

# Pondering God's perfection

Christian and Jewish scholars from across the globe gather in Jerusalem to talk about the Almighty

• By ORIT ARFA

If, according to biblical prophecy, the nations of the world will ascend to Jerusalem to learn the word of God, then an apocalyptic event of small proportions occurred during the week leading up to Christmas.

Close to 100 Christian and Jewish scholars from Israel and around the world gathered at Mishkenot Sha'ananim overlooking the walls of the Old City from December 20 to 23 to discuss and grapple with "The Question of God's Perfection," the title of an academic conference put on by the Herzl Institute, a research institute dedicated to intellectual renewal in the areas of Bible, philosophy, politics, and Zionism.

Over the course of four days, intellectual discussions about God's nature as it unfolds in the Hebrew Bible served as a bridge between what has, perhaps mistakenly, been regarded as a marked difference between Christian and Jewish approaches to theology – no, not the idea of the Holy Trinity versus the Jewish ideal of monotheism (this major difference was largely set aside) but, rather, the Christian notion of God being "perfect" versus the biblical notion of God being "in flux" as He interacts with His creations.

Presenters included leading theologians and philosophers from both the Jewish and Christian tradition, including Moshe Halbertal of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Lenn Goodman of Vanderbilt University, Alan Mittleman of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Oliver Crisp of the Fuller Theological Seminary, Alan Torrance of the University of St. Andrews and Shmuel Trigano of the University of Paris.

"I'd like to spearhead a renewed, serious intellectual effort to get God and Torah back on the table," said Jerusalem resident Yoram Hazony, the president of the Herzl Institute and a well-known American-Israeli author, thinker and scholar on the subjects of Jewish political thought, Bible and Zionism. An open, philosophical discussion about the nature of God and the Bible, he hopes, will serve to engage the West with the profound, ethical ideas endemic to the Hebrew Bible and to inspire intellectual rebels of their respective traditions to return to the bib-

lical sources they had abandoned to find answers to their philosophical questions.

While an established and sometimes controversial Judeo-Christian alliance already exists when it comes to advancing Israel's security and Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, Jews and Christians have yet to develop a systematic intellectual, academic alliance, regardless of whether it informs the political one.

"Most of our Christian participants are coming because they feel like they're missing something big in their lack of understanding of the Old Testament, and they're coming to have Jews help them understand it," Hazony told *In Jerusalem*.

In 2012 Hazony came out with *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge University Press) to break new ground on how people of all faiths can and should read the Hebrew Bible (a.k.a. the Old Testament, a.k.a. Tanach). In the book, he seeks to show how Tanach is actually infused with a philosophic tradition as influential and rigorous as that associated with the Greeks; but while classic philosophy is expounded through logical argument, biblical philosophy is expounded through stories and sermons about the struggle between man and God.

Christian theology has, from its inception, been much more influenced by Greek philosophy and particularly "classic theism," a view of God that sees Him as "perfect," possessing all the "omnis" – omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. In contrast, the God of the Hebrew Bible is one who argues with His prophets, changes His mind, and is prone to searing emotion. Take, for example, the story of the Noah's flood, when God regrets creating a world that had become so evil, or the story of the Golden Calf, which spurs God to threaten to destroy the people of Israel.

"So Christians who get too deep in Greek philosophy and the New Testament find themselves being disconnected about what God has to say about this world," Hazony said. "I think many of them also feel that it's back to the sources. They don't believe Greek philosophy is God's word, but that the Torah is God's word."

Jews as well can be enriched from a philosophically layered reading of Hebrew Scripture, said Hazony. In both academia and yeshivot, he said, Tanach is



Prof. Eleonore Stump (St. Louis University). (Photos: Courtesy)



Profs. Ed Halper (University of Georgia) and Jacob Wright (Emory University).

usually perceived as a book of revelation, proclaiming principles and commandments to be taken on faith and not on reason.

One of the presenters, Prof. James Diamond of the University of Waterloo, attributes the lack of systematic Jewish theology in large part to the legal nature of Judaism.

"A lot of people claim that Christians have theology because Christianity abandoned commandments – they said 'we're no longer bound by commandments,' so they became very good at developing theology," Diamond told *In Jerusalem*. In contrast, "Jews keep the mitzvot [commandments] – it doesn't matter what God is or is not."

The province of Christian theology, "classic theism," is largely foreign to the biblical and talmudic tradition, said both Diamond and Hazony. The idea of "God's perfection" was introduced to Judaism only in the 10th century CE by Jewish scholar Sa'adia Gaon. It then became mainstreamed with Maimonides's Aristotelian renderings of Jewish sources.

"By bringing these two religious communities into dialogue, there's a great deal that expands the horizons of the other," said renowned Christian theologian Eleonore Stump of St. Louis University and one of the presenters at the conference. In her talk, Stump invoked the classic Christian philosopher Aquinas – also the title of a book she authored – to demonstrate how the idea of a simple, immutable, eternal God can indeed be reconciled with the biblical God of human interaction and change, such as the one portrayed in the Book of Jonah.

The conference was preceded by a weeklong workshop for young Christian and Jewish scholars in the fields of religion, philosophy and theology, to groom a new generation of thinkers, particularly in the realm of interfaith academia.

This was the first time that Joshua Martin, a student at the University of Toronto, visited Israel, studied Hebrew texts closely with Jewish scholars and also developed personal friendships with Jews.

"I realized from reading Jewish writers that they were very comfortable living with tension within the religious text, whereas in my experience we were quicker to solve the tension in the text by theo-

## THE QUESTION OF GOD'S PERFECTION

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Prof. Yoram Hazony (Herzl Institute): Jews can also be enriched from a philosophically layered reading of Hebrew Scripture.

logical categories," he told *In Jerusalem* during a lunch break on the second day of the conference. "I learned to be bothered by the text."

He acknowledged that as he studied the biblical sources with Jewish scholars, he sometimes held back his instinct to jump to the New Testament or to air Christian theological interpretations, a sentiment echoed by Justin Hawkins, a lecturer on ethics and a graduate of the Yale Divinity School. But delving into the Jewish approach, Hawkins realized, could actually enrich his faith.

"They take the Old Testament far more seriously than we do, unfortunately.... When you take it that seriously, it makes it so much more illuminating for the 'sequel,'" Hawkins said.

One participant noted that no Muslim scholars were in attendance. According to Hazony, while the conference was open to applicants irrespective of faith, no Muslim scholars applied. Not surprising, he said, given that the Hebrew Bible is much more of a preoccupation of Jews and Christians.

"We've been doing philosophy so well, and they've been doing Bible so well," said Hawkins, "that if at the end of the conference the Christians learned to take the Old Testament as seriously as the Jews did, and the Jews learn to take the resources of philosophy as seriously as the Christians do, then it will have been a successful conference and the beginning of a new academic movement." •