

The Word of God and Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai's poetry

Muhammad Zafrullah, at Pocatello

Recently a friend sent me the following piece:

**Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.
- Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai**

I doubly enjoyed it because it reminded me of a verse from the Holy Quran (verse 110 of Chapter 18 (Al-Kahf)):

Say, 'If every ocean become ink for the words of my Lord, surely, the ocean would be exhausted before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even though We brought the like thereof as further help.'
18:110

I think every Christian should read the chapter Al-Kahf, it talks about people of the catacombs and what they stood for and reading it imparts a lasting impression of the greatness of God. The verse, from the Quran, that I have quoted above is a treasure in itself. It seems to indicate that we humans are free to discover scientific facts (the words of God), but while there is no end to what we can achieve we cannot fathom it all. That to my mind is another way of differentiating between the finite and the infinite. It is like what I often say: Every natural number that you can pick is finite but the set of natural numbers is infinite, keep on counting if you do not believe.

Of course anyone who reads Al-Kahf will draw benefits from it, for it delves into several important topics. For Muslims the Holy Prophet (pbuh) has prescribed recitation of the first ten and the last ten verses from this chapter, for immunity from the onslaught of Dajjal or anti-Christ.

Now the Quranic reference does not end here. As is usual with the Quran the same idea is repeated elsewhere for effect. Yet this time it is in the form of a challenge that seems to say that whatever of God's creation we may be able to put on record, there is much more that will be left. In other words when we discover a fact we are actually drawing upon an infinite pool that has no bottom.

And if all the trees that are in the earth were pens, and the ocean - seven more oceans to replenish it - were ink, the words of Allah would not be exhausted. Surely, Allah is Mighty, Wise.
31:28

As the reference indicates it is the 28th verse of the 31st chapter (Luqman). Luqman is another powerful chapter, named after a non-Arab sage and starts with his advice to his son. It indicates that belief in the Unity of God is the main pillar of faith and assures us the readers that we cannot escape His watchful eye. Mentioned next to the main article of faith is kindness to humankind, especially to one's parents and humility.

Now a word about the piece that my friend sent me, it is all over the internet, as the third hymn in the "Love of God" by Frederick Lehman.

The Love of God

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star,
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.

Refrain

*O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure
The saints' and angels' song.*

When years of time shall pass away,
And earthly thrones and kingdoms fall,
When men, who here refuse to pray,
On rocks and hills and mountains call,
God's love so sure, shall still endure,
All measureless and strong;
Redeeming grace to Adam's race—
The saints' and angels' song.

Refrain

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,

Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

Refrain

The third hymn is reported to be a Jewish poem called Haddamut, that was written in Aramaic by a cantor (Jewish religious singer) in Worms, Germany in 1050 CE. Some claim that he had rendered the Aramaic poem into German. There seems to be an air of confusion about the origin of the third hymn. In any case the third hymn is an English rendering of the Haddamut. As it stands it is a beautiful piece. I searched the internet for more information. The best I could find is the following piece by Douglas Kutilek, in "As I see it", Volume 1 number 8, August 1998.

"One final quotation from Johanan ben Zakkai is of interest. His teacher was reportedly the great Rabbi Hillel. Of Hillel, Johanan ben Zakkai is recorded as having said, "If all the heavens were parchments, and all the trees quills, and all the seas were ink, it would still be impossible to write down even a part of what I learned from my teacher. " (THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF TALMUDIC SAGES, P. 156).

When I first read these words, I was struck by how closely they parallel words in the third verse of the Gospel song, "The Love of God"--

"Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made, Were every stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade; To write the love of God above, Would drain the ocean dry. Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Though stretched from sky to sky"

I have heard conflicting accounts of the origin of this third verse. One account is that it was found written on the wall of a prison, composed by an unknown and unnamed but forgiven convict. It was then supposedly added to the original two verses. The other account is that it was attributed to "Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai" (see HYMNS OF FAITH, Wheaton: Tabernacle Pub. Co., 1980; #286). I have been unable to locate any reference to such a man, though the elements of the name sound typically Mishnaic/Talmudic. There is a famous Rabbi Meir and a lesser known Rabbi Nehorai quoted in the Mishnah (completed A.D. 200) and Talmud (A.D. 500), but I could not find anything like this quotation mentioned in connection with either of them (I did not check every reference to Rabbi Meir in the Mishnah, nor to either in the Talmud). If a Talmudic Rabbi is the source of the words of the third verse of the song, then they were borrowed from a non-Christian source, and pre-date any convict's wall graffiti by many centuries." This can be found at: http://www.kjv-only.com/doug/aisi1_8.html

I note with regret that Ben Zakkai's quote, mentioned above, does not have the praise of God in it that is found in the third hymn of "The love of God" or in the two verses of the Quran. In fact the Ben Zakkai claim strikes as a boast about learning so much. It would be interesting to know if there is a credible biblical source for the alleged Ben Zakkai

quote or the third hymn of the “Love of God. It does not matter to me as a Muslim if the source of some verses of the Quran turns out to be biblical, because according to my belief Quran was revealed by the same source, God Almighty, Who was responsible for the earlier scriptures. But there seems to be no harm in seeking clarity.