

## **Text for Today**

### **Biblical interpretation for spiritual growth: a distance-learning module**

#### **Diocese of Lichfield**

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**Published by Lichfield Diocese Ministry & Training Department**

**First published 2006**

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# Text for Today

## Biblical interpretation for spiritual growth

**Aim:** To give students an understanding of biblical interpretation – the various issues involved and questions to be asked – thereby equipping them with strategies for approaching confidently any passage from scripture, as a basis for their own spiritual growth and that of the Church.

### Learning outcomes

Successful completion of this module will enable students to:

- Discuss the nature of the biblical text, and how it can be studied and interpreted with integrity today
- Understand the importance of the form, authorship, readership and context of scripture
- Use commentaries discerningly, understanding the different approaches and viewpoints at work
- Recognise what they themselves bring to the text, affecting their interpretation of it
- Bring all these elements to bear in their personal reading and interpretation of the Bible for today.

### This module

Your role within your parishes will almost certainly involve some preaching and teaching, leading house groups, taking funerals – or in some way being responsible for interpreting the Bible to others. The purpose of this module is to equip you to do that. Later in the course, more emphasis will be placed on *hermeneutics* (the application of biblical texts to preaching – particularly in Unit 7R, *Word and Spirit*). The focus here, however, is on getting to grips with the biblical text itself.

### Why study biblical interpretation?

There's a bumper sticker in the USA that reads, 'God said it, I believe it, that settles it'. But it's just not that easy, because the Bible offers us neither simple meanings nor interpretations of its meanings – it leaves us to do that for ourselves. Many people in our churches have reservations about the Bible: what does it *really* say about this or that? What happens if Bible verses seem to contradict each other – which is 'right'? Is the Bible the Word of God, or is it incredibly inspired words about God? Does it tell us how God sees things, or how Ezekiel or St Paul saw things?

If we conclude that the Bible is a human product, we're not denying the reality of God, nor the work of the Holy Spirit in both the writers and readers of scripture. For there is no denying that

the Bible is the product of the cultural and personal histories of those who told the stories, those who wrote them down, those who edited and formed them into the text we have today. In biblical times, for example slavery was a given, women were devalued, rulers were generally revered and homosexuality denounced. But in our quite different culture, slavery is denounced, as are many rulers, and women and gay people are fighting for what Christians, Jews and Muslims among them consider their God-given rights. Our task as Christians, then, is to wrestle with scripture so as to understand it better:

Wrestling with Scripture, far from a sign of weakness, is a reflection of religious faithfulness. What else should you wrestle with if not the Bible? What struggle offers more reward? The Bible is like a sacrament, a means of grace; it mediates God's presence in the life of each of us and God's concern for the whole planet. Preaching from its pages for over forty years, I have encountered a God who bruises our egos but mends our hearts; a God who pleads without ceasing the cause of the poor and needy, who implores us to revere, not ravish, the earth, and to stay on the stony, long and oftentimes lonely road that leads to world peace.

(from William Sloane Coffin's Introduction to *Struggling with Scripture*)

## Exegesis

'Exegesis' is the term used by scholars for the biblical interpretation skills taught in this module. It is the process of carefully studying a biblical passage in relation to its historical setting and its setting in the Bible as a whole, and of considering specific questions of language and literary form, in order to provide a foundation for hearing what the passage may have to say to us today, thereby enabling us to grow as Christian disciples (and help others to grow too). In the lucidly simple words of Rabbi Lionel Blue, exegesis is 'a bridge between the old scriptures and the scriptures of one's life'.

'Exegesis is the discipline of attending to the text and listening to it rightly and well', says Eugene Peterson (*Eat this Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*, p.50). He goes on:

Exegesis is rigorous, disciplined, intellectual work. It rarely feels 'spiritual'. Men and women who are, as we say, 'into' spirituality, frequently give exegesis short shrift, preferring to rely on inspiration and intuition. But the long and broad consensus in the community of God's people has always insisted on a vigorous and meticulous exegesis. . . . Exegesis is not in the first place a specialist activity of scholars, although we very much need these scholars working on our behalf . . . Exegesis is simply noticing and responding adequately (which is not simple!) to the demands that words make on us . . . This is an enormous inconvenience,

particularly to those of us who feel an inclination and aptitude towards the spiritual. . .

But inconvenient or not, we are stuck with the necessity of exegesis. We have a written word to read and attend to. It is God's word, or so we believe, and we had better get it right. Exegesis is foundational to Christian spirituality. Foundations disappear from view as a building is constructed but if the builders don't build a solid foundation, their building doesn't last long.

(*Eat This Book*, pp.50—51)

The skills of exegesis can be compared to the process of theological reflection. In both cases, we hope that you're learning an approach to life and faith which will become a habit, a way of thinking, reading and being, which will become second nature as you practise them more and more, both in your present studies and your future ministries

## Which translation?

Bible translations are a minefield, as you can see from the following utterly opposing views on the subject:

'Every translation is a messianic act, which brings redemption nearer' (Frank Rosenzweig, quoted in Peterson, *Eat this Book*, p.119)

'It is an old and in some ways unfair cliché to say that translation is always a betrayal, but modern English versions of the Bible provide, unfortunately, persuasive evidence for that uncompromising generalisation' (Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, W W Norton, p.ix)

Does it matter which translation we use? It probably matters more that we recognise something about the nature and background of different translations.

The **King James** (KJV) or **Authorised Version** (written in the early 1600s, and often using material from much older translations) is often stylistically very beautiful, but without any of the benefits of modern scholarship. It keeps much of the word order of the original Greek or Hebrew, but is not always easy to understand today.

The **Revised Standard Version** (RSV), published in 1952, is one of a line of revisions of the KJV, but using better texts, new scholarship and updated English. There are versions of the text published as the **Common Bible** and authorised for use by all the main denominations, which indicates that it is not constrained by the interpretation of just one Christian tradition. The **New Revised Standard Version** (NRSV – the translation used in module, and which we recommend) is an update of the RSV, making use of most recent scholarship. It is in the tradition of (where

possible) phrase-for-phrase, word-for-word translations, which makes it useful for textual study. Part of the updating includes using gender-inclusive language about people.

The *New English Bible* (NEB – NT in 1961; OT in 1970) led the way for translations which do not use a word-for-word method, but attempt to use a meaning-for-meaning method instead. The NEB was a completely new translation in ‘a contemporary idiom’, rather than a reproduction of ‘biblical’ English. Many did not like the NEB for worship, as proved difficult to use for reading aloud. The *Revised English Bible* (REB, 1989) build on the NEB’s work, though in fact is more conservative than the NEB, partly in an attempt to appeal to all denominations.

Like the NEB, the *Good News Bible*, also called *Today’s English Version* (GNB/TEV, 1976) didn’t attempt to reproduce the sentence structure, word order or stylistic devices of the original languages. Its aim was to offer a lively equivalent, deliberately using a limited vocabulary so as to be as clear and simple as possible. The latest version also uses gender-inclusive language about people. The more recent *Message Bible* (published in 2002 as a whole) is a translation by Eugene Peterson into ‘the tone, rhythms, events and ideas’ of present-day America, in response to the needs of his own congregation in Maryland.

Some translations of the Bible have come out of very specific Christian traditions. The *New International Version* (NIV, 1973) and the *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB, 1966) are committed respectively to a conservative evangelical tradition and a Roman Catholic tradition. This means that the translators were committed to a particular doctrinal interpretation of the Bible, and sought to emphasise that in their translation of it. To some extent, this is true of every translation – but it is also possible to translate in a way which does not close off alternative meanings. (Some of this material is drawn from Robert Evans, *Using the Bible: Studying the Text*, Darton, Longman & Todd, pp.6–8.)

## Commentaries

There are many commentaries on the market, to appeal to a wide range of people, from scholars to those seeking daily guidance, and across all ranges of the Christian tradition. It’s best to try to look before you buy, and find a series or publisher that suit your own needs and background. A series I have found helpful is the Westminster Bible Companion series published by Westminster John Knox Press, which publishes a volume on most books of the Bible. I tend to buy only those I refer to most often (e.g. the gospels).

You may prefer to invest in – or better still, ask your parish to invest in – a single-volume Bible commentary. In my view, the best scholarship is found in the Oxford Bible Commentary, edited by John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford University Press 2001). It is expensive, but comprehensive.

## The author

This module encourages you to ask questions – of the biblical text as well as of commentaries and those who write on the Bible. It may help you ask good questions of this module to know the

author's background and bias. I write this as a woman priest, middle-aged and middle-class, who is theologically tending towards liberalism, and who believes passionately in an inclusive God, and therefore in an inclusive Church. I don't want you to end this module agreeing with me, but being able to think about the issues raised and to have thought and prayed about your own understanding of scripture, and know the basis for your thoughts and beliefs.

### *The Chapters*

Chapter 1	Opening up the Bible
Chapter 2	What kind of writing?
Chapter 3	The bigger picture
Chapter 4	So what's really going on?
Chapter 5	Readers and writers
Chapter 6	Beginnings
Chapter 7	The quality of mercy
Chapter 8	The Word revealed

We hope that the exercises and questions within the text are sufficiently stimulating and challenging, without leaving you feeling unsupported in your study. If at any point you would like to discuss issues by phone or email, contact the Local Ministry office at St Mary's House (01543 306223).

In the various questions and exercises suggested, it's important to stress that there aren't 'right' answers. We are asking you to reflect, to make connections between your own life and thoughts, and the world of the Bible; we hope that you will explore the material for yourself, and thus use this module as an opportunity for a deepening knowledge of God and yourself.

Some of the background reading may seem over-long, or too 'heavy'; persist if you can, making use of the Glossary at the end of this Introduction. If you find a chapter taking you more time than you can offer, we suggest that you complete the reading, and return to the questions at a later date.

The suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter are entirely optional; they are a resource both for now and the future. You may like to revisit them after your eventual ordination, when you may have more time for reading. It is much more important to keep pace with the work in the chapters than to read further. However, if you do have the time, it's worth checking which titles are available from the Local Ministry 'library' or the Lichfield-based Dean Savage library which keeps some books at Shallowford House.

## **Assessment**

Assessment for this module is by means of one piece of exegesis, of not more than 2000 words. Detailed questions and suggestions are found at the end of this module.

## **Background reading for the module**

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Bible Story*, SPCK, 2006.

Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, Westminster John Knox Press, revised edition 2001.

Walter Brueggemann, William C Placher & Brian K Blount, *Struggling with Scripture*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002

Robert Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: the Bible as a Problem for Christianity*, SPCK, 1991.

Ellen F David & Richard B Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Eerdmans, 2003.

Robert Evans, *Using the Bible: Studying the Text*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999.

Morna D Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, SCM Press, 1997.

Morna D Hooker, *Endings: Invitations to Discipleship*, SCM Press, 2003,

Eugene H Peterson, *Read this Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2006.

John Rogerson (ed), *Beginning Old Testament Study*, SPCK, revised edition 1998.

Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean*, SCM Press, 1987.

Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, T & T Clark, 1982.

# Glossary

## **BCE**

Before the Christian Era (i.e. it means the same as BC, but is sensitive to faiths that do not believe in Christ).

## **Canon**

The official list of the books accepted as scripture in a particular Church.

## **Ecclesial**

Belonging to, of or about the Church.

## **Exegesis (plural exegeses)**

The process of carefully studying a biblical passage in relation to its historical setting and its setting in the overall collection that makes up the Bible, asking specific questions about language and literary form, and considering how it has been understood by past interpreters, in order to provide a foundation for hearing what the passage may have to say to us today. People who do exegesis are called *exegetes*; their work is described as *exegetical*. The opposite of *exegesis* is *eisegesis*, which means to put into a text what isn't there (perhaps by unconsciously bringing to it our own views and assumptions – not a good idea in biblical studies!).

## **Feminist theology**

A movement, generally in Christianity and Judaism, to reconsider the traditions, practices, scriptures, and theologies of religion from a feminist perspective. Some of the goals of feminist theology include reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language about God, determining women's place in relation to career and motherhood, and studying images of women in the religion's sacred texts.

## **Graeco-Roman**

Relating to the cultural, social, military and religious influences of the Greek and Roman world in New Testament times.

## **Hebrew Bible**

A term for the Old Testament. Its implications are not entirely accurate in that, while originally written in Hebrew, many of the books have come down to us in their best form in Greek, Latin and Syriac translations.

## **Hermeneutics**

The art (or, some would say, science) of interpretation, especially of Scripture; 'the branch of theology that deals with the principles and methodology of exegesis' (Collins English Dictionary).

*Hermeneutical*: interpretative



## **Johannine**

Means 'deriving from John'. Thus 'the Johannine literature' means the Gospel of John, the three letters attributed to John (1, 2 and 3 John), and the Book of Revelation.

## **Liberation theology**

Liberation theology explores the relationship between Christian theology and political activism, particularly in areas of social justice, poverty and human rights. Liberation theology does theology (i.e. speaks of God) from the viewpoint of the economically poor and oppressed. According to Phillip Berryman, liberation theology is 'an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and the Catholic faith and Christianity through the eyes of the poor'.

## **Literary criticism**

In biblical scholarship, this means seeing the Bible texts as literary creations (and often very brilliant and complex ones), and asking some of the same questions about them that literary scholars would ask of any text (e.g. what is its literary form? How is the plot developed? How are characters presented or revealed? How does the passage or book get its message across? To whom does it seem to be addressed (i.e. who is the implied reader?) Does the writer or storyteller have a viewpoint, and if so how is it being expressed?

## **Metanarrative**

A term coined by postmodern thinkers and writers to describe large, over-arching 'stories' which contain other stories. In Christian theology, we would say that God is the ultimate metanarrative – God *is* the big story, as creator of the universe and redeemer of the world. God also *uses* metanarratives (such as the Bible) in order to communicate with his people. The history of the Christian Church is another metanarrative in which we play our own parts, and live out our own life-stories. By contrast, postmodernist thinkers deny the existence of metanarratives – instead (they maintain), each human being lives out their own life-story in a fragmentary way, crossing paths with other individuals, each with their own 'story'.

## **Myth**

Stories concerning characters and plots which may not be literally or factually true but which embody some deeper truths about God and humankind. In many of the world's religions, myths date from pre-literate societies, and are often accounts or 'explanations' of how the world comes to be as it is.

## **Narrative**

A story, recounting events and experiences. Narratives involve human characters, their speech and actions, their relations and desires, their ideas and institutions. Narratives also always have a plot – a set of actions which lead from an initial situation through complications to some sort of resolution. The Bible can be seen as one huge story of creation and redemption, made up of very many smaller stories.

**Parable**

A short story which uses familiar events to illustrate a religious or ethical point.

**Psalter**

Another name for the Psalms, especially in the version in the Book of Common Prayer.

**Queer theology**

The exploration of the nature of God and human-kind's relationship with God through the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Many who have embraced Queer Theology would ascribe a broad meaning to queer – including a broad range of those who choose to identify or ally themselves outside the constraints of the prevailing social norms

**Redactor**

Editor; in biblical scholarship the redactor is the skilled writer and editor who wove together material from many sources to create the books of the Bible in their present form. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars tried to separate out the strands which formed the source material for the redactors; nowadays, biblical scholars tend to look with admiration and awe at the inspiration and skill by which redactors created the sacred texts.

**Source criticism**

The scholarly approach to the Bible favoured during the first part of the twentieth century which concentrated on identifying the sources, both oral and written, that lie behind the text of the Bible as we have it today. Thus, for example, it is thought that there existed a document (known as 'Q' from the German *Quelle*, meaning 'source') which was used by Matthew, Mark and Luke, thus explaining the material they have in common.

**Synoptics or Synoptic Gospels**

The three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, which tell much the same story and which share a common perspective on the life of Jesus (possibly partly through having shared a common source document – see 'Source criticism' above) – in contrast with the Gospel according to John.

**Text**

A word with several meanings in biblical studies. 'The biblical text' can mean the whole Bible, or the particular part under discussion (a section, a book or a chapter); it can also mean a single verse or part of a verse on which a writer or preacher is focusing. Its main use is to distinguish material from the Bible from material from other sources.

**Torah**

The teaching or instruction by which to live a characteristically Jewish life; often used as an alternative name for the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible, and also called the Written Torah, by contrast with the Oral Torah, the accumulated teachings of rabbis).

**Yahweh or YHWH**

‘Yahweh’ and ‘Jehovah’ are two different attempts at an English reading of the four Hebrew consonants (YHWH) which are accepted by both Jews and Christians as being God's Hebrew name. In our Bibles, this is often translated ‘Lord’.

## Chapter I

# Opening up the Bible

### Aims

- To reflect on the nature of the Bible, the variety of meanings within the biblical text, and ways of approaching these
- To acknowledge the challenges of biblical interpretation and understanding, and to establish some ground rules.
- To consider the authority of the Bible, and whether all parts of the Bible are equally important

Read through the Introduction to this module. Then re-familiarise yourself with the shape, content and rough chronology of the Bible.

