

DIVING AND DIVINITY

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How a Bible scholar with a yen for scuba diving ended up introducing Judaism to Christians on a remote island in Fiji.

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Sunset on a Friday evening: clouds have descended on the lush mountains surrounding this grassy campus as young people, dressed in their Sabbath best, cross the central lawn to gather in a large common room. In the stillness, I'm transported back to my teenage years and Friday evenings at my Jewish summer camp—until suddenly my reverie is interrupted: “Dr. Joshua! Happy Sabbath, happy Sabbath to you!” The nearest synagogue is over 1,700 miles away, and I'm in Sabeto, a village on the Fijian island of Viti Levu in the South Pacific.



A six-rayed sea star. Wikipedia.

There are two passions in my life. Primary is the Hebrew Bible—the Tanakh—which I have the good fortune to study and teach and write about as a professor of Bible in Israel. Second is scuba diving. Currently on sabbatical, I'd indulged a longstanding dream to travel to a world-class diving destination—and, while there, to teach Tanakh.

As a diver, my sights had long been long set on Fiji, whose underwater mountains of candy-colored coral, teeming with reef sharks, offer some of the best diving in the world. But Fiji is two ten-hour flights from Tel Aviv, and to fulfill the itinerary I had in mind I would have to observe Shabbat in a place with no Jewish community and no Chabad presence. Scouting out venues in Fiji that offer Bible, I'd noticed that one, Fulton College, was associated with the Church of the Seventh Day Adventists, of whom I knew nothing except that in some fashion they observed

Saturday as a holy day of rest. Surely, I reasoned, it would be better to spend Shabbat with them than within the walls of my hotel room.

But would they see it the same way? An inquiring e-mail made its way to Steven Currow, the college principal, who graciously invited me to spend Shabbat on the campus and while there give a range of talks on Judaism and the Bible. Contacting a European member of his theology department, I asked about topics that might be of interest. “Well, few of us have ever really met a Jewish person before,” he replied. “Could you offer a lecture about those boxes you wear in the airport?” I happily agreed.

There is no church edifice at Fulton College. Instead, communal gatherings are held in an enormous open-air hangar. This allowed me to remain outside during prayer services on Friday evening before entering to present my talk. I was struck by the melodies, which were reminiscent of black American spirituals, and by the fact that all of the hymns were in English. Later I learned the reason why: Fulton students come from all over the Pacific islands, and even on a single island it’s common to hear more than one language being spoken. Hence, instruction and prayer at the college are conducted in the local lingua franca, a heavily accented English.

My first talk, following the ceremony ushering in the Sabbath, went well. “Dr. Joshua,” gushed the college pastor, a native Fijian who had earlier sent me an enthusiastic e-mail, “it is an enormous privilege that you are here with us. And what you said tonight is so important. I have arranged that tomorrow all of the elders from around the region will come to hear your talk and shake your hand.” I was a bit unsettled by the intensity of his response. At home, my lectures and sermons are well enough received—but nothing like this. I was reminded of a Hebrew saying that a friend of mine likes to invoke: *eyn navi be-iro*, “no one is a prophet in his own hometown,” or: you’re only a star when you’re on the road. I couldn’t remember the prophet who said it, but the name would come back to me soon enough.

For dinner, I was invited to the home of Steven Currow and his wife Nerrisa. Would this feel like a Shabbat dinner, I’d wondered? I needn’t have. There were just the three of us, and, like me, Steven had dressed for the occasion in a white shirt and dark slacks. Intent on serving only what I could eat, my hosts had prepared a meal consisting of a bounteous salad followed by a large platter of local tropical fruits, the whole served on a table set beautifully on a white cloth. To finish off, Nerissa produced fig bars whose wrappers bore the kashrut certification of the Orthodox Union.

Adventists engage in formal Bible study every Sabbath morning, focusing on the same weekly reading worldwide. In order to be able to express themselves in their native tongue, the Fulton students had broken into smaller groups, the Polynesians in one corner, the Melanesians in a second, the Micronesians in a third, and, in a fourth, those students and faculty, remnants of the fall of the Tower of Babel, who spoke in diverse other tongues but also knew English. This was the group I joined.

