe how these themes can provide a structure for understanding the Bible. We want to suggest that the ability to read the Bible through Indigenous eyes will be crucial for the future of the church in Australia, and not just for the Aboriginal churches.

This way of reading looks for analogies between our own cultures and those of the Bible, and of course, analogies imply both similarities and differences. Ancient Israel was a tribal society, and there are many close analogies between the Old Testament traditions and Indigenous experience, but there are also differences.

One of the closest analogies can be found in the ideal of wellbeing as the flourishing of extended families in their traditional country, maintaining the rhythms of the law. In Israel's story, even when this model of wellbeing (*shalom*) has been lost through bitter experience, the ideal is still found in the aspirations for 'redemption', which is understood to be the restoration of family and ancestral land (e.g., Leviticus 25; Isaiah 61).

In discussing the five key elements of Indigenous societies, we need to think about both beliefs and practices and how they all relate to each other, particularly for 'two-way' people like Aboriginal Christians. Often people feel pulled one way or the other, and some have even suggested that God and culture cannot be held together. But we believe that all Christians are called to live in this tension, following Jesus in light of our complex cultural circumstances. The dominant culture in Australia today is still

¹ At a workshop at Whitley College in January 2012, Mark Yettica-Paulson and Steve Jampijinpa Patrick handed out five smooth stones in the course of presenting these themes to the participants. The number five was also linked to the five stars in the Southern Cross. See further, Steven Jampijinpa Patrick, Miles Holmes and Lance Box, *Ngurra-kurlu: A Way of Working with Warlpiri People* (DKCRC Report 41; Alice Springs: Desert Knowledge CRC, 2008).

a culture, even when its principles are simply assumed and not thought about critically.

Five Principles of Culture

- **Family:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have strong family values that extend well beyond the loyalties within a nuclear family. For example, people often use kinship terms that give every member of a society a 'skin' name so that everyone can relate to others as their 'mother', 'grandfather', 'sister', 'nephew', and so on, regardless of whether people belong to their immediate family or not.

Sometimes, even non-Aboriginal people will be given these kinship names as an invitation to join in the life of the community, and this invitation brings with it a clearly defined set of relationships. In our discussion of the Abraham covenant below, we will say more about the inclusive nature of the family of God, which is demonstrated even when Israel preserved its identity as a tribal system of kinship.

- **Land:** Traditional groups are strongly connected to particular lands and waters, which provide the foundations of identity. Within the boundaries of this traditional country there will also be particular sites that have been rendered sacred by events in the ancestral past. 'Country' in this particular Aboriginal sense includes the animals and plants, along with lands and waters, all of which must be cared for by their traditional owners.

By way of analogy, we might bear in mind that the first covenant in the Bible, the covenant with Noah, included 'all living things' (Genesis 9:10, 15, 17), and this inclusive covenant was renewed by the prophets. Hosea 2:18, for example, proclaims a new covenant with animals, and Ezekiel 36:26-29 speaks of the gift of a new spirit that has the effect of bringing fertility to the land (cf. Psalm 104:29-30). Paul says in Romans 8:19-23 that the creation itself will be released from slavery to decay and that it waits in eager anticipation for its redemption. The Bible therefore includes a strong theology of the environment, which has often been neglected.

In Aboriginal societies, caring for country includes environmental practices, such as burning off, but more importantly there are special kinds of ceremonial law that needs to be maintained in order to ensure the wellbeing of the land. The prophet Jeremiah similarly saw that if God's law was not maintained then creation would suffer (Jeremiah 4:23-28).

Indigenous people can maintain their dependence and obligations in relation to their traditional country even if they do not live there all the time. These connections are still extremely significant for people whose grandparents and great-grandparents were forcibly moved from their country by governments

in the past. If individuals lose connection with country, this can be a great source of grief and disorientation.

Such grief and confusion was also part of Israel's experience when the people were forcibly removed from their land and taken into exile in Babylon.² This is reflected in some of the Psalms where people remember Mount Zion (in Jerusalem), where their most sacred site was located:

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing Yahweh's song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy. (Psalm 137:1-6)

This is a biblical example of how connection to country was maintained in the face of exile, and this was the case even when the prophets insisted that God had used the empires of Assyria and Babylon to punish Israel for her sin. These empires, however, were in turn judged for their delusions of power. An Assyrian king, for example, imagined that:

By the strength of my hand I have done this,
and by my wisdom, because I have understanding.
I removed the boundaries of the peoples
I plundered their treasures...
As one reaches into a nest, so my hand reached for the wealth of
the nations.
As men gather abandoned eggs, so I gathered all the countries;
not one flapped a wing, or opened its mouth to chirp. (Isaiah
10:13-14)