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### Questions

Jot down a few thoughts in response to these questions:

- Why is the Bible important to you?
- What problems (if any) do you have with reading and understanding the Bible?
- What do you actually mean when you say that the Bible is 'God's word'?

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Read the following material ('How do we use the Bible?') on biblical authority, and the faithful reading of scripture today.

## How do we use the Bible?

A cartoon shows a man at the information desk of a large bookshop. The assistant taps on her keyboard, peers intently at the computer screen, and replies, 'The Bible? That would be under Self-Help'. In our postmodern world, people have a hard job knowing what to make of the Bible – to define it as 'self-help' is the equivalent of the popular view of faith as a form of therapy ('If it works for you, that's great'), as one more consumer product, one more option for people in their relentless and endless quest for self-invention and self improvement.

Of course, the Bible isn't about *self-help*; it's about *God's* gracious and loving actions to save a lost and broken world. But the Bible is also an ancient text, often hard for us to understand, which can seem remote from our daily lives. We often simply make assumptions about how we

interpret the Bible and about the ways in which it's right and proper to use it, resulting in spectacular and painfully public disagreements between different parts of the Church on issues such as the role of women, or of homosexual men and women, within the leadership and life of the Church. Each body of opinion is able to quote either the letter of scripture or the spirit of scripture to justify their own position. And so we find that, even among those who agree that the Bible has authority, the ways in which that authority is interpreted and understood varies greatly, with damaging consequences for the Church's mission and ministry.

The renowned biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, a skilled interpreter of the Bible for today's world, suggest six key issues for understanding biblical authority as we read and interpret the text: inherency, interpretation, imagination, ideology, inspiration and importance, each of which is explained below (for a fuller account, see Brueggemann, *Struggling with Scripture*, pp.5—28).

- **Inherency** – the belief that the Bible is inherently the living word of God which tells us about the character and will of the gospel-giving God, empowering us to live an alternative life in the world. In the Bible, God discloses himself through many different authors – though exactly *how* God does this, and *how we try to interpret it* is open to debate. This means that the Bible is 'not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; it is rather a script, always reread, through which the Spirit makes new'. Nobody, says Brueggemann, can use the Bible to determine final meanings for all time, precisely because 'the Key Character in the book, who creates, redeems and consummates, is always beyond us in holy hiddenness'.
- **Interpretation** – the Bible requires human interpretation which is inevitably both subjective (i.e. reflects the personal views of the interpreter) and provisional (i.e. for now rather than for all times and places), and is also likely to be the cause of argument and disagreement. This is inevitable, because even within the biblical text itself, interpretations change. For example, Moses bans from the community all those with distorted sexuality, and all foreigners (Deuteronomy 23:1—8); but in Isaiah 56:3—8, this teaching is totally overturned. The old, no doubt circumstance-driven exclusion by Moses is answered by a circumstance-driven inclusiveness in Isaiah. In our own times too we can see changing interpretations – for example, the ecological crisis has made us realise that the Bible addresses issues of 'green theology', calling on human beings to honour and protect God's good creation, though in the past, we didn't 'read' the text in that way because we read it in a specific time and place. Brueggemann goes on: 'The Spirit meets us always afresh in our faithful reading, in each new time, place and circumstance. Anyone who imagines that reading is settled and eternal simply does not pay attention to the process in which we are all engaged, liberals and conservatives . . . There is not one voice in Scripture, and to give any one voice in Scripture or tradition the authority to silence other voices surely distorts the text and misconstrues the liveliness that the text itself engenders in the interpretative community' (*Struggling with Scripture*, p.16). This is why interpreters no longer talk about 'the meaning' of a passage of scripture, but its 'meanings', recognising the richness of the text, and the depths of possible meanings it offers.
- **Imagination** – responsible interpretation requires imagination. By 'imagination', Brueggemann means our ability to open our minds to meanings and realities that are beyond our ordinary everyday world. He uses Jesus' parables as examples of helping the listeners use their imaginations to interpret God's actions in the world. The danger of using our imaginations is when we don't realise or acknowledge that this is what we're doing – for example, when we transport ourselves back into the ancient word and apply its truths unthinkingly for today. This can work both for good and for harm. For example, what a huge leap of imagination it is to argue

that the ancient provision for jubilee in Leviticus 25 in fact concerns the cancellation of third-world debts, with an implied critique of global capitalism – but we do it. Or what a huge leap of the imagination it is to argue that an ancient purity code in Leviticus 18 bears upon consenting gays and lesbians in the twenty-first century and is concerned with ordination – but we do it. And we do it on good authority, for it is what Jesus himself did when he said, ‘You have heard it said of old . . .’, and reinterpreted ancient texts for his hearers. As we use our imaginations, though, we must be careful that the interpretation we come up with is in line with what the rest of what scripture tells us about the justice and mercy of God.

- **Ideology** – it’s very easy not to see the distortions we ourselves bring to a reading and interpretation of scripture. Brueggemann declares that ‘there is no interpretation of scripture . . . that is unaffected by the passions, convictions and perceptions of the interpreter. Ideology is the self-deceiving practice of taking a part for the whole, of taking “my truth” for *the* truth’ (*Struggling with Scripture* p.20). This also applies to the text of scripture itself, ‘because the Spirit-given text is given us by and through human authors’. It also applies to any other commentary or interpretation of the Bible (including this module, as well as our own interpretations), for ‘we do not see so clearly or love so dearly or follow so nearly as we might imagine’ (p.20). (We will consider this more closely in Chapter 5, ‘Readers and Writers’.) Does this mean, then, that all interpretation is meaningless, because of the bias of all interpreters? Not at all, says Brueggemann. We must carry on taking the risk of being biased, of daring to go on trying to interpret, despite the problems, because of the Bible’s importance. What it does mean is that we must ask questions about bias in others and in ourselves, that we must open our eyes to the role of vested interests, and of the anxieties, fears and hurts within ourselves which unconsciously affect our interpretation of scripture.

- **Inspiration** – it’s traditional to speak of scripture as ‘inspired’, though ‘there is a long history of unhelpful formulations of what that notion might mean’ (Brueggemann, p.23). The best way to understand inspiration, according to Brueggemann, is to acknowledge that in and through the Bible, God’s wind (the Hebrew *ruach* means ‘wind’, ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’) blows through and blows past all our academic and church-based reading and understanding: ‘The Spirit will not be regimented, and therefore none of our reading is guaranteed to be inspired. But it does happen – on occasion. It does happen that we are blown in and through the text beyond ourselves. It does happen – on occasion – that through the text the Spirit teaches and guides and heals so that the text yields something other than an echo of ourselves . . . Such newness might have happened without the text, of course, because the wind blows where it will. But it does happen in and through the text – new resolve, new vision, new assurance, new summons’ (p.24). The wind of God’s Spirit through scripture can confound all our neat methods of studying and reading the Bible, because ‘this is a holy Wind that blows and destroys and makes new. The script of the book is a host and launching pad for the wind among us that the world cannot evoke and the Church cannot resist’ (p.25).

- **Importance** – ‘Biblical interpretation, done with imagination, willing to risk ideological distortion, open to the inspiring Spirit, is important’ Brueggemann p.25). The reason for the importance, or even urgency, of interpreting scripture today is not to seize control of the Church with our own views, but is rather that ‘the world may have access to the good truth of the God who creates, redeems and consummates’ (p.25). In other words, mission is the underlying reason for our reading, interpreting and understanding scripture. Reading the Bible in all its

truthfulness is more important than ever, simply because our society wants to reduce people to commodities, to feed them ever more self-help and self-fulfilment techniques, and (as we noted above) the Bible is *not* a self-help manual. Brueggemann uses this issue of the ‘Importance’ of scripture to challenge today’s Church to resist the worldly temptations to use the Bible for self-help, or to offer us ‘spiritual’ techniques (e.g. ‘ten steps to holiness’), to put aside our differences within the Church, and together to focus on interpreting and living the Bible for the sake of the world – in order to show the world ‘that it is not without God, and not without the holy gift of life rooted in love’ (p.27).

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### Questions

(a) Jot down anything that has particularly interested you, or struck you, or with which you disagree, in ‘How to use the Bible’ above.

- What did you find helpful, or unhelpful, in Brueggemann’s list? Is there anything you would want to add, from your own experience of Bible reading as part of your life of faith?
- What, in your experience, are the dangers and temptations of using the Bible as a self-help book? In what circumstances do we (either you personally or the Church) tend to use it in this way?

(b) One of the problems of biblical interpretation is that not all parts of the Bible seem to be equally important, or to contain equally eternal truths. For example, look up the following pairs of verses:

1 Corinthians 14:34—35 and 1 John 4:20

Romans 1:26—27 and Galatians 3:28

- For each of the pairs, try to work out whether one verse is as important as the other. Does one contain eternal truths and the other culturally specific rules? Or are both equally important for us as Christians today, in our attempts to interpret the Bible?
- Whatever your views (and there are no ‘right’ answers here – the aim is to challenge you to consider the way in which you read and interpret the Bible, something we all do by making assumptions about its truths and how to read them), on what basis did you reach your views? What did you take into account in coming to a decision? Does this seem satisfactory to you?

Having done the reading and questions in this chapter, would you want in any way to change your response to Question 3 above?

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At the end of this chapter, spend some time in prayer, bringing to God those things that are puzzling and difficult, and asking the Holy Spirit to accompany you on your journey through this module.

## Further Reading

Walter Brueggemann, William C Placher & Brian K Blount, *Struggling with Scripture*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002

Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, Westminster John Knox Press, revised edition 2001

Ellen F Davis & Richard B Hays (eds), *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Eerdmans, 2003

Robert Evans, *Using the Bible: Studying the Text*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999

Eugene H Peterson, *Eat this Book: the Art of Spiritual Reading*, Hodder & Stoughton 2006



# Reflection Sheet for Chapter I

Make notes in response to as many of the following questions as possible.

- What have you learned in this chapter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How do you feel about it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What further questions have been raised by this chapter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What action will you take, or what will you try to do differently, as a result of this chapter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Any other thoughts or reflections?

## Extra Reading (optional)

The following material is optional. Feel free to read it if it looks helpful and interesting or to ignore it if you are short of time, or it doesn't look helpful to you at the moment.

The following extract is from Davis & Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2003). This book is the result of The Scripture Project – a group of distinguished biblical scholars who met together over a four-year period (1998—2002) to 'read' scripture together. Their aim was, by pooling their different areas of expertise in a team underpinned by prayer, to recover something of the Church's rich heritage of biblical interpretation for our own times.

They produced 'Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture' – a framework for grasping the scope and nature of scripture, its relationship to us, to the Church and to the world. As you read them, decide on how far you agree with each one (later in this module we will return to some of the points labelled by the theologians 'for ongoing discussion'). (What follows is an extended quotation; the Glossary at the end of the Introduction (just before Chapter 1) may prove useful from time to time.)

### **Nine Theses<sup>1</sup> on the Interpretation of Scripture**

#### **1 Scripture truthfully tells the story of God's action of creating, judging and saving the world.**

God is the primary agent revealed in the biblical narrative. The triune God whom Christians worship is the God of Israel who called a people out of bondage, gave them the Torah, and raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. This same God is still at work in the world today. God is not a projection or construct of human religious aspiration. Readers who interpret the biblical story reductively as a symbolic creation of the human psyche, or merely as a vehicle for codifying social and political power, miss its central message. Scripture discloses the word of God, a word that calls into existence things that do not exist, judges our presuppositions and projects, and pours out grace beyond our imagining.

*For ongoing discussion:* How is the biblical story of God's action related to God's continuing work in the contemporary world? How is the affirmation that God is at work in the world to be related to widespread evil and human suffering?

#### **2 Scripture is rightly understood in light of the Church's rule of faith as a coherent dramatic narrative.**

Though the Bible contains the voices of many different witnesses, the canon of Scripture finds its unity in the overarching story of the work of the triune God. While the Bible contains many tensions, digressions and subplots, the biblical texts cohere because the one God acts in them and speaks through them: God is the author of Scripture's unity for the sake of the Church's faithful proclamation and action.

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<sup>1</sup> Plural of 'thesis', meaning a doctrine or belief supported by reasoned discussion

*For ongoing discussion:* How are non-narrative portions of Scripture to be understood in the light of the claim that Scripture is a coherent dramatic narrative? How do we understand the character of the Bible's unity in and through its many voices? the character of God's speech through Scripture? of God's authorship? How do we understand particular texts that seem theologically or morally problematic – does God speak through *all* the texts of Scripture?

**3 Faithful interpretation of Scripture requires an engagement with the entire narrative: the New Testament cannot be rightly understood apart from the Old, nor can the Old be rightly understood apart from the New.**

The Bible must be read 'back to front' – that is, understanding the plot of the whole drama in the light of its climax in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . Yet the Bible must also be read 'front to back' – that is, understanding the climax of the drama, God's revelation in Christ, in the light of the long history of God's self-revelation to Israel . . .

*For ongoing discussion:* . . . How do we honour claims about the centrality of Christ while honouring the abiding significance of Israel? How do we deal with New Testament texts that appear to say that Israel has been rejected by God and superseded by the Church?

**4 Texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author. In accord with Jewish and Christian traditions, we affirm that Scripture has multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole drama.**

The authors and editors of the canonical texts repeatedly gave new contexts and meanings to earlier traditions, thereby initiating the process of discerning multiple meanings within the text . . . The Church's traditions of biblical interpretation offer models and guidance about how the fuller sense of Scripture should be understood. This does not involve rejecting the historical investigation of biblical texts. Indeed, historical investigations have ongoing importance in helping us to understand Scripture's literal sense, and in stimulating the Church to undertake new and imaginative readings of texts.

*For ongoing discussion:* How, then, do we learn from modern historical interpretations of Scripture while also drawing on the Church's pre-modern traditions of biblical interpretation? Should either modern or pre-modern traditions be privileged in the Church's reading of biblical texts? What criteria ought to be used to provide some determinacy<sup>2</sup> for the interpretation of particular texts?

**5 The four canonical Gospels narrate the truth about Jesus.**

The Gospels, read within the matrix of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, convey the truth about the identity of Jesus more faithfully than speculative reconstructions produced by modernist historical methods. The canonical narratives are normative<sup>3</sup> for the Church's proclamation and practice.

*For ongoing discussion:* How are the four portraits of Jesus related to one another? To what extent are historical investigations necessary or helpful in understanding Jesus? How far is the whole of Scripture necessary to an accurate portrayal of Jesus? To what extent is a right

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<sup>2</sup> i.e. determining factors

<sup>3</sup> i.e. offer a standard or norm

understanding of the whole of Scripture necessary to an appropriate understanding of the identity of Jesus?

## **6 Faithful interpretation of Scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God's redemptive action – the Church.**

Scriptural interpretation is properly an ecclesial activity whose goal is to participate in the reality of which the text speaks by bending the knee to worship God revealed in Jesus Christ. Through Scripture, the Church receives the good news of the in-breaking kingdom of God and, in turn, proclaims the message of reconciliation. Scripture is like a musical score that must be played or sung in order to be understood; therefore, the Church interprets Scripture by forming communities of prayer, service and faithful witness. The Psalms, for example, are 'scores' awaiting performance by the community of faith. They school us in prayer, and form in us the capacities for praise, penitence, reflection, patient endurance and resistance to evil.

*For ongoing discussion:* What does 'participation in the community' entail? Does it require particular credal<sup>4</sup> or sacramental understanding? At what point does a community lose its status as an identifiably Christian community? How does the disunity of the Church affect the interpretation of Scripture?

## **7 The saints of the Church provide guidance in how to interpret and perform Scripture.**

From the earliest communities of the Church, through whose scriptural interpretation we received the Christian Bible, to the present communities of biblical interpreters, generations of Christians have received this book as a gift from God, and sought to order their lives according to the witness of Scripture. This chain of interpreters, the communion of saints, includes not only those officially designated as saints by the Churches but also the great cloud of witnesses acknowledged by believers in diverse times and places, including many of the Church's loyal critics. This communion informs our reading of Scripture. We learn from the saints the centrality of interpretative virtues for shaping wise readers. Prominent among those virtues are receptivity, humility, truthfulness, courage, charity, humour and imagination. Guidance in the interpretation of Scripture may be found not only in the writings of the saints but also in the exemplary patterns of their lives. True authority is grounded in holiness; faithful interpretation of Scripture requires its faithful performance.

*For ongoing discussion:* How much of a gap can be endured between one's right interpretation of Scripture and one's failure in performance (e.g. churches that practise racial exclusion or unjust divisions between rich and poor?) How do we understand what goes wrong when the Bible is used as an instrument of oppression and division?

## **8 Christians need to read the Bible in dialogue with diverse others outside the Church.**

There is a special need for Christians to read Scripture in respectful conversation with Jews, who also serve the one God and read the same texts that we call the Old Testament within a different hermeneutical framework. There are also diverse others to whom we need to listen and from

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<sup>4</sup> i.e. belief or faith

whom we need to learn. This includes critics who charge us with ideological captivity rather than fidelity to God.