The morning's reading, from the Gospel of Luke, was a passage narrating how Jesus' teachings had developed a following in some parts of the land but not in Nazareth. We read Luke 4:24: "And I tell you all with certainty that no prophet is accepted in his hometown." I had found the voice behind my Hebrew proverb: Jesus of Nazareth.

Over the course of the day I had many conversations with Fulton students about their lives and their communities. One young man approached me with struggle visible on his face. "May I ask you a question about marriage?" he asked. "What does the Bible say about taking several wives?" As I began measuring my response, he continued: "My grandfather is the chief of our tribe in the Solomon Islands. He has four wives, and he says there is nothing in the Bible that forbids this."

"Your grandfather is absolutely correct," I said to the young man. "In fact, we find in the Bible many stories about families where a man has married several wives. And I can tell you that not a single one of those families is happy. It's not for me to offer you instruction as a religious authority. But I'll say this: you can enjoy the pleasure of having several wives available to you, or you can enjoy the intimacy and the bond that comes with monogamous union. You can't have both. The choice is yours."

As Saturday ended and the sun sank over the open-air hangar, the students again sang hymns, and again I was struck by the melodies, by the loveliness of their voices, and by the frequently exquisite harmonic effects they achieved. It had been a more beautiful Shabbat than I could possibly have imagined.

At the same time, though, I felt within me a certain tension that runs through rabbinic literature: how to regard the observance by non-Jews of commandments that Judaism traditionally considers a particular inheritance of the Jewish people? A prime example is the laws of kashrut, which aren't universal moral teachings but, to the contrary, precepts by which Jews are deliberately separated from other human beings. The observance of Shabbat is often cited as a second example—but, for me, the power of this community's Sabbath observance had challenged the notion.

Some guardians of Jewish law, fiercely protective of the commandments as a trust given to the Jewish people alone, maintain that no meaning whatsoever inheres in the attempted observance by non-Jews of Shabbat and kashrut. But Maimonides in the Middle Ages and many contemporary authorities on Jewish law maintain otherwise. To them, non-Jews who recognize the Torah as the word of God and wish to observe the commandments may receive divine reward, and are to be regarded positively.

Was my time among the Adventists of Fiji shedding further light on this question? Part of me felt as if someone had gone into my closet and come out wearing my best suit—and looking pretty good in it.

The diving portion of the trip began the next morning at Rakiraki on the island's northern coast. If my trip had already brought me experiences far from my usual comfort zone, the diving part would be no different. Back-flipping off the boat into a spinning swirl of bubbles in an azure sea, I was propelled into an incredibly thrilling universe entirely disconnected from normal existence. Moments later, in the total silence of the undersea world, I was alongside a 50-foot cliff of lavender and yellow polyps of coral. From the left, a school of small red fish made its way in my direction; from the right, another school of glass-colored fish. As the two converged around me, a five-foot reef shark swam quickly by. Looking up at the columns of light streaming down into the water I couldn't help wondering: if there were no one to behold all this, would it still be as ravishing?

No less eye-opening than the dive itself had been the long boat ride to the site. Our pilot, Choelly, or "Joe" as he introduced himself to the English speakers, was listening to a discourse on a Fijian-language radio station. Hearing words like "Solomonolulu," "Moabitelula," and "Sidonitalula," I recognized the context: passages in the biblical book of Kings about Solomon's lapse of virtue in his dalliance with foreign wives. "Joe," I asked, "Are you a Christian?" "Yes, sir, Adventist!," he beamed, and his eyes lit up when I proceeded to tell him about my Sabbath at Fulton College. "Joe, while I'm here, would you like me to come to your village and speak about the Bible?" Certain that the village elders would be pleased, he made a date with me for that same evening.

Nakorokula was established some 80 years ago when rival tribes in another part of the island chased out some inhabitants. The population, drawn from two clans, numbers some 70 souls. No one owns a car, and inside the village there are no roads at all. Electricity arrived in 2012.

In pitch-black darkness, our taxi wound its way down a dirt path. At the first structure in the village—a small thatched hut—a man was pounding loudly and (to me) rather forebodingly on bongo drums. My hosts allayed my anxiety: "This is our call to all of the village members to gather together for a significant occasion."