But this arrogant fantasy of Assyria's king did not escape God's attention. The imperial imagination claims not even to have heard the flapping of a bird's wing in resistance, but God hears the cries of those who suffer. Every society has its sin, but it does not follow that kings can take the resources of the land away from its traditional owners. This is something that Israel's own kings

² Cf. George Rosendale, *Spirituality for Aboriginal Christians* (Darwin: Nungalinga College, 1993), 19.

had to learn as well.³ The basic principle is stated very simply in Israel's wisdom tradition: 'Do not move an everlasting boundary stone, set up by your ancestors' (Proverbs 22:28).⁴

- **Law:** Traditional law applies across every area of life, governing relationships, ceremony, seasons of the year, flora and fauna, as well as punishments when the law is breached. Caring for country and caring for family are all covered by the law, and everything flourishes when the law is properly kept.

Christian faith is in some respects defined by its freedom from the law of Moses in the Old Testament, but we need to remember that for Israel the law is seen as a source of life. The Psalms, for example, describe those people who keep the law as blessed:

Their delight is in the law [*torah*] of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper (Psalm 1:2-3; cf. Psalm 19).

In Jewish tradition, therefore, the deepest kind of freedom is found in keeping God's Torah (law or instruction). This is expressed, for example, in an interpretation of the Exodus story as a movement 'from the yoke of iron to the yoke of Torah, from slavery to freedom'.⁵ The book of Exodus uses the same Hebrew word to mean either 'slavery' under Egypt's king or 'service' to God in ceremony. Christians preserve this ambiguity when we speak about participating in a worship 'service'.

- **Language:** In traditional societies, languages were linked directly to their country, and there was no common language across the hundreds of the First Nations. People might have had some understanding of their neighbours' languages, but generally it was a person's own mother tongue that expressed identity within their own country. In particular, caring for country through ceremony required the maintenance of the local language.

When the English language arrived in Australia, Aboriginal people adapted it in various ways for talking amongst themselves, and in some areas this mixture became its own language: Kriol. When engaging with the wider Australian society, English is commonly used, but for many people in the

³ On this point, see Peter Adam's discussion of Naboth's vineyard in, 'Australia – Whose Land?' (2009), available at www.kooriweb.org/foley/resources/pdfs/118.pdf.

⁴ Father David Passy commonly referred to this text in explaining his participation in the Mabo case that discovered native title on his island of Mer.

⁵ This saying is found in the Rabbinic interpretation of the exodus story and law, *Exodus Rabbah* 15:11.

remote communities the traditional language remains closest to their heart. Identity arises from this heart language, and when it is lost, people experience a kind of grief.

Today, communities are stronger when education is conducted in both the local language and in English. This 'two-way' approach maintains identity while giving people the skills to engage with the wider world.

Theologically, we can relate this point to the Protestant principle that the Bible needs to be translated into a people's heart language (vernacular translation). The early Protestant leaders asserted this principle against the medieval Catholic view that the Bible should be preserved in the languages of empire: Greek and Latin. In practice, the use of Greek and Latin preserved the power of highly educated people, whereas local translations empowered greater numbers of people in their walk with God.

Interestingly, although the New Testament was first written in Greek (the language of the Hellenistic empires), Jesus himself spoke Aramaic, the language of the Jews in his day.

- **Ceremony:** There are many different kinds of ceremonies in traditional culture, relating for example to gender-specific initiations, caring for country through the performance of sacred songs and practices, communal celebration, protection of sacred things in secret rites, and reconciliation ceremonies. These activities bind people together in a range of different ways, reinforcing the networks of responsibility within the community. When ceremonies are not carefully maintained, the country suffers and its people become disorientated.

In the Old Testament, we find a similar range of ceremonies in the festival calendar and in the system of sacrifices: circumcision was a kind of initiation ceremony, pilgrimage festivals provided communal solidarity in thanksgiving, and atonement rites cleansed the people and the land of impurities.

Leviticus 18:25–28, for example, explains that the land itself would 'vomit' out any nation whose sins are left to accumulate, and Leviticus 16 outlines the annual rites of purification for the priests, for the people and for the temple itself. A few of these rites were conducted in the 'holy of holies', a sacred site that could be accessed only by the most senior lawmen in Israel.

When the temple was destroyed, and the Israelites went into exile, prayer became more important. Prayer could express grief or complaints to God, thanksgiving, intercession or confession of sin. Many texts written after the destruction of the temple indicate that God was still caring for Israel when they could no longer perform ceremony at their most sacred site in Jerusalem.