*For ongoing discussion:* How do we pursue the tasks of learning (again) to read Scripture faithfully in the Church while also being in dialogue with those outside? How should we understand and engage people who find themselves, in some sense, simultaneously inside and outside a fragmented Church?

**9 We live in the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the kingdom of God; consequently, Scripture calls the Church to ongoing discernment, to continually fresh rereadings of the text in the light of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the world.**

Because the narrative of Scripture is open to a future that God will give, and because our vision is limited by creaturely finitude<sup>5</sup> and distorted by sinfulness, we lack the perspective of the finished drama as we seek to live faithfully in the present. Yet we trust that the story is moving to a final consummation in which God will overcome death and wipe away every tear from our eyes. Knowing that we do not see ourselves and our world from God’s point of view, we are grateful for the gifts of Scripture and community, and for the possibilities of mutual correction in love that they offer. We are also grateful for Scripture’s promise that the Spirit of God will lead us into truth, which gives us hope that our speech and practice might yet be a faithful witness to the righteous and merciful God who is made known to us in Jesus Christ,-.

*For ongoing discussion:* If the story has not yet reached its conclusion, does this have implications for understanding the relationship between Scripture’s identification of God and the claims made by other religious traditions? How are our fresh rereadings to be distinguished from interpretations of Scripture that purport to separate the ‘kernel’ of the gospel from the ‘husk’ of cultural accretions<sup>6</sup>? To what standards of accountability are we called in order to keep our rereadings faithful to the God of Jesus Christ?

(from Ellen F David & Richard B Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Eerdmanns 2003, pp1—5)

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. our state of being mortal, finite creatures

<sup>6</sup> i.e. additions or interpretations that stem from the cultural background either of ancient times or our own day. The key question being asked, to which we shall return on a number of occasions in this module, is: what elements of scripture are eternal and changeless, and what elements are relative because they relate to the culture and conditions under which the text was written? An easy example is the ban on eating shellfish in the Levitical law – a sensible health precaution in a hot country without refrigeration.

## Chapter 2

# What kind of writing?

### Aims

- To consider different literary forms in the Bible, and the importance of understanding form in order to interpret the text truthfully
- To understand the importance of both narrative (i.e. story) and metanarrative in the Bible
- To look at the use of language in biblical texts – at the importance of identifying images and metaphors<sup>7</sup>, and understanding the power of images to affect meanings

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### Questions

Spend two or three minutes jotting down what first comes into mind when you think about the content of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament).

- What *kind* of material have you remembered? (Characters? Stories? Poetry? Proverbs? Or something else?)
- If you mainly thought of stories and characters (as most people do), what might this tell you about the importance of story in human memories and imaginations?

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## Forms and meanings

If we're to understand any piece of writing it's vital to know its literary form (or genre) – i.e. what kind of writing it is: 'If we mistake a recipe for vegetable stew for a set of clues for finding buried treasure, no matter how carefully we read it, we will end up as poor as ever and as hungry as ever' (Peterson, *Eat this Book*, p.42). We unconsciously make quite subtle distinctions all the time (e.g. the phrase 'Wish you were here' has different meanings in a love letter and on a seaside postcard; we believe there was a real politician called Lloyd George, but recognise that he didn't know all our fathers):

But when it comes to Scripture we don't do nearly as well. Maybe it is because Scripture comes to us authoritatively – *God's word!*—that we think all we can do is submit and obey. Submission and obedience are a large part of it, but first we have to listen. And listening requires listening to the *way* it is said (form) as well as to *what* is said (content).

(Peterson, *Eat this Book*, p.43)

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<sup>7</sup> A metaphor is an image applied to a thing or person which is not literally true; e.g. he's a swine; God is my rock

We will look briefly at the main types of literary form found in the Bible, concentrating mainly on story, or ‘narrative’, because of its importance to understanding and interpreting the Bible.

## Narrative and metanarrative

Stories are central and essential to our understanding of the Bible. ‘Story’ does not mean that the contents are not true (we talk of a TV news story as well as a fairy story, acknowledging the many different kinds of story). A story, or narrative, has the following characteristics:

1. It centres on human *characters*, their speech and actions, their relationships and desires, their ideas and institutions. Usually there are at least two characters in a story (often more). The narrator – the voice that tells the story – can also be seen as a character; and a reader or listener is implied, and sometimes even addressed directly, thus making yet another ‘character’. For example, when Charlotte Bronte writes in *Jane Eyre*, ‘Reader, I married him’, she’s not talking about herself, Charlotte, but her imaginary character Jane, who has narrated the whole book from her own perspective; and she isn’t addressing you and me as real readers, but an imaginary person in whom Jane is choosing to confide in order to make her declaration seem both more dramatic and more intimate.
2. *Plot* is crucial in a narrative (in contrast with other biblical forms like poetry, legal codes or proverbs). Plot is ‘a sequence of actions, often explicitly associated in terms of cause and effect, leading from an initial situation, through complication, to a sense of resolution’ (Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, p.2).
3. Narratives often use *word-patterning*, with the repetition of key words or phrases (think of fairy-tales with refrains such as ‘I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down’). An obvious Bible example is the creation story in Genesis 1, with the repeated refrain, ‘And there was evening and there was morning, the ...th day’. In parts of the OT the Hebrew text uses extensive repetition, which some translators avoid in English, believing it sounds clumsy and crude (the Authorised Version often preserves these repetitions, which can be helpful to us as readers as they can indicate links within a story of which we might otherwise be unaware.)

The Bible itself is actually an extraordinary series of stories, a bit like Russian dolls that fit inside each other.

- There’s the huge story (or ‘metanarrative’), of God’s actions in creating, redeeming and being present in the world, a vast story peopled with thousands of characters – the story from creation to heaven, from Genesis to Revelation, from alpha to omega (A—Z).
- There are large and lengthy stories within the Bible – more than half of the Hebrew Bible is narrative; for example, one major narrative runs from Genesis 1 to the end of 2 Kings – a grand story of Israel’s history, in a plot initiated by God, who tries to establish and sustain a relationship of trust with humankind. Likewise, we could describe the whole of the New Testament as the narrative of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.
- These great stories are composed of many shorter narratives of various kinds: history, legend, saga, myth, folk-tale, biography. And many of these can be further broken down into episodes which are also stories in their own right (e.g. Joseph’s story, in Genesis chapters 37—50, contains many stories within it; Jesus’ life-story in the gospels also contains narratives about Jesus and stories told by Jesus).

From our viewpoint, it’s good news that, when God chooses to communicate with us verbally, he does so mainly through stories, because we have an inbuilt disposition to tell stories and listen to stories. Why do people love TV soap operas? Because they’re stories about people’s lives. What

do we do with our friends when we meet to relax? We tell stories about our day, our week, our lives. As Eugene Peterson writes:

Young and old love stories. Literate and illiterate alike tell and listen to stories. Neither stupidity nor sophistication puts us outside the magnetic field of story:

But there's another reason for the appropriateness of story as a major means of bringing us God's word. Story doesn't just tell us something and leave it there; it invites our participation. A good story-teller gathers us into the story. We feel the emotions, get caught up in the drama, identify with the characters, see into nooks and crannies of life that we'd overlooked, realise that there is more to this business of being human than we had yet explored. If the story-teller is good, windows and doors open. . .

But unfortunately we live in an age when story has been pushed from its biblical front-line prominence to a bench on the sidelines and then condescended to as 'illustration' or 'testimony' or 'inspiration'. Our contemporary unbiblical preference, both inside and outside the Church, is for information over story. We gather impersonal information, whether doctrinal or philosophical or historical, in order to take things into our own hands and take charge of how we will live our lives. But we don't live our lives by information; we live them in relationships in the context of a personal God who cannot be reduced to formula or definition, who has designs on us for justice and salvation. And we live them in an extensive community of men and women, each person an intricate bundle of experience and motive and desire. Telling a story is the primal verbal way of accounting for life the way we live it in actual day-by-day reality. And so when we lose touch with our *souls* – our moral, spiritual, embodied, God-personal lives – story is the best verbal way of getting us back in touch again. And that is why God's word is given for the most part in the form of story, this vast, overarching, all-encompassing story, this meta-story. (Peterson, *Eat this Book*, pp.40—42)

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### Questions

- If stories are the natural way in which people process the past and the present, as well as imagine future possibilities, and if stories are the way in which we relate most comfortably to others, and if stories are the primary verbal way in which God communicates with people through the Bible, why do you think that stories in our churches are often restricted to Sunday School, or short sermon illustrations?
- How are stories used in your church? (e.g. testimonies, illustrations, Bible stories, etc) On what occasions? How well does this work? How could they be used more effectively or more extensively?
- How far do you see the eucharistic liturgy as 'telling a story'? Are there ways in which the 'story' of our faith could be emphasised to encourage a deeper participation in it by church members?

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## The Bible as metanarrative

Our distinctiveness as Christians in today's world arises largely because we believe in a metanarrative – we believe in a God who creates us, who saves us and who is our companion;



secular philosophy rejects this, seeing only millions of individual people, each one creating their own story, with no bigger meaning or significance.

The ultimate metanarrative for Christians is God – God who IS the plot, who creates the characters, the rhythms and patterns of life, death and new life. And the Bible, taken as a whole, is an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative of God’s relationship with the universe and with us, his creatures; his relationship as creator, as saviour, as a companion who blesses us. It is vital for us to grasp this, if we are to interpret the Bible faithfully, because ‘it takes the whole Bible to read any part of the Bible’ (Peterson, *Eat this Book*, p.48). We can no more try to understand a short Bible passage without any reference to the biblical metanarrative than ‘any one of our sentences spoken throughout the course of the day can be understood apart from our relationships and culture and the various ways in which we speak to our children and parents, our friends and enemies, our employers and employees – and our God (Peterson, p.49).

Peterson goes on to explain why the narrative form of the Bible is so compelling for us – we who are trying to follow Jesus faithfully, to allow God’s Holy Spirit to become an ever more integral part of our lives:

Spiritual theology, using Scripture as text, does not present us with a moral code and tell us, ‘Live up to this’; nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say, ‘Think like this and you will live well’. The biblical way is to tell a story and in the telling invite: ‘Live *into* this – this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being’. We do violence to the biblical revelation when we ‘use’ it for what we can get out of it or what we think will provide colour and spice to our otherwise bland lives. That always results in a kind of ‘decorator spirituality’ – God as enhancement. Christians are not interested in that; we are after something far bigger. When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our stories in God’s. God is the larger story and plot in which our stories find themselves.

(Peterson, *Eat this Book*, pp43—4)

## Story and myth

It is worth adding a brief word here about story and myth – the source of many disagreements about biblical interpretation. ‘Myth’ (popularly used to mean something that isn’t true) actually means a story which may or may not be factually true, but whose importance lies in the truths it conveys. Take as an example the myth of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1—9). It may perhaps be a factual description of an event at a stage of human prehistory when everyone spoke the same language (though there is no historical or archaeological evidence to support this). But the story was not told to impart historical or archaeological information; it was told to express deep truths about the nature of being human: first, that humans want to set themselves up as if they were God, to take control of their lives and circumstances in ways that challenge God’s authority; and second, that language is both a blessing and a curse, that through words we can both grow close to one another, yet also through words we can fail to understand each other at all (e.g. if we were to ask an Israeli and a Palestinian to talk about nationality, a homeland, security, defence and the conditions for living in peace, we know that there isn’t one of these words which would mean the same to both of them.) The myth of the Tower of Babel is as true today as ever it was. (Christians, of course, believe that these profound differences can be healed by God’s Spirit – through the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost people of all languages and tongues could

understand God's truths and receive God's life. This is also a good example of the importance of metanarrative – of being unable to interpret one part of scripture without reference to the bigger story.)

Different interpretations, depending on whether certain Bible stories are read as myth or story, truth or fact, surface in the debate between Christians who are 'creationists' and those who are 'evolutionists': the former understand the creation stories as literally and factually true, the latter understand them as true myth.

## Other forms of Scripture

Within the metanarrative of Scripture are a number of other literary forms:

- **Poetry.** The Psalms, large amounts of the prophets, and some wisdom literature, as well as some New Testament hymns, are all forms of poetry. Modern versions of the Bible are helpful in laying out poetry in a distinctive way (look at the Psalms if you're not sure whether your version does this) – this gives us a clue about the poetic form. Poetry is characterised by intensity of feeling, and very focused expression, as well as by the use of metaphor and image (you might like to compare the two parts of Isaiah 6, for example, with its prose 'story' of Isaiah's vision in verses 1–8, followed by a poetic oracle from God in verses 9–13).

- **Law.** Within the larger 'story' of the Torah (the first five books of our Bibles) are several collections of laws (e.g. the 'Book of the Covenant', Exodus 21–24; the 'Holiness Code', Leviticus 17–26; the Deuteronomic legislation (Deuteronomy 12–26). At the heart of the law lie the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5); the rest of the legislation forming a detailed commentary on them.

- **Wisdom.** There are at least three kinds of wisdom literature in the Old Testament:

- 1 Sayings which draw moral and practical conclusions about everyday life (e.g. Proverbs 10–30)

- 2 Reflection on theological and cosmological issues (e.g. Proverbs 8:22–36, and some of the Psalms)

- 3 The interpretations of dreams and visions (parts of Daniel and Ezekiel, linking to the apocalyptic literature of which Revelation is an example).

Two books, Job and Ecclesiastes, seem to reflect on the shortcomings of Wisdom traditions, which fail to provide 'all the answers'. Perhaps these books have particular significance for us, living in a world which is suspicious of neat 'answers'.

- **Prophecy.** Like 'Wisdom'. 'prophecy' is 'a bit of a catch-all term covering a wide variety of material' (Barton & Muddiman, eds, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, p.9). Its basic form is a (usually) short and pithy saying expressing the word or will of God. Many prophetic books also contain narrative (e.g. Jeremiah). The Hebrew prophets (the last of whom was, arguably, John the Baptist) spoke God's word for that time, place and context, sometimes showing what the future could be (and this was often conditional, dependant on the response of God's people), but always trying to bring God's people back to covenant faithfulness.

- **Gospel** (from the Anglo-Saxon *god spel*, 'good news'). The only literary form in the Bible which has no parallel in the literature of the ancient world. A gospel isn't a biography (though it contains elements of one), nor is it a simple expression of God's will (though again, it contains many expressions of God's will). Each of the gospels offers a telling of the bigger story of Jesus, God-with-us, focusing on his life, his teaching, his suffering, his death and his resurrection, each angled to a different readership and context within the early Church.

- **Letters.** Much New Testament teaching is in the form of letters addressed to new churches struggling to make sense of the gospel in their own historical and cultural contexts.
- **Apocalyptic.** Part of the book of Daniel in the OT, and most of Revelation in the NT, belong to a form of literature called ‘apocalyptic’, which aims to reveal truths about God from a heavenly perspective, and which, in imaginatively theological language, is concerned with the contradiction between God’s rule over creation and the apparently unchecked sway of evil in the world.

## Words and images

We have considered the importance of metanarrative; now to the other end of the scale – the use of words:

We have a written word to read and attend to. It is God’s word, or so we believe, and we had better get it right. Exegesis is the care we give to getting the words right. Exegesis is foundational to Christian spirituality. Foundations disappear from view as a building is constructed, but if the builders don’t build a solid foundation, their building doesn’t last long.

Because we speak our language so casually, it is easy to fall into the habit of treating it casually. But language is persistently difficult to understand. We spend our lives learning the language and just when we think we have mastered it our spouse says, ‘You don’t understand a thing I’m saying, do you?’ . . . A close relationship doesn’t guarantee understanding. A long affection doesn’t guarantee understanding. In fact, the closer we are to one another and the more intimate our relations, the more care we must exercise to hear accurately, to understand thoroughly, to answer appropriately.

Which is to say, the more ‘spiritual’ we become, the more care we must give to exegesis. The more mature we become in the Christian faith, the more exegetically rigorous we must become. This is not a task from which we graduate. These words given to us in our Scriptures are constantly getting overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortions and ignorant guesses that pollute the text. The pollutants are always in the air, gathering dust on our Bibles, corroding our use of the language, especially the language of faith. Exegesis is a dust-cloth, a scrubbing brush or even a Q-tip for keeping words clean.

(Peterson, *Eat this Book*, p.53)

As we read and interpret scripture, we must be particularly aware of the use of images and metaphors – those ‘word pictures’ which can become so familiar that we forget that they’re rough pictures and begin to mistake them for the real thing. Think, for example, of some of the images used in the poetry of the Psalms to express different aspects of our relationship with God, images which offer us tiny windows into God’s greatness: shepherd, rock, fortress; but then there are those images for God that are so familiar that we forget that they’re only pictures and treat them as if they’re the whole truth (e.g. King, Father, Almighty). Or think, perhaps, of some of Paul’s letters, filled with images with which we’re so familiar, that we forget to think of the full meanings implicit in the image: (e.g. ‘Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery’, Galatians 5:1).