Escorted by two elders, I entered the common room to find the entire village—men, women, and children—seated on mats on the floor, with some of the youngest children already sleeping on pillows or in their parents' laps. The villagers sang a hymn in my honor, this time in Fijian, and once more I was struck by the resonance and richness of the voices and how naturally the singers broke into harmonies.

I began my talk by telling them how privileged I felt to be with them, and expressing gratitude on behalf of the Jewish people for the Fijian men in arms who participate in UN peacekeeping operations on Israel's northern and southern borders. After I spoke for a while, we opened the floor and the questions came in earnest:

"Could you tell us please the history of your people?"

Who is the man who led your people back to the holy land?"

"What tribe are you from?"

“Does your wife wear the hijab?”

It was no surprise that, as Adventists, they were most interested to hear about Jewish Sabbath observance. Here I note that the Adventist church discourages a lengthy code of official rules for Sabbath conduct. Rather, each community institutes its own norms for instilling the special Sabbath spirit—although a common recommendation is that cooking for the day be concluded before sunset on Friday. “Like you,” I therefore opened confidently, “we do all of our cooking on Friday”—only to notice that the villagers were exchanging uncomfortable glances. Sensing that there must be some debate and perhaps contention over the issue, I backtracked. “Before I tell you about my Sabbath, let me tell you about my Friday.” I then described what a typical Orthodox home looks like in the hours preceding Shabbat, concluding that, in our experience, the greater the effort on Friday to get everything done in the kitchen, the greater the rest and peace in the house on the next day. Every woman in the room smiled and nodded in approval.

An especially fascinating moment came when a woman asked if we separated tithes on the Sabbath. Adventists dedicate a tenth of their earnings to the church, and evidently bring the money to worship services on the Sabbath itself. I said that we don’t touch money at all on the Sabbath, not even to give charity, and no beggar would think to extend his hand on that day. This really struck home. On the taxi ride back, one of the two elders, after conversing with the other in Fijian, announced a decision: henceforth, tithing in Nakorokula would no longer be done on the Sabbath. “You are absolutely right about money,” he said to me. “When your hand is in your pocket, your mind is in your pocket.”

But if the villagers gleaned something useful from me, I benefited even more from them. During the course of the evening in Nakorokula, one man had asked if I knew the origin of the name “Fiji.” As I struggled to remember what I had read on the subject, he proudly interjected: “‘Fiji’ means First Israelite Jews’ Island.” Stunned, I looked around the room, but no one was laughing at his invented acronym. Fearing to embarrass the man in front of his village, I also feared offending the whole village by correcting him. I decided to play it safe and register polite interest in this newfound insight.

As it turned out, no else dared correct him publicly, either, at least not in my presence as the honored guest. But as we returned to the waiting taxi, one of the two elders—they had been speaking to each other in Fijian—broke into English. “Mbale,” he began, addressing his colleague, “that was the first time I ever heard that explanation for the name ‘Fiji.’ Have you heard it before?” “No,” said Mbale, “that was also the first time I heard that explanation.” I was blown away. By staging this innocent dialogue, they had managed to make clear to me that, lest I think them a community of kooks, they knew their etymology perfectly well and that “Fiji” did not remotely mean the Promised Island—a feat they had accomplished with such delicacy as simultaneously to avoid shaming or disparaging one of their own.

Back in Israel, when first conceiving the idea of combining the word of God with an undersea adventure, I’d facetiously dubbed my plan the Jonah Project. In the biblical book named for that

notoriously reluctant prophet, Jonah flees God's summons by putting to sea on a boat manned by supposedly heathen sailors. When the sea begins to storm violently, he is content to let all aboard perish rather than acknowledge his identity. But the sailors spare no effort to save his life, thereby offering a living lesson in the divine attribute of compassion.

To achieve insight into God's ways, Jonah had to remove himself from home and seek the society of strangers, only then to find himself undersea, alone and terrified, in the belly of a great fish. Sometimes a rabbi and professor must depart his comfort zone and dive into worlds, on land and beneath the waves, entirely disparate from his own, there to apprehend the fullness of the Almighty's blessings.