2 Chronicles 7:14 suggests that it is humility, prayer and right behaviour that cleanse the land: “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land”. Even though this verse comes from a story about the temple, it does not seem to emphasize sacrifice as the only way to cleanse the land.

This movement beyond the secret ceremonies of the temple is also suggested in the moment of Jesus’ death, according to Matthew’s Gospel, when the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom, and the earth shook in response (27:51).

The prophets openly criticized the priests’ system of rituals and sacrifices, emphasizing instead that what Yahweh really required was for Israel to ‘do justice, love faithfulness and walk humbly with your God’ (Micah 6:8). The priests and the prophets had different emphases in their understanding of what God wants, so even within the Old Testament itself we find some theological tensions.

Three Types of Old Testament Theology

There were at least three different starting points for thinking about right living before God. The differences were clearly expressed by the three groups of leaders in Israel’s community: the priests, the prophets and the wise (cf. Jeremiah 18:18). Each type of leadership was founded on a different kind of authority: the law, the prophetic word, and the wisdom learned from experience.

The main character in the book of Job, for example, is a wise man. His understanding of God does not begin with the laws of the priests, or the words of the prophets, but rather with nature:

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the earth, and she will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the spirit of every human being. (Job 12.7-10)

In many respects, Indigenous cultures assume as Job does that God can be found in the witness of nature. The Scriptures provide a challenge here to those who believe that God did not speak in Australia until the Bible arrived with Captain Cook. On the contrary, God was always here and speaking through creation. This fact is also reflected in the narrative of Genesis 14:18-23, where Abram acknowledges an Indigenous name for the Creator – Melchizedek’s ‘God Most High’ (El Elyon).

Knowing the Power of God in Weakness

Sadly, we know that many colonial settlements in the past were justified on the basis that Christian kings and queens claimed a divine right to conquer or annex Indigenous territories, as if they were repeating Joshua's story and the Mosaic laws of conquest.⁶ This is something that colonizing nations need to acknowledge and from which they need to repent. These things were not properly Christian, and certainly not Christ-like. Christian identity arises from the covenant with Abraham, and not from the law of Moses (Galatians 3:28-29; 1 Corinthians 10:2).

Although the messiah in the Old Testament was expected to be a king and a conqueror, Jesus revealed God's power in humility. He even allowed himself to be tortured to death by an oppressive imperial power. This was the ultimate demonstration of his teaching that God is present among the powerless, the poor, those in prison, and those who are sick (Matthew 25:31-46). The Kingdom of God is not revealed in the power of colonizing governments, but rather, in a radically inclusive love and justice.

Given the health problems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their rates of incarceration and social disadvantage, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:31-46 should offer good news and great hope. Jesus is near, even where we least expect him:

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' (Matthew 25:37-39)

While we might expect sinners not to recognize Jesus, this passage shows that even 'the righteous' fail to see him. Jesus' life and teaching should provoke us to ask how we can see the world as God sees it, and how we can 'provoke one another to love and good deeds' in light of the grace of God (Hebrews 10:24).

In repenting of biblical interpretation that has led away from God's purposes, how can we read the Scriptures in ways that restore the fullness of wellbeing in God? In turning from the distortions of racism and colonial histories, can we begin by reading through Aboriginal eyes.

The Five Themes in the Dominant Australian Culture

⁶ Robert Miller, Jacinta Ruru, Larissa Behrendt, Tracey Lindberg, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Mark G. Brett, 'Feeling for Country: Reading the Old Testament in the Australian Context', *Pacifica* 23 (2010), 137-156.

We began with the five key elements of Aboriginal identity: family, land, law, language, and ceremony. These can become the organizing principles for reading Scripture afresh. But if we turn the searchlight around and also ask how these five themes are expressed in the dominant Australian culture, there are other important lessons to be learned. In this connection, we will just make a few comments that illustrate what might be brought to light under the five themes.