## Questions

The following questions are aimed at helping you to get a sense of the different perspectives we can have of a Bible story depending on whether we read it alone, or see it as just one component in the layers of metanarratives within the Bible.

Read 2 Samuel 11:1—27, the story of David and Bathsheba.

- Paintings of the scene described in 11:2—5, and Hollywood films (*David and Bathsheba*, 1951, directed by Henry King and starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, and *King David*, 1985, directed by Bruce Beresford and starring Richard Gere), have all taken different standpoints about the morality and motives of David and Bathsheba. Some have seen Bathsheba as a provocative temptress, bathing naked in view of the palace, at the opposite extreme, others believe Bathsheba to have been effectively raped by David, his role as king being all-powerful, allowing her little choice.

- What is your view of where responsibilities lie in this part of the story?

- How far do you think your views depend on your own past experiences or present opinions, rather than on the biblical text itself?

- Some commentators see this story as the turning-point in David's life – up to this point, his rise has been steady and glorious; from here things begin to change (see chapter 12:1—15), and his family life is riven with violence and abuse, as the nation also suffers (chapters 13—24). What difference does this knowledge make (if any) to the way in which you read and interpret David's adultery with Bathsheba?

- Some commentators also see this story as the turning-point of God's covenant history with his people Israel. Throughout the early books of the Bible, God builds relationships first with individuals (Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham), then with a family (Isaac, Jacob and his sons), then with the twelve tribes, then with Israel as a nation and finally, at their insistence, with Israel as a monarchy. God had warned his people that monarchs were not the answer – but Israel wanted to be like other nations, so God allowed first Saul and then David to be their king. But from 2 Samuel 11, the story of David and Bathsheba, the rot sets in, with kings becoming more and more dissolute, and resistant to the covenant relationship with God (with one or two notable exceptions), culminating some centuries later in the Exile to Babylon.

Again, what difference does this knowledge of the bigger story make (if any) to the way in which you read and interpret David's adultery with Bathsheba?

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Spend some time praying over the issues that have arisen for you from this chapter. You might find it helpful to pray using Psalm 51, thought to be the prayer of penitence and lament written by David after his sin with Bathsheba.

## Further Reading

David M Gunn & Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1993

J Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book: the Art of Spiritual Reading*, Hodder & Stoughton 2006

## **Reflection Sheet for Chapter 2**

Make notes in response to as many of the following questions as possible.

- What have you learned in this chapter?
- How do you feel about it?
- What further questions have been raised by this chapter?
- What action will you take, or what will you try to do differently, as a result of this chapter?
- Any other thoughts or reflections?

## Chapter 3

# The Bigger Picture

### Aim

- To consider the importance of the scriptural context and background to an understanding of Bible passages
- To look at the use of themes or concepts throughout scripture, recognising the importance of accumulated meanings
- To reflect on the ways in which the different gospel writers treat the same material – and the significance of this for interpretation.

### Questions

Read Mark 6:30—44.

- What do you think this story is about?
- What do you think it means? (i.e. what, at first sight, is your interpretation of it?)

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Read ‘Free food for all – text and context’, jotting down answers to the questions posed in the text. Bear in mind that (as ever) we’re not looking for ‘right’ answers – these questions are designed to show the kinds of questions that must be asked of a biblical passage in order to delve deeper into its meanings.

## Free food for all – text and context

Mark 6:30—44 is, at first sight, familiar and fairly straightforward. Clearly its form is narrative (i.e. it’s a story), and it’s part of the bigger narrative of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. But we’re now going to look further into it, to see how our understanding deepens as we learn more about its biblical context.

The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle told in all four gospels –so (we can conclude) it must have been particularly meaningful for the different groups of early Christians for whom the gospels were written. Moreover, God’s free provision of food for his people is a theme throughout the Bible, from Adam and Eve in a garden filled with good things for them to eat, right through to the vision of the heavenly banquet (the feast in God’s kingdom with the Messiah as host). First, though, a word about the ways in which commentators in the past have tried to work out answers to the question of ‘what really happened’ at the feeding of the multitude: Suggestions that the numbers involved were exaggerated (Wellhausen) or that the feeding was a symbolic one involving only tiny fragments of food (A. Schweitzer), or that people were persuaded to share the food which they had brought with them (Branscomb), cannot explain the

belief of all the evangelists that this was a miraculous feeding. Whatever the historical basis for the story, it is now impossible to separate this out from the interpretation given to the event in which various ideas have been employed to bring out the significance of Jesus' person. It is thus a much more rewarding question to ask what truths about Jesus the evangelist is trying to convey to his readers in retelling this story.

(Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, p.164)

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### **Question**

In the light of this, what do you think this passage tells us about 'the truths about Jesus'?

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We will now look briefly:

- 1 at the story in the context of Mark's Gospel
- 2 at the story in the context of the Old Testament
- 3 at the parallels and differences between this and the accounts of the same story in Matthew, Luke and John.

## **I The context of Mark's Gospel**

### **(a) The surrounding material**

Read Mark 6:14—29, Mark 6:45—7:30 and Mark 8:1—20.

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### **Questions**

What light (if any) do you think these passages throw on the context and meanings of Mark 6:30—44? (e.g. note all the different references to food – what might be their significance? What do they add to our understanding? How far do all these passages illustrate an underlying dialogue going on between Jesus and his disciples? What might such a dialogue actually be about?)

If possible, reflect on these questions before reading on.

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You may have noted the parallel 'feasts' in Mark 6, contrasting Herod's banquet (a description of excess, selfishness and evil at a meal-table) and the feeding of the multitude, each offering an implicit critique<sup>8</sup> of the other – and moving to someone who is willing to scratch around for the crumbs under the table in 7:27—8. The Bible is full of such unspoken yet meaningful contrasts, of placing stories next to each other, or interrupting one story with another to act as a comment on it. We sadly often miss these important juxtapositions through our lectionary cycle, which does not encourage us to read the Bible in this way because of the necessity of chopping it up into bite-sized chunks.

More old-fashioned commentators tended to make symbolic interpretations of scripture. Here is Morna Hooker's comment on Mark 6:30—44 and 8:1—10:

It has been suggested that the five loaves in the first story represent the five books of the Law,

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<sup>8</sup> Critique means a reflection or commentary; it doesn't imply 'criticism' in the negative sense of the word.

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and the twelve baskets the twelve disciples . . . though we may well wonder why Jesus should be distributing the Law in his teaching. Attempts to give similar interpretations to the numbers in the second story, however, become absurd: here the seven loaves are said to represent the seventy nations, and the seven baskets the seven deacons of Acts 6:1—6. But the loaves are fed to the people, and cannot represent them, seven does not equal seventy, and we must not import deacons from Acts to explain what Mark is doing here. This kind of interpretation is artificial, and is not justified by Mark's narrative.  
(Hooker, *Mark*, p.188)

**(b) In Mark's gospel as a whole**

Read Mark 14:17—25.

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**Questions**

What insights can we gain by reading Mark 6:30—44 in the light of the eucharist? And what insights into the eucharist by seeing it through the 'lens' of Mark 6:30—44?

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It is interesting to note that bread and fish became symbols of the eucharist in the early Church (compare also John 21:9—13, where Jesus himself cooks breakfast for his friends). Hooker, commenting on Mark 14, writes:

The Last Supper was remembered, not simply because it was the last meal of Jesus with the Twelve, but because he did and said something memorable. Nevertheless, the occasion, special though it may have been, was presumably one of many meals which Jesus ate with his disciples, and we need to remember that eating together was seen as an important means of establishing fellowship. The suggestion that the meals eaten together by early Christians fell into two distinct categories – eucharists (celebrations of the Last Supper) and agapes (fellowship meals) – is probably too rigid. It seems more likely that such gatherings would have reflected a spectrum of ideas and associations.

Including, perhaps, ideas about God offering free food for all, as revealed in Mark 6 and 8?

## **2 The context of the Old Testament**

There are a number of OT stories about God's practical care for his people.

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**Questions**

Look up each of the following references, and note down what (if anything) an awareness of these stories or images might add to our interpretation of Mark 6:30—44:

Exodus 16:1—16; Numbers 11

1 Kings 17:1—16; 1 Kings 19:4—8

2 Kings 4:42—44; Isaiah 55:1—3

Psalms 23 1, 5—6; Psalm 145:14—16

- Taken together, do these passages imply that Jesus is a second Moses, Elijah, Elisha, David?



- What might this add to our understanding of Mark 6:30—44?
- 

### 3 The story in all four gospels

#### Questions

Carefully read Matthew 14:13—22; Luke 9:10—17 and John 6:1—14, 48—51, comparing them with Mark 6:30—44 and each other, noting both similarities and differences in the details of the stories.

- Do you think it's important that the stories aren't identical? Does it affect their truth in any ways?
  - Do any of the differences highlight different reasons why each evangelist might be retelling the story?
  - What might be the significance, in John's Gospel, of Jesus giving his eucharistic teaching after the feeding of the multitude rather than at the Last Supper, and of John's (deliberate) eucharistic 'echoes' of the Passover setting (6:4) and the words of 6:11?
  - What questions might be raised, or issues need to be discussed, when different gospels tell the same event differently?
  - What significance does this have (if any) in your personal reading and understanding of scripture?
- 

Given the evident importance of these stories to the early Church, how do they fit into the accounts of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness when he refused to multiply loaves miraculously, answering, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4)? It seems, perhaps, that the main point of the stories is not the miracle in itself, but rather that, when Jesus offers fellowship at his table, marvellous abundance is forthcoming. Think, for a moment, of how many gospel meals were occasions of repentance (Zacchaeus), of love (the woman with the alabaster jar), of revelation (the meal in Emmaus), of plenty (the wedding at Cana) – and remember too that Jesus' critics condemned him for being 'a glutton and a drunkard' in contrast to John the Baptist's ascetic life (Matthew 11:19). It may be that the stories of Jesus feeding the multitude have a profound significance for us today, when meals have lost any sense of being sacred occasions or reminders of our dependence on God's abundant generosity.

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#### OPTIONAL QUESTIONS

If you are interested, and/or have time, use the skills you have gained in this chapter to look at another story that appears in all four gospels – the story of the woman anointing Jesus with costly oil (Matthew 26:6—13; Mark 14:3—9; Luke 7:36—50; John 12:1—8).

- What are the similarities and the differences, and how do you think this affects the meanings (if at all)?
  - What is added to the story if some of the OT significance of anointing is understood? (see, for example, Exodus 30:22—33; Exodus 28:41; 1 Samuel 16:12—13) And the knowledge that 'Christ' means 'the anointed one'? (see also Luke 4:18; Acts 10:37—8)
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- Matthew, Mark and John set this story in Holy Week, near to the time of Jesus' death. Do you see any creative parallels between the woman's foot-washing and the foot-washing by Jesus at the Last Supper in John? Or the breaking of the jar and the breaking of bread, both an act of costly giving?
  - In what ways can our reading of the stories in parallel deepen our interpretative understanding?
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## Further Reading

Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.  
David M Gunn & Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1993  
Morna Hooker, *St Mark*, A & C Black, 1991.  
Jeffrey John, *The Meaning of Miracles*, Canterbury Press, 2001



## Chapter 4

# So what's really going on?

### Aims

- To consider the importance of social and historical contexts to the meanings of biblical texts
- To be aware of contemporary Ancient Near Eastern or Graeco-Roman texts, and how biblical writers/editors have chosen to shape their material.

### Questions

Think about any historical event – either from world history or from your family history – that took place before your birth.

- What are your sources of information? (e.g. other people's memories, letters, TV documentaries, the Internet, school history lessons, books)
- Can you test any of your sources against each other? – i.e. do they give the same version of the facts of the matter?
- How can you tell whether or not the story-telling was accurate? Might there be more than one view of what happened?
- Is there a person, group of people, or even a whole nation, mentioned in the story but only from the point of view of the 'historian'?
- If you were to imagine the story from their point of view, how different would it be? (e.g. a family story about air-raids over London in World War 2 would be different if told from the viewpoint of the household on which a bomb actually fell, and different again if told from the viewpoint of the German pilot).
- Imagine recounting the story you've chosen to someone from a tiny village deep in the Brazilian jungle. How much context and background would you have to explain to them?

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Read 'Bible backgrounds – the untold stories'.

## Bible backgrounds – the untold stories

The people of the Bible lived in an area of very different climate and landscape from us; they also spoke languages very different from ours; perhaps most importantly, they lived a very long time ago (which may seem obvious, but we can easily forget the implications of this as we eagerly read the Bible as a spiritual text to meet our own twenty-first century needs). The people of the Bible lived from about 3,700 to about 1,900 years ago. We must therefore learn something about their cultures, their assumptions and their circumstances in order to gain a deeper

understanding of scripture.

Malina (*The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, pp.7—9) describes three apparently contradictory assumptions we hold simultaneously:

- we believe that all people are 100% the same (so that it doesn't matter who posed for the picture of the human heart in an anatomy textbook); this area is called 'the objective', and is often ascribed to 'the sciences';
- we believe that all people are 100% different (focusing on the unique individual story of each human person); this area is called 'subjective';
- we believe that all people are somewhat the same and somewhat different; 'culture' is the system by which groups of people share patterns of meaning and feeling, which allow both for same-ness and difference; this area is called 'social'.

We recognise that we're physically the same 'species' as Bible people, and that we share with them our human nature; but we also accept that we're impossibly different in terms of our unique personal stories and experiences. And so we must take great care (says Malina) not to mistake *our* cultural story for the story of human nature through all times and in all places, nor to mistake *their* cultural stories for eternal truths – we must recognise those elements within ourselves, and within the Bible, which belong to particular social and historical ways of thinking and behaving. To put it simply, it's OK for a small child in a Nativity play to imagine the Flight into Egypt involving runways, jets and baggage check-ins – but it becomes unacceptable when, as adult biblical interpreters, we make equivalent cultural errors.

This is a huge subject, partly because of the great historical and cultural range of scripture itself. We will look briefly at two types of cultural issues (while encouraging you to be generally aware of such issues as you read scripture, and Bible commentaries):

- (a) Historical and social contexts
- (b) Literary contexts – the relationship of parts of the Bible to other ancient texts.

## **(a) Historical and social contexts**

As an example of the significance of historical and social contexts, we shall look at just one theme from the world of the Old Testament (the optional further reading at the end of this chapter offers a very different example from the world of the New Testament).

### **The concept of sacrifice in Old Testament culture**

Some of this material comes from 'The World-View of the Old Testament', by John Rogerson (chapter 4 in Rogerson, ed., *Beginning Old Testament Study*). It's worth noting that the other sections in his chapter are: the world of nature, magic, miracles and social organisation, giving an idea of the main cultural differences Rogerson sees between the world of the Hebrew scriptures and our own.

The practice of sacrifice was universal in the ancient world:

For this reason it was taken for granted. So, in literature spanning one thousand years or so, we find no attempts to define sacrifice. It never occurred to anyone that it needed explanation or definition . . . People just instinctively used this means of worshipping the gods, and if we are to understand sacrifice we have to look for the presuppositions that lie sometimes below the conscious surface of their minds.

(Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, p.21)

In ancient Israel, sacrifice was the whole business of killing, dissecting, blood-sprinkling, burning and disposal of the remains of animals and birds. Christians may be reluctant to engage with the OT understanding of sacrifice – first, because the death of Jesus has abolished the need for a sacrificial system (and yet we use the language of sacrifice in our liturgies and preaching, so we need to understand some of its significance); second because we can think of OT passages which seem to say that God doesn't want animal sacrifices (Isaiah 1:12—20; Jeremiah 7:21—26; Amos 5:32—34). There are also passages which seem to spiritualise sacrifice, in which sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving and penitence seem preferable to animal sacrifices (e.g. Psalm 51:15—17; Micah 6:6—8). But the fact is that 'no reform movement within the religion of the OT succeeded in abolishing the sacrificial system, for the simple reason that sacrifice was part of a much more complex system of drawing and maintaining boundaries in ancient Israel' (Rogerson, p.69).

Rogerson continues:

Sacrifice in the OT was a form of symbolic behaviour that enabled boundaries to be crossed, and boundaries to be restored when they had been violated . . . The most fundamental boundary, so far as sacrifice was concerned, was that between clean and unclean. This cut right across the distinction that we make today between moral offences (the breaking of rules governing behaviour towards other human beings) and ritual offences (the breaking of rules about religious ceremonies . . .). A person could become unclean, and thus violate the boundary between clean and unclean, in many ways: by contact with a dead body (Leviticus 22:4), or with an unclean animal (Lev. 11:24—27); by contracting 'leprosy' (Lev. 13—14), by menstruating or giving birth (Lev. 12:1—8; 15:19f), by damaging the property of another person (Lev. 6:1—7) or by breaking a divine commandment unintentionally (Lev. 5:14—19). (Rogerson, 'The World-View of the Old Testament', pp.69—70)

Rogerson uses the rituals for rehabilitating a leper (Lev. 14) to illustrate the role of sacrifice. The conceptual world-view of ancient Israel, he suggests, was divided into spheres of order and chaos. On being declared a leper, a person was excluded from society not simply because of the risk of contagion, but at a deeper level because they could not continue to be part of ordered social relationships, but must live in the disordered sphere beyond – literally, as well as symbolically, because lepers had to live outside the town or village, showing that even the land was thought to be ordered into spheres reflecting order and chaos.

The restoration ritual began with the priest meeting the leper 'outside the camp' (Lev. 14:3) – i.e. outside the sphere of ordered relationships. An elaborate ritual (including the release of a bird, which probably symbolised the removal of uncleanness) brought the leper into an intermediate state between being part of society and being outside it. For seven days the leper lived inside the camp but outside his tent (Lev. 14:8). On the eighth day, a final elaborate ritual completed the passage back to full membership of society. This ritual (says Rogerson) can be compared to two other rituals:

- The ritual for consecrating priests (Lev. 8—9) – the priests spend seven days in an intermediate position, as part of crossing the boundary between the ordinary and the sacred
- The rituals for the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) – again, there are similarities in the use of sacred space, notions of places of order and of chaos, as the goat that is to bear the sins of the community is led through the camp and out into the wilderness. Thus is symbolised the removal of uncleanness from the ordered to the chaotic, as represented by the wilderness.

All ancient peoples used sacrifice in their worship. But what is distinctive about Israel is that sacrifice is given coherence and meaning by the Sinai story in which God gave to his people the gift of the law after delivering them from slavery in Egypt:

Sacrifices are thus part of the way in which Israel must respond in gratitude to God for his gracious redemption and his continuing care for the people. The sacrificial system enabled the Israelites to order their lives in loyalty to the God who had revealed himself at the Exodus. If and when they broke his laws, the sacrifices enabled relationships to be restored.

(Rogerson, 'The World-View of the Old Testament, p.70)

In other words, there was a complex interrelationship in ancient Israel between sacrifice and the social, moral and theological order.

Much of this theology and practice continued until the time of Jesus. Malina (*The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, pp.161—197) includes a chapter on 'Understanding Rules of Purity', taking further the idea of ordered space (as opposed to chaos), and subdividing it into places that were ever more holy: within the holy land of Israel is the holy city, Jerusalem; with Jerusalem is the holy temple, and within the temple, there are courts of every-increasing holiness into which fewer and fewer categories of people were allowed, culminating in the 'holy of holies', where the high priest alone went to offer sacrifice, interacting with God on behalf of God's holy people. This understanding is therefore important to our interpretation and understanding both of OT texts, and also of some gospel stories and people – for example, lepers (Mark 1:40—45; Luke 17:11—19) or the woman with the haemorrhage (Mark 5:25—34), who (along with the blind, the paralysed, the possessed, the lame) were barred from the Temple and sacrifice because of their uncleanness. Likewise, of course, Jesus made himself unclean by touching such people; and told a story (Luke 10:25—37) in which two religious people are condemned for putting these considerations before love of God and neighbour.

Jesus' activity and teachings, then, point to a new vision of priorities based on his own knowledge of God and God's will. Jesus showed that purity laws, while important, are much less important than relationships. First, the relationship of God to his people, for God desires not that people should obey a complicated set of purity rules in order to get close to him, but should approach him openly in the context of a loving relationship as between parent and child; and secondly, that his people should live in relationships of love, justice and mercy with each other.

This was an issue that the early Church struggled with: should non-Jewish converts have to obey Jewish purity rules (e.g. physical circumcision)? Should Jewish members of the Church keep to the dietary laws of Judaism, and require the same of non-Jews? (see, for example, Acts 10:1—11:18; Acts 15:1—21).

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### **Question**

Look up the following Bible passages, reflect on them and make notes as to whether the reading above has deepened or changed your understanding of each passage. How might your understanding of this passage affect your own spiritual life?

- Matthew 9:10—13
- Luke 10:25—37
- Hebrews 4:14—16

## (b) Ancient literary contexts

In the literature of the Ancient Near East there are a number of myths which can be read in parallel with biblical texts, allowing us to consider both the similarities and differences between the two, and thus helping us understand the distinctiveness of Israel's theology and worship in relation to other cultures and religions of the time. The following are two ancient creation stories. Read them through carefully.

### Egyptian

*A theology of creation from the city of Memphis. The document is from 700BC, but derives from a much older text from about 2700BC. Atum is a spirit who bears within himself the sum of all existence. Ptah is the chief god of Memphis, the patron of artists and artisans. Ennead is the company of lower gods.*

There came into being as the heart, and there came into being as the tongue, something in the form of Atum. The mighty Great One is Ptah, who transmitted life to all gods.

. . . Thus it happened that the heart and tongue gained control over every other member of the body, by teaching that he is in everybody and in every mouth of all gods, all men, all cattle, all creeping things, everything that lives, by thinking and commanding everything that he wishes.

Thus all the gods were formed, and his Ennead was completed. Indeed, all the divine order really came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded . . . Thus justice was given to him who does what is liked, and injustice to him who does what is disliked. Thus life was given to him who has peace, and death was given to him who has sin. Thus were made all work and all crafts, the action of the arms, the movement of the legs, and the activity of every member, in conformity with this command which the heart thought, which came forth through the tongue, and which gives value to everything.

And so Ptah was satisfied after he had made everything.

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### Questions

Read this Egyptian creation myth alongside Genesis 1:1—2:4a.

- What are the main similarities and differences?
- What do you think these tell us about the Hebrew God?
- What might they tell us about the aims of the writer of Genesis? (i.e. what might the writer want readers to believe about God, humankind and the world?)

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### Babylonian

*This comes from an Akkadian epic Enuma Elish, 'When on high', which was solemnly recited on the fourth day of the New Year festival. Texts date from the first millennium, but the story is older. Marduk is the god of Babylon; Tiamat is the watery female sea-monster; Ea is the god of creation, crafts, water and intelligence:*

Then joined Tiamat and Marduk, wisest of the gods.

They strove in single combat, locked in battle.

The Lord spread out his net to enfold her,

The Evil Wind, which followed behind, he let loose in her face.



When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him,  
He drove in the Evil Wind so that she closed not her lips.  
Her body was distended and her mouth was wide open.  
He released the arrow, it tore her belly,  
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.  
Then the Lord paused to view her dead body,  
That he might divide the monster and do artful works.  
He split her like a shellfish into two parts:  
Half of her he set up and sealed it as sky,  
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.  
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.

When Marduk hears the words of the gods,  
His heart prompts him to fashion artful works.  
Opening his mouth, he addresses Ea  
To impart the plan he had conceived in his heart:  
'Blood I will mass, and cause bones to be.  
I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name.  
Verily, savage-man will I create.  
He shall be charged with the service of the gods  
That they might be at ease.'

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### Questions

Read this Babylonian creation myth alongside Genesis 2:4b—25.

- What are the main similarities and differences?
- What do you think these tell us about the Hebrew God?
- What might they tell us about the aims of the writer of Genesis 2? (i.e. what might the writer want readers to believe about God, humankind and the world?)

## Further Reading

Bernhard W Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament*, Longman, fourth edition 1988.

James D G Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, SCM Press, second edition 1990.

Bruce J Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

John Rogerson, 'The World-View of the Old Testament', chapter 4 in Rogerson (ed.), *Beginning Old Testament Study*, SPCK, revised edition 1998.

Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, T & T Clark, 1982.

Frances Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ*, SCM Press, reissued 1994.

## Reflection Sheet for Chapter 4

Make notes in response to as many of the following questions as possible.

- What have you learned in this chapter?
  
- How do you feel about it?
  
- What further questions have been raised by this chapter?
  
- What action will you take, or what will you try to do differently, as a result of this chapter?
  
- Any other thoughts or reflections?

## Further Reading (Optional)

### The concept of personality in New Testament culture

As we've already said, we share our human nature with ancient peoples – but we must not therefore think that we share the same assumptions about individuals, and their roles within families, groups and communities:

Honour and shame were pivotal values for the persons represented in the New Testament, and in the Bible as a whole. Among those people, the virtuous man was the strong man who knew how to maintain and perhaps increase his honour-rating along with that of his group. And the virtuous woman was the woman devoted to her husband and family, who knew how to safeguard the family's honour and teach her children accordingly. . . . What sort of personality sees life nearly exclusively in terms of honour? For starters, such a person would always see himself or herself through the eyes of others. After all, honour requires a grant of reputation by others. So what others tend to see is all-important. Further, such individuals need others for any sort of meaningful existence, since the image such persons have of themselves has to be indistinguishable from the image held and presented to them by their significant others in the family, tribe, village, city or ethnic group . . . The honourable person would never expose his or her distinct individuality. One's unique personhood, one's inner self – with its difficulties, weaknesses, confusions and inabilities to cope, as well as its distinctive, individual realm of hopes and dreams – is simply not of public concern or comment. Rather, persons of such enculturation<sup>9</sup> know how to keep their psychological core hidden and secret . . . They are adept at keeping their innermost self concealed with a veil of conventionality and formality, ever alert to anything that might lead to their making an exhibition of themselves, to anything that would not tally with the socially expected and defined forms of behaviour that have entitled them and their family to respect.

(Malina, *The New Testament World*, p.58)

Malina goes on to discuss the radical implications of this for a person's sense of self, and sense of their role within the community. He concludes this fascinating chapter with a summary, in table form, of some of the differences between first-century Mediterranean persons and twenty-first century US persons; some of that table is reproduced overleaf

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<sup>9</sup> i.e. people brought up with the standards and assumptions of that culture and society.

<b>1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean preferences</b>	<b>21<sup>st</sup> century US preferences</b>
<i>General attitudes</i>	
People put high value on conformity	People put high value on independence
Authoritarian attitudes are the social norm	Authoritarian attitudes are a matter of personality
Superiors make decisions autocratically and paternalistically	Managers (and parents) make decisions after consulting with subordinates
Subordinates are more satisfied with superiors who give orders and directions, and maintain their social distance	Subordinates are more satisfied with superiors who allow for participation in decision-making, and play down social distance . . .
<i>Attitudes towards status differences</i>	
High-status people are of a different kind from low-status people	High-status and low-status persons are all 'people like me'
A few should be independent, most dependent	All should be interdependent . . .
The powerful are entitled to privileges and must look as mighty as possible.	All persons have equal rights; the powerful should downplay their might, and not look the part.
Social upheaval is always due to some 'underdog', who must be punished by force and shame	Social upheaval is always due to some feature of the system. The system needs fine-tuning, while those who deviate from it require rehabilitation.
To change the social situation, dethrone those in power	To change the social situation, redistribute power . . .
<i>Group orientation vs Individualism</i>	
People are born into extended families which protect them in exchange for loyalty, commitment, in-group solidarity	Everyone is supposed to take care of himself or herself and his/her immediate family
The individual is emotionally dependent on organisations and institutions, with identity based in the social system	The individual is independent of organisations and institutions, with identity based in the individual.
Private life is invaded by in-group, extended family group, and organisations to which one belongs; opinions are predetermined; individual conformity and group acceptance are foremost; group membership is ideal.	Individuals have a right to a private life and to their own opinions; individual initiative and achievement are foremost, with leadership as ideal . . .
<i>Ideological/Religious Outlooks</i>	
Religion is part and parcel of the political system and the family system	Religion is separate from the political system and family system
Activist religion with emphasis on doing symbolically significant things	Pragmatic of introvert, meditative religions
Collectivist conversions	Individual conversions . . .
Activities more structured, with more explicit (written) rules, and with larger number of specialists involved in	Activities are less structured, with fewer explicit (written) rules, with more generalists or amateurs.

details, seeking organisational uniformity.	Specialists are more involved with strategy, with organisations taking on various different forms and structures..
Acquiescence in the possession of absolute truth	Ongoing search for relative truth
Belief in inequality of sexes	Belief in equality of sexes
Appeal of ‘tough’ religious beliefs and ideologies	Appeal of ‘tender’ religious beliefs and ideologies
Sympathy for the successful achiever, heroes who endure pain, hardship, suffering	Sympathy for the unfortunate, heroes who do good for the sake of other, less fortunate persons
<i>On the Gender Division of Labour</i>	
Machismo (showy masculinity) is the ideal	Gender equality of opportunity and reward is the ideal
Gender roles in society are to be clearly differentiated	Gender roles in society should be fluid
Males must behave assertively; females must always be caring	Males need not be assertive but can also take caring roles; females too can be assertive
Males should dominate all social settings	Differences in gender role should not mean differences in power

An awareness of some of these significant differences between the culture and world-view of the early Christians and our own is clearly vital as we seek to interpret and understand the teachings of the early Church about roles and relationships. It also helps us to understand just how much we in the twenty-first century struggle to live in the community of the Church, whose God-given demands about mutual love and belonging run so directly counter to the standards of our society.

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### **OPTIONAL QUESTIONS**

Read Ephesians 5:1—2, 5:21—6:9.

- Does your reading in this chapter deepen your understanding of references to sacrifice and purity?
  - Does the table given by Malina above deepen your understanding of Paul’s teaching about relationships within households? How far does Paul’s teaching reflect the social expectations of his time, and how far does it challenge them?
-

## Chapter 5

# Readers and Writers

### Aims

- To consider Bible writers and editors – who they were, and who were their original readers or hearers
- To learn to ‘read the gaps’ in the biblical text
- To consider the bias that modern readers bring to an interpretation of the text – those who write commentaries as well as we ourselves.

Read the following extracts (a) and (b), taken from national newspaper articles covering the same news item – the publication of immigration and emigration figures by the Home Office in August 2006 – and then answer the questions that follow.

(a)

### **A million migrants in 2 years**

One million migrants have poured into Britain in the past two years, it was revealed yesterday. Of those, 427,095 were from ten countries which joined the European Union in May 2004.

Ministers had estimated that number would be only 26,000 – a rate of 13,000 a year. Last night, Tories said that Labour must ensure it does not allow the same sort of intake when Bulgaria and Romania join the EU in January. Shadow immigration minister Damian Green said: ‘It is vital that we learn the lessons of the unprecedented numbers who came into this country after the last expansion of the EU. The Government should impose conditions similar to those applied by most European countries to the last wave of EU accession countries’.

On top of the figures covering the arrival of people from the new EU states, Home Office statistics showed that 261,000 had come here from outside the EU since 2004. Permission to remain in Britain was granted to another 320,000 non-EU nationals. It means well over one million arriving legally in the past two years.

That does not include estimates of self-employed workers or illegal immigrants. They could total several hundred thousand.

(*The Sun*, 23 August 2006; this was accompanied by a cartoon showing the globe, with arrows pointing to ‘North Pole’, ‘South Pole’, and one pointing to Britain labelled ‘All other Poles’)

(b)

## **New in the UK: the ‘guest’ workforce who don’t stay long**

A new temporary migrant labour force has emerged in Britain but the overwhelming majority say they intend to go home within two years, according to official immigration figures published yesterday. Indeed, the Home Office say that in terms of long-term immigration – those who intend to stay somewhere for more than four years – Britain is suffering from an annual net loss.

The latest international migration figures to and from Britain by length of stay show that net migration to the country has risen sharply in recent years and reached 222,600 more migrants coming in than leaving in 2004. But a big majority – 193,000 – say they want to leave within two years and a further 54,000 say they will go within three to four years. The proportion of all migrants saying they intend to stay less than two years has risen from 36% in 1995 to 50% in 2004.

The numbers of British citizens leaving the country has risen since 1997 to reach a record 235,000 in 2004. This net outflow of long-term residents from Britain has been increasing since 1999 and reached record levels as a more affluent age-group buy retirement homes abroad.

The long-term trend underlines the changing nature of migration to Britain. That it is the creation of a new, temporary, east European ‘guest-labour’ workforce rather than a repeat of the mass migrations from the Asian sub-continent and Africa seen in the 1960s and 1970s.

(*The Guardian*, 23 August 2006; the article is accompanied by a full page graphic display showing ‘Where do they come from?’, ‘Where are they in the UK?’ and ‘What jobs do they do?’)

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### **Questions**

- What (if anything) can you deduce about the people who wrote these articles?
- What can you deduce about their likely readership?
- What do you think the writers want the readers to think and feel about the statistics? Do you think the writers might have been writing in a certain way to form opinion in their readers or to appeal to the known bias of their readers?
- What ‘clues’ did you use from the articles to reach your conclusions?
- Imagine you were a Polish van driver working in the UK: how would you tell the story differently? What sort of background information might you include?
- Which of the above articles is more ‘true’ (or is this even a legitimate question to ask of a newspaper article?) How far might your answer to this reflect your own views on immigration or party politics?

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Read ‘Let the reader beware!’; jot down answers to the questions asked at intervals in the text, which should help you to reflect further on what you’re reading.