- **Family:** We find that the primary focus of family identity in Anglo culture is the nuclear family. This was not always the case in Western history, but the loss of intergenerational depth seems to have been one of the consequences of the industrial revolution and the movement of populations into cities. The mobility required by modern economies has also undermined wider family commitments. The values and wisdom of the older generations tend to be given less respect than they were in the past.
- **Land:** The value of land in the dominant culture tends to be evaluated in terms of markets. Land has monetary value, whether through its commercial uses above the ground or through the mineral resources below it. In urban contexts, the closest analogy with 'caring for country' would perhaps be caring for the family home. The analogy is weak in that we often struggle to connect this narrow urban practice of land use with wider concerns for the environment (the challenges are more pressing for farmers). With the advent of climate change, however, there is now a new urgency to listen more to the needs of the earth and find new ways to live in tune with the laws of nature. National parks and conservation reserves are increasingly important, but they are set apart from most people's everyday lives.
- **Law:** Legislation tends to be seen as a matter for the parliaments that come and go as the democratic majority sees fit. Legal frameworks provide punishment for bad behaviour at the edges of society, mainly so that people can find as much individual freedom as possible within the sphere of legally acceptable activities. A thin conception of the law like this is in danger of neglecting the responsibilities and core values that make for the common good.
- **Language:** Mainstream Australia rewards people with a command of English, especially through higher levels of education. The heart languages of minority groups do not greatly interest the democratic and commercial majorities, and so they are not given any priority in most educational institutions. Assimilation to the dominant language can, however, be a painful social process that brings frustration.
- **Ceremony:** There are very few public ceremonies that bind the whole of the Australian nation together. ANZAC day is a notable exception, and its growing importance might be attributed to the lack of inspiring alternatives, such as a

declaration of national independence.⁷ Australia Day rubs salt into Aboriginal wounds, since it marks the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788.

Secular ceremonies celebrate individual achievements in sport, education and other walks of life, but although these rituals do provide notable social occasions in the life of particular clubs and institutions, they generally do not act as the means to affirm a complex network of responsibilities that give life to a society in its wider environment.

Perhaps the opening of the federal parliament is one of the exceptions here, and it is striking that this is now accompanied by a 'welcome to country' along with the Lord's Prayer. Perhaps these elements provide hints of transcendence and point beyond the shifting politics of parliaments.

Christian ceremonies no longer depend on a connection with sacred sites or interpretation of Israel's law. They take place mainly within services of worship, prayer, preaching and baptism (an initiation into the Kingdom of God, whether for children or adults). Israel's Passover ceremony has been reinterpreted within the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist, but the other pilgrimage and sacrificial rituals have been folded into our understanding of Jesus taking over the roles of a High Priest in the line of Melchizedek, rather than by Jesus belonging to one of Israel's priestly families (Hebrews 6:20–7:28).

Fulfilling the Abraham Covenant in the 'Many Nations' of Christian Faith

Earlier we noted that after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, prayer tended to take the place of sacrifice. The temple was of course rebuilt under the Persian empire, and it was still in operation during the time of Jesus. But it was soon destroyed again, this time by Roman troops, and the traditions of Jewish and Christian prayer have replaced the rituals of sacrifice.

The expansion of Christian faith among the Gentiles was in part enabled by the fact that faith in Jesus no longer relied on strong connections to an Israelite tribe, or to Israelite land, law, language and ceremony. Instead, through faith in Jesus, the churches acknowledged the reign of God, followed the 'law of Christ' (instead of the law of Moses), expressed their faith in any language, and reshaped the Old Testament's ceremonies into prayer and service.

In many ways, this transformation fulfills Abraham's eternal covenant in the blessing of 'many nations' (Genesis 17:4). The international movement of faith cannot, however, be said to be a fulfillment where it took on colonial practices that extinguished Indigenous languages and cultures. Wherever this happened, the Indigenous nations were not blessed; they were oppressed, and the grace of God was hidden from view.

⁷ See Graeme Davison, 'Narrating the Nation in Australia', Menzies Lecture 2009, King's College, London.

It is still true that in the family of Christ, there is 'no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female'. But this does not mean that the church can ignore the social realities of culture, poverty or gender. In practice, this usually means that the church needs to overcome the patterns of oppression that are often associated with a dominant culture, the influence of the wealthy and the power of males. This is not a complex new theology, but rather, simple truths that have been part of the church's life since the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians.

It remains the case that the Old Testament includes both the national covenant of Moses and the international covenant of Abraham, side by side. Accordingly, after the exile, Isaiah 40-66 envisages the restoration of the Israelite people along with an offer of salvation for the Gentiles. Perhaps this pattern can inspire a church that seeks to balance a local identity with its many connections through Christ to other cultures and peoples. Among those local identities would be the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups who maintain traditional connections and norms.

In re-thinking our understanding of culture, we need to take up the prophets' challenge to do justice and walk humbly. Our faith can then celebrate the diversity of the family of God, from the traditional Aboriginal communities who follow Jesus in their own distinctive ways to the urban Indigenous people who have lost their traditional connections to country. Whether we are Indigenous or non-Indigenous, however, God is calling us to re-read the Bible through Aboriginal eyes.⁸

⁸ This paper was written primarily by Rev. Graham Paulson. It arose from the Indigenous talking circles at the Storyweaving conference at Whitley College in January 2012 and from subsequent conversations with Mark Brett and Jerry Jangala during a visit to Lajamanu in May 2012.