## **Let the reader beware!**

*Caveat emptor* – ‘Let the buyer beware’ – is a phrase which Peterson alters to ‘*Caveat lector*’, ‘Let the reader beware’, on the grounds that to read holy scripture, to interpret it truthfully for

our own lives and times, is indeed a risky enterprise:

Just having the print on the page and knowing how to distinguish nouns from verbs is not enough. I might own a morocco leather Bible, having paid fifty dollars for it, but I don't own the word of God to do with what I want; *God* is sovereign . . . An enormous amount of damage is done in the name of Christian living by bad Bible reading. *Caveat lector*, let the reader beware. (Peterson, *Eat this Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading*, p.82)

It is hard enough for us to interpret factual news stories based on the publication of statistics (which is probably why we usually buy newspapers that share our own bias) – never mind interpreting the Bible. And yet we can discover a lot about the meanings of the biblical text by asking the kinds of questions you asked of the newspaper articles above:

- What (if anything) can we deduce about the writer of this text?
- What can we deduce about their likely readership?
- What might the writers want their readers to think and feel about the text?
- How would the text look if it were told from a different standpoint?
- What bias do we ourselves bring to our reading of the text?

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### Questions

- Is this a familiar way of approaching the Bible for you?
- If so, what kind of insights have you gained from it?
- If not, think about whether or not it feels comfortable to approach the Bible as we would approach any other text. Can you see advantages? Disadvantages?

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## What can we deduce about the biblical writers?

Most biblical texts are anonymous, or bear a name which probably doesn't relate to a single author (most of Paul's letters are the obvious exception). In ancient times, the individual who wrote or compiled a text was simply not considered important in themselves.

Many OT books, and some of the Gospels, come to us in their present form not from the pen of a single writer, but from a highly skilful editor (known as a 'redactor') who wove together material from various different sources in order to create a complex, living text to meet the needs of his or her community. In the first part of the twentieth century, 'redaction criticism' and 'source criticism' were the principle academic approaches to the Bible – scholars painstakingly analysed the text to determine which material originated from which oral tradition or long-lost source documents. For example, meticulous scholarship concluded that Isaiah was written by three different people, at different times and in different circumstances. The present-day literary-critical approach, by contrast, explores the book of Isaiah as a whole, accepting it as a work of theology, poetry and prophecy magnificently written and edited in ancient times to create the masterpiece we have today.

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### Questions

Read Amos 1:1 and Amos 6:4—7:

- What do these verses say, both directly and indirectly, about Amos?



- How might this affect their meanings to a community of (a) poor Christians? (b) wealthy Christians?
- 

As we read the Bible, in our daily devotions and in public worship, it's important to remember that these texts did not simply materialise, but were written and edited by real people for real people, with all the richness and interpretative risk that this implies.

## **What can we deduce about their readers?**

For whom was each book of the Bible written, and what were their circumstances? We can, for example, learn a lot about the church in Corinth from a close reading of Paul's letters, even though we have only one side of a clearly very two-sided correspondence. But the original readers and their situations are seldom so well-defined, and we must be alert for clues.

For example, in Mark 15:21, the gospel-writer goes out of his way to name Simon, as well as his sons Alexander and Rufus. Might this be because they were well-known in the congregation he was writing for? And could this be the same Rufus as mentioned by Paul (Romans 16:13), whose mother is also referred to? We don't know the answers for certain, but to reflect on such issues can add depth to our understanding of the context of biblical writings.

## **What might the writers want their readers to think and feel?**

Much of the ancient material of the Old Testament – stories, law codes, genealogies, poetry, which had been recited and written down for generations – was compiled and crafted to form the written Torah (Genesis—Deuteronomy) some time soon after the Exile to Babylon (586 BC). When we recall these circumstances, we see the text differently, imagining a nation chosen by God, whose worship centred on the Temple in Jerusalem, being taken captive into distant exile. From this perspective we might understand differently the metanarrative of God's dealings with his people from Adam onwards, right across the lands of the Middle East – God's continued faithfulness, and his presence in places far from Jerusalem. Likewise, we might imagine the story of the Exodus having a particular and powerful significance if written down for a people in exile, subject to another empire. We might also start to see this as a foundational myth about the love of God for his people, and his longing to deliver them from all kinds of bondage, and return them to places (literal or metaphorical) where they can enjoy a fuller, deeper covenant relationship with him.

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### **Questions**

Read Deuteronomy 30:15—20.

- Try to imagine how it might have felt to hear this (a) on the brink of the Promised Land, after 40 years of nomadic wanderings since being freed from slavery; (b) in exile in Babylon, not knowing whether there will ever be a return to the Promised Land.
  - What might the writer/editor be wanting the readers or hearers to think or feel as a result of this passage? Are there ways in which situations (a) and (b) above can be compared to your own, enabling you also to hear God speaking through this text into your own situation?
-

Scripture can be read with the same expectations as any other piece of writing – i.e. the expectation that the writers want their readers to understand, to feel and to respond, and have planned, written and organised their material accordingly, often with great skill.

## **The text from a different standpoint**

History, it is said, is written by the winners. It's hard for us to discover, for example, what the ancient Britons believed and how they lived, because the Romans conquered them – so it's Roman records that survive. In other words, when we read any text, we need to ask: Who's the 'winner'? Who benefits from this telling of the story? Who loses out? And what might be the effect on the meanings if we look at the text from the viewpoint of the 'loser'? This critical approach is also called 'reading the gaps' – i.e. taking characters who are mentioned briefly, and filling in some of the missing details in terms of motives, views or feelings. Some of these 'reconstructions' can become works of art or literature in their own right. Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* is, among other things, a retelling of Genesis 2—3 which fills in dialogue, action, description and explanation. Similarly, Cecil B. de Mille's film *The Ten Commandments* or the more recent animated film, *The Prince of Egypt* both retell biblical narratives by 'reading the gaps' to supply extra characters, dialogue, descriptions and inner motivations.

### **Liberation theology**

Scholars have also adopted this approach, perhaps most notably in the area of liberation theology, and its many offshoots (e.g. feminist theology, queer theology, womanist theology, etc). Liberation theologies argue that our understanding of God comes not primarily from the Church's creeds, doctrines or dogmas, but from discovering Christ in the situations of everyday life, and from then reading scripture with these issues in mind. Thus, in apartheid South Africa, Bishop Desmond Tutu read the story of the Exodus as foundational for all oppressed peoples, expressing God's bias towards the victims of injustice, and God's intention of bringing them out of oppression and into a place of freedom and justice.

Similarly, African theologian Justin Ukpong suggests an African reading of Luke's account of Jesus' birth:

As Luke presents it, we have here the story of God's intervention on behalf of the poor and the lowly, to raise them up, give them a new hope, and empower them to struggle for equality and justice in society. . . Might not the birth of Jesus be the definitive intervention by God to bring down the ruling Roman Empire and bring liberation to the oppressed? By the same token, might not the birth of Jesus spell liberation for the politically, socially and economically oppressed common people of Africa today? . . .

Today political strife and violence bedevil the continent [i.e. Africa] everywhere. Political oppression goes hand in hand with economic deprivation, injustice, bribery, different forms of corruption, neglect of the social system whereby the poor could get economic relief, and so on. All these come through a systemic oppression of the poor and the voiceless. Will the God that mightily did great things in the past not do the same today? . . .

The basic theme of Luke's story of the birth of Jesus is that in the coming of Jesus God has raised up the weak and the lowly, an action that simultaneously puts down the great and mighty such that both parties now exist as equals (as God created them and meant them to be). . . It is indeed good news, a message of hope for the weak, the lowly and the oppressed. Read against the background of the current political and economic situation in Africa, the Christmas story

holds out hope and reassurance for the common people.

(‘The Story of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1—2): An African Reading’, pp.59—70 in Dietrich and Luz, eds, *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics*, Eerdmanns, 2002).

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### **Questions**

Read Luke 2:1—20, from the viewpoint suggested by Latin American theologian Elsa Tamez (Dietrich & Luz, pp.53—58). She describes the violence of life in Latin America (in Columbia, more than 30,000 people a year die violently; 30% of women in Nicaragua and Peru are beaten or assaulted); and she reads Luke 2:1—20 as a story of violent occupation and taxation by Rome, a story of material poverty and outcasts. The following questions may help you to ‘read’ this familiar story from a different viewpoint:

- What might it mean in practice for the angels to announce ‘peace on earth’ as a outcome of Christ’s birth?
- What might it mean that the angels chose to announce the birth to social outcasts (shepherds), ritually unclean people whose job on the hills prevented them from keeping the purity laws?
- What might it mean in situations of violence and abuse of power that God’s expected Messiah did not arrive in military strength but as a baby in a dirty stable?
- Who, in your parish or community, might benefit from this interpretation of the nativity?

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### **Feminist theology**

Feminist theology also ‘reads the gaps’, conscious that most of the biblical texts were apparently written by men, and that stories might sound differently if told from another viewpoint. Phyllis Trible, for example, reads the story of Hagar, a woman, a non-Jew and a slave, and finds in it an uncomfortable challenge to faith in a liberating God who is on the side of the oppressed. She argues that Hagar is used and abused by Abraham and Sarah, and that the outcome falls far short of justice for Hagar:

Knowledge of [Hagar] has survived in bits and pieces only, from the oppressor’s perspective at that, and so our task is precarious: to tell Hagar’s story from the fragments that remain . . .

Read in the light of contemporary issues and images, her story depicts oppression in three forms: nationality, class and sex. Hagar the Egyptian is a maid; Sarah the Hebrew is her mistress. . . From the beginning . . . Hagar is powerless because God supports Sarah. Kept in her place, the slave woman is the innocent victim of use, abuse and rejection.

As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and exploited by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the bag-lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others. . .

Beyond these many distinctions, Hagar foreshadows Israel’s pilgrimage of faith through contrast. As a maid in bondage, she flees from suffering. Yet she experiences exodus without liberation,

revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfilment, and unmerited exile without return. . . . Hagar is Israel, from exodus to exile, yet with differences. . . . To neglect the theological challenge she presents is to falsify faith. (*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, pp.9, 27—9)

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### **Questions**

- What are your views of Tribble's interpretation of Hagar's story?
  - Do you think that the people whom Tribble describes as 'finding their stories' in Hagar would be able to identify with her story, or find it helpful in their own lives? Or does this seem fanciful to you?
  - Do you see any difficulties in this approach to scripture?
- 

## **The reader's bias**

The work of Ukpong, Tribble and others reminds us forcefully that no reader or writer can ever be wholly neutral, but brings to the text a wide range of life-experiences, biases, views and assumptions. In this section, we will consider briefly first our own bias, and second the bias of Bible commentaries.

### **Our own bias**

It can be hard to discern our own bias, simply because it's such a deep part of who we are. This is particularly true when the bias is part of our very culture. Our attitudes to money and material possessions, for example, almost certainly affect our theological and spiritual response to the many teachings and observations Jesus made about them. (Jesus said almost nothing about sexual morality, yet spoke very often about attitudes to money and possessions – an emphasis that might be extremely challenging for Western Churches.) Look, for example, at Mark 10:17—28, a series of conversations about the cost of discipleship. Sermons on such passages often suggest that what Jesus *really* meant was that being rich was a stumbling-block for that particular young man, and that as long as we have a right (Christian) attitude to possessions, this doesn't apply to us.

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### **Questions**

- How far might such an interpretation come from the reader's bias? Is there any indication in the text that this was Jesus' meaning? Is Mark 10:27 the get-out clause that allows us to ignore verses 23—5?
  - Do you think that such sayings of Jesus as are found in Mark 10:23—5 should be taken at face value by Christians? What is the basis of your reasoning?
- 

Our spiritual discipline of reading the Bible faithfully may well involve spending time with God in prayer, asking for the Holy Spirit's help to recognise those things which we simply can't see, or daren't let ourselves believe, because of the bias in our own lives. Perhaps the most obvious and fundamental article of faith against which people have an inbuilt bias stemming from low self-esteem, or a sense of guilt or unworthiness, is that 'God loves me, as I am – passionately and totally – and desires what is best for me'. Many people, both inside our churches and outside them, have huge difficulty in truly believing this.

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## The bias of commentaries

It's all too easy to assume that because a commentary quotes Greek or Hebrew, it must be right. Once again we must accept that there is no such thing as an unbiased commentary – when we read scripture using commentaries (and especially when doing exegesis), we must consult three or four commentaries to get a more rounded view; this gradually increases our ability to recognise bias as we read.

Bias originates in a number of areas, especially:

- Church tradition
- Age, sex, nationality, background of commentator

## Church tradition

This interpretative slant is mocked (but in such a way as to offer helpful indicators) in the following:

How would we deal with 'the cat sat on the mat' if it appeared in the Bible?

The liberal theologian would point out that such a passage did not, of course, mean that the cat literally sat on the mat. Also, cat and mat had different meanings in those days from today, and anyway, the text should be interpreted according to the customs and practices of the period.

This would lead to an immediate backlash by the Evangelicals. They would make an essential condition of faith that a real, living, physical cat, being a domestic pet of the *Felix Domesticus* species, and having a whiskered head and furry body, four legs and a tail, did physically place its whole body on a floor-covering, designed for that purpose, and which is on the floor but not of the floor. The expression 'on the floor but not of the floor' would be explained in a leaflet.

Meanwhile, the ritualist high-churchers would have developed the Festival of the Sedentation of the Blessed Cat. This would teach that the cat was white, and majestically reclined on a mat of gold thread before its assumption to the Great Cat Basket of Heaven. This is commemorated by the singing of the Magnificat, lighting three candles, and ringing a bell five times.

This would cause a schism with the Orthodox Church, which believes tradition requires Holy Cats Day (as it is colloquially known) to be marked by lighting six candles and ringing the bell four times. . . .

Eventually, the House of Bishops would issue a statement on the Doctrine of Feline Sedentation. It would explain:

*Traditionally the text describes a domestic feline quadruped superadjacent to an unattached covering on a fundamental surface. For determining its salvific and eschatological significations, we follow the heuristic analytical principles adopted in dealing with the Canine Fenestration Question (How much is that doggie in the window?) and the Affirmative Musaceous Paradox (Yes, we have no bananas) . . .*

. . . and so on, for another 210 pages.

The C of E General Synod would then commend this report as helpful resource material for parish clergy to explain to the person in the pew the difficult doctrine of the cat sat on the mat. (thanks to Revd Paul Thomas for supplying this story)

## Age, sex and background

In many ways, the straightforward commentaries are those that state up-front the bias of their writers (e.g. King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, SPCK; Stone, *Practising Safer*

*Texts: Food Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective*, T & T Clark; or Tribble's *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*). Such commentaries can help us to discover the implicit and unacknowledged bias of other interpretations and commentaries.

Our best tactic for getting as balanced a view as possible is to read a number of different commentaries, and to gauge by comparison what bias or assumptions are implicit in each. The purpose of this, for our own spiritual growth as well as for the benefit of our congregations, is to help us cultivate the discipline of asking the Holy Spirit to make the text come alive for us – and clearing the way for this to happen by getting as good an understanding as possible of the meanings of the text, and the range of possible interpretations. This is by no means to suggest that sermons should consist of ‘While Barratt finds . . . Hooker, on the other hand . . .’ – but rather that we must often wrestle with the text, just as Jacob wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22–32), asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to us its meanings for us this day, or for our congregations this week.

This is also why it is helpful to read the Bible in groups, and to discuss it with others who may bring very different things to the text, both in terms of knowledge and skills, but also in terms of assumptions and bias. Again, it's important to stress that ‘bias’ is not a bad thing, but an inevitable thing; our task is to learn to recognise it so we're not simply passing it on to others as ‘the truth’. Bible-reading must be a community enterprise, as well as an individual journey.

Finish this chapter, perhaps by praying some verses which have made an impact on you during your reading and reflection; ask the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth as you wrestle with the text of Holy Scripture.

## Further Reading

Leonardo & Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, Orbis Books, 1987

Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Guide*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament*, SPCK, 1994.

Walter Dietrich & Ulrich Luz, *The Bible in a World Context*, Eerdmans, 2002.

Morna Hooker, *St Mark*, A & C Black, 1991

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, SCM Press 1994

Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Fortress Press, 1984

## Reflection Sheet for Chapter 5

Make notes in response to as many of the following questions as possible.

- What have you learned in this chapter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How do you feel about it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What further questions have been raised by this chapter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What action will you take, or what will you try to do differently, as a result of this chapter?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Any other thoughts or reflections?

# Chapter 6

## Beginnings

### Aims

- To consider exegesis as a whole process, combining skills and knowledge already learned.
- To use exegetical skills to reflect Genesis 1 and 2
- To explore ways in which exegesis can feed our spiritual lives.

### So now you can do exegesis

The skills you have learned and practised in Chapters 1—5 equip you to be exegetes, to approach the biblical text with eagerness and caution, to ask appropriate questions, and thereby to understand its meanings more deeply in order to nourish your own spiritual life and that of your churches:

Too many Bible readers assume that exegesis is what you do after you have learned Greek and Hebrew. That's simply not true. Exegesis is nothing more than a careful and loving reading of the text in our mother tongue. Greek and Hebrew are well worth learning, but if you haven't had the privilege, settle for English. Once we learn to love this text and bring a disciplined intelligence to it, we won't be far behind the very best Greek and Hebrew scholars. Appreciate the learned Scripture scholars, but don't be intimidated by them.

Exegesis is the furthest thing from pedantry; exegesis is an act of love. It loves the one who speaks the words enough to want to get the words right. It respects the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what he says.

(Peterson, *Eat this Book*, p.55)

The following is a guide to exegesis, summarising much of what has already been covered in this module. You may find it useful when you come to do the assignment, but also as you work on the remaining chapters of this module, as you deepen the quality of your spiritual reading of the Bible, and as you prepare to preach and teach from God's word. It is reproduced at the end of this workbook, for easy reference in the future.

### How to write biblical exegesis

1. **Read the passage carefully in different versions**
2. **Ask yourself these (and similar) questions:**
  - What kind of literature is this?



- What kind(s) of truth can this form of literature convey?
- What is the literary context? What comes before and after? To what other biblical texts does this one allude?
- What is the theological context? What are the theological interests of the author/redactor?
- What is the socio-historical context in which the passage is set or being edited?
- Who is involved and/or being alluded to?
- What is the mood of the text?
- What is the purpose of the text?

**3. Note any difficulties in:**

- translation (Bible footnotes often mention this)
- interpretation (related to translation but also to lost meanings)
- understanding (the words may be plain, but may be hard to understand)

**4. Read several commentaries** on the text to give you a flavour of the different emphases and approaches to understanding. Read also relevant parts of the Old/New Testament theology books, especially where specific subjects are involved (e.g. covenant, law, creation, land, redemption, sacrifice).

**5. Identify key words** and trace their use in different parts of the OT/NT with the help of a concordance or Bible dictionary (either on-line or in book form).

**6. Explore instances where other Ancient Near Eastern (OT) or Graeco-Roman (NT) traditions** are alluded to, and show how the biblical writers have shaped the material.

**7. Discover the literary structure and devices of the passage** – they may reveal important information about purpose, communication methods and audience/readership (e.g. what images or metaphors are used? How does the plot unfold?).

**8. Consider the nature of the community** for which this passage was written. What does the passage reveal about the character, experience, hopes and fears of the community which produced and preserved it? Comment on any communities today for whom this kind of literature may be important.

**9. Read the gaps** – pay attention to all the characters, even those mentioned in passing; how different might the passage look from another viewpoint? Does this offer valuable and complementary insights into God's dealings with people?  
(with thanks to the North East Institute for Theological Education)

The point made by Peterson cannot be stressed too highly: that exegesis is not a dry academic exercise sending us all round the houses to arrive back where we started. On the contrary, it is designed to give life to the written word, to help us to learn as much as possible about the God who creates, redeems and sanctifies us, and to grow in love for him and in the consciousness of his love for us. Exegesis may be a tough discipline, but its purpose is passion – God's for us, ours for God, and (as Christian ministers) for God's people.

The rest of this chapter asks you to carry out an exegesis of Genesis 1:1—2:4. If you wish, you can stop reading here, and do the exegesis using your own resources, using the plan given above. Alternatively, you may find it helpful to read the background material and the quotations

reproduced here, and to answer the suggested questions, as a guided exercise. It would be good if you were able to supplement this with your own reading of commentaries or other books.

## I Read

Read Genesis 1:1—2:4 in several versions, including, if possible, a modern one such as the Message Bible. Make notes of differences, indicating whether these seem to alter the meanings.

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### Questions/task

Compare the following modern translations of Genesis 1:6, 8. Both are scholarly and use the best manuscripts and expertise in Hebrew. The *New International Version* (NIV) is translated from the standpoint of evangelical doctrines, and a particular belief in the ‘infallibility’ of the Bible. The *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) is more broadly ecumenical. Highlight the differences between the two; then read Evans’ comments on the reasons for the differences.

(NIV) And God said, ‘Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water’ . . . And God called the expanse ‘sky’.

(NRSV) And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters’ . . . And God called the dome Sky.

### Evans (*Using the Bible*, pp.93—4):

The creation stories in Genesis are a battlefield for a lot of the debate about science and religion, and the historical or cosmological reliability of the accounts of creation. Arguably, the NIV is concerned to defend the agreement of the accounts with a modern understanding of the nature of the cosmos and also to reconcile any apparent internal inconsistencies in the accounts. Genesis 1:6, 8 seem to describe an ancient world-view where a dome (NRSV) or firmament (KJV) is fixed like a vast garden ‘cloche’ above a flat earth. The NIV reflects a consciousness of a modern world-view in the word used to translate this. The NIV assumption is that this account of creation is not necessarily a mythological way of writing but is consistent with scientific cosmology.

- Does this affect your interpretation of the passage in any way?
- In the light of this, which of all the different versions you’ve managed to read best expresses what you think are the most important meanings of the story? Try to give reasons for your answers. (You may find that you prefer different versions for different situations or readers; if so, make a note of this. You’re doing good contextual theology!)

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## 2 Literary type, contexts, etc

Much of the ‘Creationism vs Evolution’ debate hangs what type of literature found in Genesis 1 and 2.

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### Questions

- Is Genesis 1:1—2:4 a story? A myth? Poetry? (it may, of course, be all of these) If you’re not sure of the answer, make educated guesses, noting down your reasons from the text (e.g. could it be poetry because of the rhythms and repetitions?).

- What kinds of truth can this form of literature convey? (e.g. scientific truth? theological truth? symbolic truth? historical truth? philosophical truth? practical truths – i.e. advice for living?)
- 

Brueggemann, in his commentary on Genesis, writes:

At the outset we must see that this text is not a scientific description but a theological affirmation. It makes a faith statement. As much as any part of the Bible, this text has been caught in the unfortunate battle of ‘modernism’, so the ‘literalists’ and ‘rationalists’ have acted like the two mothers of Kings 3:16—28, nearly ready to have the text destroyed in order to control it. Our exposition must reject both such views. On the one hand, it has been urged that this is a historically descriptive account of ‘what happened’. But that kind of scientific, descriptive reporting is alien to the text and to the world of the Bible. In any case, believers have no stake in biblical literalism, but only in hearing the gospel. On the other hand, largely by way of comparative study, the text has been understood as a ‘myth’ about the enduring nature of reality. But such a statement about what always was and will be is equally alien. . . This text does not announce an abiding structure any more than it describes a historical happening. Rather, it makes a theological claim that a word has been spoken which transforms reality. The word of God which shapes creation is an action which alters reality.

(Brueggemann, *Genesis*, pp.25—6)

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### Questions

- In the passage quoted above, Brueggemann writes: ‘Believers have no stake in biblical literalism, but only in hearing the gospel’. Do you agree? And what do you think is ‘the gospel’ in Genesis 1 and 2?
  - What is the literary context of Genesis 1:1—2:4? What comes after (for nothing comes before)? To what other biblical texts does this allude? See other creation narratives in Genesis 2:4—24; Proverbs 8:22—31; Job 28:20—28; see also John 1:1—5; Ephesians 1:9—10 (might this be the metanarrative?)
  - What do you think is the theological purpose of Genesis 1:1—2:4? Spend some time reflecting on your own response before continuing with the reading.
- 

Brueggemann writes:

These chapters [Genesis 1—11] embody a peculiar and perceptive intellectual tradition. This intellectual tradition has discerned that all other philosophical and political questions (i.e. issues of meaning and power) are subordinated to this fundamental issue of the relation of the creator and creation. Upon that issue everything else hinges, including human *authority*, *power*, and the reality of *order* and *freedom* in human life.

(Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p.12)

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### Questions

What is the socio-historical context of the passage? How does it affect your understanding to know that this creation story (in its present form) was written for the Jewish people in exile in Babylon? Again, try to spend some time in reflection before reading on.

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Brueggemann writes:

‘[The text] served as a refutation of Babylonian theological claims. The Babylonian gods seemed to control the future. They had, it appeared, defeated the dreams of the God of Israel. Against such claims, it is here asserted that Yahweh is still God, one who watches over his creation and will bring it to well-being . . . To despairing exiles, it is declared that the God of Israel is the Lord of all life’ (*Genesis*, p.25)

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### Questions

- How does the text make you *feel*? What is its mood?
  - What do you think might be the purpose of the text?
- 

According to Brueggemann:

The main theme of the text is this: God and God’s creation are bound together in a distinctive and deliberate way. This is the presupposition for everything that follows in the Bible. It is the deepest premise from which good news is possible. God and his creation are bound together by the powerful gracious movement of God towards that creation. . . . This text announces the deepest mystery: God wills and will have a faithful relationship with the earth. The text invites the listening community to celebrate that reality.

(Brueggemann, *Genesis*, pp.23—4)

## 3 Translation and interpretation

A note on vv.26 and 27, ‘humankind’ (NRSV), tells us that the Hebrew is ‘*adam*’. Note also that ‘*adam*’ is translated ‘man’ in the second creation account (Genesis 2:7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23), where the Hebrew word ‘*adamah*’ is variously translated ‘earth’, ‘dust’ and ‘ground’ (2:5, 6, 7, 9, 19).

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### Questions

- Do you think this means that ‘Earthling’ would be a better translation than ‘humankind’ or ‘man’? What might be the advantages and drawbacks of ‘Earthling’ as a word in Genesis 1 and 2?
- How do you think it might affect the meanings of the two Genesis creation stories that the first uses ‘*adam*’ only twice, on the sixth day, and the second repeatedly uses ‘*adam*’ and ‘*adamah*’ as themes in the text?

## 4 Commentaries

Look up Genesis 1:1—2:4 in any commentaries you have or can borrow, and make notes of the similarities and differences in interpretation and emphasis. (You can try looking up comments on line, though this is unpredictable and more likely to turn up cranks and odd-balls than most Internet searches. It sometimes takes longer to sift through the vast amount of available material than its usefulness warrants.)

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## 5 Key words

If you have access to a concordance or Bible dictionary, look up ‘create’, ‘creation’, ‘creator’, ‘created’; note the range of references and meanings. (If you don’t have access to a concordance, try looking up the following: Isaiah 42:5—9; Psalm 51:10; Ephesians 4:22-4; Colossians 3:9—11; Revelation 4:9—11).

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### Questions

- How do these passages add to your understanding of Genesis 1?
  - What do you think might be the value or significance of the verbal repetitions in Genesis 1? (‘there was evening and there was morning, the first day’, etc; ‘God said . . . and it was so’; ‘God saw that it was good’). Jot down some ideas; we’ll refer back to this later.
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## 6 Other ancient texts

### Question

Look back to the Babylonian and Egyptian creation stories from the background reading to Chapter 4. Are there any other differences you now find significant, having spent more time on Genesis 1?

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Brueggemann writes:

The theologians of Israel, in these texts [i.e. the early chapters of Genesis], face the basic mystery of life upon which all social well-being depends. The texts appropriate material from the common traditions of the Near East. But they handle and utilise them in a peculiarly theological way. On the one hand, they break with the ‘mythological’ perception of reality which assumes that all the real action is with the gods, and creation in and of itself has no significant value. On the other hand, they resist a ‘scientific’ view of creation which assumes that the world contains its own mysteries and can be understood in terms of itself without any transcendent reference. The theologians who work in a distinctively Israelite way in Genesis 1—11 want to affirm at the same time (a) that the ultimate meaning of creation is to be found in the heart and purpose of the creator (cf. 6:5—7; 8:21) and (b) that the world has been positively valued by God for itself. It must therefore be valued by the creatures to whom it has been provisionally entrusted (1:31). (Brueggemann, *Genesis*, pp.12—13)

## 7 Structure and devices

We have already noted the patterns and rhythms of the daily creative cycle, highlighted by repetitions.

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### Questions

- Can you imagine this passage being used in liturgy? Would the repetitions make good congregational responses?
  - Might there be an occasion when you could use the material liturgically in your church?
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## 8 The reading community

When exploring the socio-historical background of the text, we have already considered the original readership as the Jewish people in exile in Babylon. It is interesting to note that a number of modern-day interpreters see significant links between the Christian Church in a postmodern world, and the Jewish people in exile (for example, Bishop Gordon Mursell in his book *Praying in Exile*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005). In the first chapter, Bishop Gordon writes: 'This book is written out of the discovery that exile is something all of us have to face, and out of the conviction that there exist, for those willing to seek them out, priceless spiritual resources to help us do so with hope and not despair' (p.7).

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### Question

In what ways (if any) might this creation account be 'a priceless spiritual resource' for Christian readers today?

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Commenting on Genesis 1:26—8, Schottroff contrasts humankind's creation in God's image (v.26) with human domination of creation (v.28):

On earth, men and woman have been made by God in his own image. Therefore the Jews deported to Babylon spoke about themselves and their God in these words: we have been created in the image of God. The entire creation narrative is actually nothing but a reflection on the relationship of humankind to God. Sun, moon, day, night, animals, trees – everything is our home, wonderfully furnished for royal children. This is how those people speak who have in mind such kings as Nebuchadnezzar, who razed Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The prisoners praise God. . . .  
(Schottroff, 'The Creation Narrative', pp.30-31)

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### Questions

Does this quotation give you any further ideas about present-day communities who might respond to some of these meanings of the creation story? Or any who might be alienated by it?

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## 9 Reading the gaps

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### Questions

Are there any 'gaps' to read in the narrative? If so, what are they, and how might the story look if told from their viewpoint?

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After considering the question above, read the following quotations – the first from Schottroff; the second a story by Trevor Dennis.

The discrepancy between the clarity and peace of this concept of creation and the filth and noise-polluting creation today is distressing . . .

Those deported to Babylon were living under harsh conditions when they told each other this story for the first time. Their reality was poverty in a foreign country, their labour and their

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professional abilities were exploited, their bodies were overworked and their souls were sad. They were vassals in a strange land for an undetermined length of time; their homeland was lost. They were worth only as much as their labour. In their longing for their homeland they told each other the story of a marvellous creation, the story of their God, the story of everything they had that could not be taken away or exploited. The realisation of its beauty and hope increased in their threatening environment. Creation is still there today, damaged and endangered, but we can still recognise it.

(Schottroff, pp.26—8)

### **Child's Play – a story by Trevor Dennis**

One hot afternoon Adam and Eve, unselfconsciously naked, sat on the bank of one of the rivers of Eden, dangling their feet in the water. Eve picked up a flat, round stone, stood up and flicked it in twelve graceful bounces right across to the other side.

'Who taught you to do that?' asked Adam.

'God did.'

Adam turned towards God. 'Did you really?'

'Yes.'

'Could you teach me?'

'Of course. Watch.'

God stood up, chose a stone carefully, kissed it, curled his finger round it, and, with a movement of his wrist too quick to catch, sent it spinning downstream. It went almost as far as Adam and Eve could see, then swung round in a tight circle and came speeding towards them again, till with one last bounce, it skipped back into God's hand. It had hit the water two hundred times, and had left two hundred circles spreading and entwining themselves upon the surface. From the middle of each circle a fish leaped, somersaulted, and splashed back into the river.

'Now you try', said God.

Adam pushed him into the water. God came to the surface a few yards out from the bank. 'That was level ten, by the way', he called. 'Eve's only at level two at the moment, aren't you, Eve?'

'You were showing off, God,' said Eve. 'You'll be walking on water next!'

'That's level twenty', laughed God, and promptly disappeared beneath the surface.

So it once was in Eden. So it can be still. So it is, on rare and precious occasions. But Adam and Eve complicated matters. They grew up to think flicking stones child's play. They turned in upon themselves, and God remained out of sight, beneath the surface. They did not sit with him on the bank any more. Now and then, realising their loneliness and overcome with sudden longing, they would gaze out across the water and see the ripples he left behind. But these were soon gone, and the water would resume its customary smoothness, as if nothing had happened, as if he had never been there. The Garden had ceased to be for them a holy place.

So they went in search of one. They left Eden behind. It was, after all, too small a place, too familiar. It held no surprises for them any more. They supposed they had nothing more to learn here, except for getting to levels ten or twelve, but that was child's play, not worthy of their ambitions.

God followed them at a distance. Sometimes they could hear his footsteps behind them. Occasionally he came so close they could feel his breath on the backs of their necks. Very occasionally he sat down with them and shared their food, and made the spot at once a holy place. Yet they were never satisfied for long. They would move on, hoping for more, yearning, though they did not realise it, for the days when they could sit with their feet in the waters of

Eden, and push God in and hear him laugh, and marvel at what he could do with a round pebble and a flick of the hand. It had all been so natural then. Perhaps it had not been child's play, after all. Perhaps it had been God's play. Perhaps they were the same thing. When such thoughts as these broke the surface of their minds, then God seemed, indeed was, very close once again.

Adam and Eve did not stay just Adam and Eve for very long. They had been told to be fruitful and multiply, and so they did, until, no longer only a couple, they became a family, then a clan, a tribe and a people.

The clan invented what they called 'religion', and the tribe and the people set about improving it. God was still following at a distance. He carried a tent on his back, with the centre pole tied across his shoulders. The clan and tribe tried to organise him. They told him where to pitch the tent, and the times when he should be there to meet them. But a sense of direction and punctuality did not seem to be among his strengths. Too often his tent was nowhere to be seen, or when they found it and raised the flaps to peer inside, he seemed not to be there.

The *people* said the whole idea of meeting God in a *tent* was absurd, if not an insult. They forgot it belonged to God and that he carried it himself on his back. They decided to make him a much finer place, one that could not be moved, one that was solid, predictable, fit for a king certainly, and suitable, they hoped, for a god. So they built him a temple in the heart of their capital city, next to the palace of their king, and nearly as big, overlaid its walls with gold and ivory, painted heaven on its ceilings, filled the air between with incense and sweet song, and became very serious about it all.

God arrived there one day, when the people were so engrossed in what they were doing that they were not expecting him at all.

'Do you have balloons here?' God inquired.

'Balloons?' they replied. 'Balloons? Balloons are child's play. We are serious here.'

'Oh', said God, and retreated out of the door. He had propped up his tent in the entrance. He picked it up again, tied the pole across his shoulders, and went back to Eden to flick some pebbles.

The first one bounced three hundred times, went round in three circles, and had the fish doing triple Salchows. 'Level twelve', murmured God. But no one heard him.

(Dennis, *Imagining God: Stories from Creation to Heaven*, SPCK 1997, pp.4—7)

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### Questions

- Do you think each of these interpretations, or readings of the gaps, are true to the original Bible text?
- Did you find either, or both, illuminating in any way? If so, how?
- Do you think there are any limits on how we can truthfully read the gaps?

With the understanding you now have of Genesis 1:1—2:4, what would be the single theme you would choose if you were asked to preach a sermon on it for the spiritual up-building, feeding and stretching of your own local congregation?



Close this chapter with prayers of thanks for the depths and riches of God's self-revelation in the inexhaustible words of scripture.

## Further Reading

Alter, Robert *Genesis: A Translation and Commentary*, W W Norton & Co, 1996  
Brenner, Athalya (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.  
Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1982.  
Coggins, Richard, *Introducing the Old Testament*, Oxford University Press 1990.  
Evans, Robert, *Using the Bible*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999.

## Reflection Sheet for Chapter 6

Make notes in response to as many of the following questions as possible.

- What have you learned in this chapter?
  
- How do you feel about it?
  
- What further questions have been raised by this chapter?
  
- What action will you take, or what will you try to do differently, as a result of this chapter?
  
- Any other thoughts or reflections?

## Chapter 7

# The Quality of Mercy

### Aims

- To study the book of Jonah, using exegetical and interpretative skills
- To reflect on the meanings the book of Jonah has for God's people today – and especially those in ministry.

Read the OT book of Jonah thoroughly (preferably more than once, and in more than one version of the Bible). Draft some notes for an exegesis. Printed below is a range of articles and quotations which are *optional*, but which may be helpful as you prepare your exegesis. Some of the commentators quoted present conflicting (or at the very least, different) ideas; your task is to evaluate them, make interpretative choices and try to discuss the reasons for those choices.

## Jonah – some background material

### 1 A profile of the prophet Jonah (from Foster *et al*, eds, *The Spiritual Formation Bible*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2006, p.1321)

God chose for Jonah a difficult task: prophesying not to his own people, Israel, but to the enemy. The Ninevites, residents of the capital of the Assyrian empire, were idolatrous and known for heinous acts of violence and cruelty. They were also the ones God had said would later overtake Israel. Considering Nineveh's reputation and its relationship to Israel, it's no wonder Jonah struggled with God's command to go and preach judgement.

Although another prophet may have been more than willing to pronounce Nineveh's sure destruction, Jonah felt reluctant to follow God's command. It was not that Jonah was afraid to enter Nineveh (although that would have been reasonable) – it was because he knew God too well. He knew God to be 'a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (Jonah 4:2). If the Ninevites should repent, Jonah reasoned, God would forgive. This was not acceptable to Jonah and made him angry (4:1).

Jonah may have possessed a keen understanding of God's mercy on one level, but at a deeper level he didn't understand holy mercy at all. Indeed, Jonah himself experienced this mercy after running from God and his implausible task, and being thrown into the sea. 'As my life was ebbing away', he prayed inside the fish, 'I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you . . . Deliverance belongs to the Lord!' (2:7, 9). Jonah could thank God for the mercy he received. He could expect mercy towards Israel, which had also proven idolatrous and periodically cruel. Yet he could not tolerate God's mercy offered to the other side, the enemy. Had he really understood the stunning depths of God's mercy, Jonah would have shared God's love even for the vile Ninevites.

## **2 From Peter J M Southwell, 'Jonah' (in Barton & Muddiman, eds, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 2001)**

We read in 2 Kings 14:23—7 of a Galilean prophet called Jonah, son of Amittai, who successfully predicted a national expansion for Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II (786—746 BCE). The book of Jonah, which appears on literary, linguistic and historical grounds to have been written in the fourth century, tells a story about this prophet designed to show the limits of mere nationalism as an expression of the purposes of God. Faced with the task of addressing God's word to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh. Jonah flees the task. Brought back and recommissioned by God he at length undertakes it, only to be dismayed by the comprehensive repentance of the Ninevites and consequent forgiveness by God, whose nature is always to have mercy. Jonah's error was to magnify God's wrath at the expense of his compassion. Passages of the OT known to our author appear to include Jeremiah 18:8 . . . and Joel 2:13—14, which significantly includes the phrase 'and relents from punishing' cited in Jonah 4:2 (cf 3:9), despite its being absent from the original Hebrew formulation of God's character in Exodus 34:6—7. There are also echoes of the Elijah story (1 Kings 19:4—5. cf Jonah 4:6—8) and of Ezekiel's lament over Tyre (Ezekiel 26:16, cf Jonah 3:6; Ezekiel 27:25—9, cf Jonah 1:3—6).

### **[Commenting on 4:1—11]**

God challenges Jonah to review his attitude (v.4), and, being Lord both of the sea and of the dry land by Jonah's own admission (1:9), now uses the fruits of the dry land ('a bush', v.6 . . . and a worm, v.7) as he had earlier used the creature of the sea, to teach Jonah a lesson. The lesson was that Jonah cared more about his pleasure in the sheltering plant which he had not cultivated than about God's concern for a huge city of people and their livestock which he had cared about for years (vv.9—11). As claimed for the Assyrian kings (and attested on their building inscriptions), the Lord is the good shepherd of all his sheep, as the Hebrew kings themselves recognised (e.g. Psalm 23), and Jonah here, like Jesus' followers in John 10:16, needs to learn he has sheep in other folds also. Their sin is born of ignorance ('who do not know their right hand from their left', v.11), and their repentance is welcome to a merciful God. Such theology is also present in the NT (e.g. Luke 23:34, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'; 1 Timothy 1:13, 'I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief'), and implied in Ezekiel 18:28, 'because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die', where the word 'considered' implies seeing the truth of the situation at last. The prophet's task, as that of all God's people, is simply to speak his message wherever he may be sent. The outcome, so the book of Jonah is telling its readers, is God's responsibility, and his alone. As another Jewish writer with a similar theological problem was led to conclude: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!' "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" (Romans 11:33—40, cf. Isaiah 40:13).

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### **Question**

Look up the gospel references to Jonah (Matthew 12:39—41; Matthew 16:4; Luke 11:29—32).

- Why do you think Jesus might have used this story as an illustration?
- How far do you think the book of Jonah can be seen as an illustration of the fundamental NT teaching, expressed by Paul in Galatians 3:28?

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## **3 From Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: the Canon and Christian Imagination*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, pp.230—33.**

The book of Jonah may be reckoned to be 'prophetic', both because of the lead character who is

sent by YHWH as a prophet and because the book itself seems to carry ‘a prophetic message’ given, not by the character Jonah, but by the narrator.

. . . Critical scholarship has long since given up any notion that the story of Jonah is historical. Rather, it is an artistic, imaginative creation designed to carry a message, but one that is delivered in an artistic way that is not excessively didactic<sup>10</sup>. Thus the narrative is offered as a parable, a fable, or a didactic novel, though any of these labels must not be taken with too much precision. The narrative must be taken on its own terms, and since we can make no historical . . . judgements about the book, we can say very little with certitude about the book other than to comment on its content. The book of Jonah is conventionally dated to the Persian period and, as with much literature from that later period, it contains allusions to earlier texts.

Two specific questions have dominated much of the interpretative discussion. First, the identity and meaning of the ‘big fish’ in chapter 2. It is clear that the ‘fish’ is elemental to the narrative, but it may be taken in the narrative for what it is: consequently, it is not necessary to interpret it allegorically<sup>11</sup> as though the fish were an image suggesting Israel’s exile. It is enough to see the ‘fish’ as a vehicle whereby Jonah is put deeply at risk to the power of chaos (the sea), and is rescued by the power of the Creator (who presides over chaos) through the creature, the fish. Thus the rescue of Jonah is also a demonstration of the power of the Creator who will not have the mission of the prophet thwarted. Even the fish, consequently, serves the prophetic mission intended by YHWH.

The second critical question, more intrinsic to the narrative itself, is the issue of whether the psalm in Jonah 2:2—9, a song of thanksgiving, is intrinsic to the narrative or is inserted. There need be little doubt that . . . the psalm existed apart from the narrative. That, however, does not make the psalm extraneous to the narrative, but rather, it is a vehicle for the advance of the narrative . . . The prayer of thanksgiving on the lips of Jonah articulates the traditional trust of Israelite prayer, and functions as a counterpoint to Jonah’s prayer in 4:2 that acknowledges YHWH’s great mercy (which Jonah himself has received in chapter 2); Jonah, however, in chapter 4, resents and resists the very mercy that YHWH has shown to Nineveh, which he himself has received in chapter 2 . . .

The plot turns on YHWH’s resolve to save Nineveh; YHWH’s strategy is a prophetic summons, via Jonah to Nineveh to repent, a summons that the king of Nineveh unexpectedly embraces. Thus the hated foreigner repents and turns to YHWH; while the Israelite ‘insider’, Jonah, acknowledges YHWH’s mercy, and resists its offer to the ‘outsider’. As a parable, the narrative exposes Israel (Jonah) as the great and dependent recipient of YHWH’s mercy who resists the extension of that same mercy beyond Israel to other peoples who are also recipients of that mercy . . .

It is conventional to interpret the narrative of Jonah in relation to the harsh anti-foreign policies of Ezra and Nehemiah in the condemnation of mixed marriages and in their general animosity towards non-Jews (see Ezra 9:1—4; Nehemiah 13:23—7). While the narrative plot of Jonah readily witnesses against that sort of xenophobia by evidencing the embracive mercy of YHWH toward the ‘foreigner’, it is less likely that the narrative of Jonah is deliberately a response to that particular political crisis. Rather, the book of Jonah concerns a recurring and endlessly powerful resistance to reduce YHWH’s character, so large in mercy and comprehensive in compassion, to

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<sup>10</sup> i.e. intended to teach or instruct

<sup>11</sup> i.e. as a symbol actually representing something else

the local convenience of the insider community of Israel. . . .

Finally, it should be noted that the narrative of Jonah is an artistic achievement of considerable power in which patterns of words and phrases give the narrative a remarkable and cunning depth. After one has read the narrative of Jonah for the plot line, a re-read for artistic nuance is worth the effort.

**4 From John R Miles, ‘Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody’ (pp.203—215, Radday & Brenner, eds, *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1990)**

. . . It is crucial to the functioning of parody<sup>12</sup> that the literary style or styles to be laughed at are so standardised as to be immediately recognisable. The book of Jonah meets this requirement admirably, for the narrative of the prophetic career is surely the clearest stereotype in Scripture. The characters in the narrative – the prophet himself, the summoning deity, the wicked king in his wicked city – are stock characters. The scenes – the prophet’s initial reluctance, his prediction of destruction, his grief at failure – are stock scenes . . .

We will trace elements of parody in the book through five distinct prophetic scenes. The first of these is the call to prophecy, a familiar scene in which the most familiar note is the prophet’s humble reluctance to accept the Lord’s call (. . .see Exodus 4:10; Judges 6:15; Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 1:6) . . . Jonah expresses his reluctance to go east to Nineveh by sailing west to Tarshish . . . He responds to Yahweh with phlegmatic silence. The prophetic scenario calls for reluctance on the part of the prophet, but it also calls on him to express this reluctance in anguished eloquence. . . . For all that the text tells us, Jonah may think himself perfectly worthy of the prophetic call. He is simply determined not to accept it. One must keep in mind that Jonah *pays* for his passage to Tarshish. By presenting a prophet who actually buys out of his vocation, the author drains the last trace of numinosity<sup>13</sup> from this most numinous genre in the Bible. Moses could hardly have been more mundane than Jonah had he thrown water on the burning bush, or pawned the miraculous staff to escape confrontation with Pharaoh.

Faced with the reluctance of his chosen spokesperson, the Lord follows the script and produces a demonstrative storm at sea [God’s dramatic intervention being the second type of parody in the Book of Jonah]. Jonah’s reaction to the sign worked for his benefit is to fall asleep. Once again, it is a silence that speaks, for typically the prophet, when confronted with such a sign, expressed his awe before the power and holiness of the Lord. . . . The quality of numinous abandon – Isaiah’s ‘Here am I, Lord, send me’ – is utterly missing . . .

The third biblical genre to be parodied in Jonah is the psalm of thanksgiving for rescue from the pit. Such, of course, is Jonah’s famous prayer from the belly of the fish. I agree . . . that this prayer was composed separately and inserted into the Jonah narrative . . . However, the question must still be asked: why was it inserted at all? . . .

Water and sea imagery . . . is as prominent in the psalter as the call the prophecy is prominent in the prophetic books. Indeed, Psalm 130, ‘From the depths I cry to you, O Lord’, is one of the

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<sup>12</sup> Parody mimics the style of another author, book or literary form in a humorous or satirical way. Gilbert & Sullivan’s operas, for example, are parodies both of the form of high operas and of the pretensions and flaws of contemporary society.

<sup>13</sup> Numinous/numinosity: mysterious or awe-inspiring in its closeness to God or its expression of the divine.

finest in the collection. However, the power of sea-imagery is only effective if it is in fact imagery and not direct description . . . It cannot refer to real oceans and real water. In Jonah 2, it does.

In our culture, cancer is a common metaphor for hidden danger. A presidential address on communism or on crime in the streets might well speak of ‘a dread cancer gnawing at the vitals of America’. But for a presidential address on cancer itself, ‘dread cancer gnawing at the vitals’ would not be available *as an image*. Some other image would be used . . . The author of the book of Jonah deliberately disregards this . . . For comic effect. Jonah’s situation is not comparable to the situation of a man swallowed by a great monster. This *is* Jonah’s situation. His troubles are not like waves washing over his head. They *are* waves washing over his head. This, I submit, is the comic effect of the placement of the psalm in chapter 2 . . . The psalms are satirised through a comically exaggerated use of their imagery just as Jonah’s reluctance satirised the classical reluctance of the prophets . . .

In chapter 3, we enter upon the parody of a fourth biblical set-piece, namely, the rejection of the prophet by the king. Background scenes here are such standard ones as Moses before Pharaoh, Elijah before Ahab, Isaiah before Manasseh and Jeremiah before Zedekiah. In all these incidents, the Word of the prophet is lengthy and impassioned, he himself is completely ignored or angrily rejected, and the fated punishment comes to pass. Chapter 3 of the book of Jonah is a reversal: the prophet is neither eloquent nor impassioned . . . He speaks only one sentence . . .

Strange to tell, this brings about a truly momentous response from the king. He rises from his throne immediately on receiving a second-hand report of Jonah’s preaching, strips off his robes, dons sackcloth, sits in the dust, imposes an indefinite fast from all food and drink on all the men and animals in the realm. No prophet in the history of Israel ever suggested that a penitent king fast from water or . . . strangest of all, arrange for his animals to repent of their sins and dress in sackcloth . . .

Evidently Yahweh enjoyed this spectacle. At any rate, he cancelled the scheduled destruction of Nineveh, making Jonah the most successful, if not the only successful, prophet in history. All prophets aimed at averting disaster by warning of it. Only Jonah’s warning was fully heeded. Only Nineveh’s destruction was averted, and it is this, Jonah’s prophetic triumph, which sets the stage for the last scene which we shall consider.

This scene, occupying most of ch.4, is a burlesque of the stock scene in which the rejected prophet pours out his sorrow to Yahweh and is comforted. The misgivings of Moses and his prayer for death (Numbers 11:10—15) and Jeremiah’s curse on the day of his birth (Jeremiah 20:7—8) are general background here, but the most direct parallel is provided by 1 Kings 19, where Elijah sits under a furze bush and despairs (1 Kings 19:4). Jonah despairs under a castor-oil plant . . . but his words are similar to Elijah’s: ‘I would be better off dead’. In these words, the author of the book of Jonah apes the whole parade of prophets, psalmists and saints, not excluding Job, who have prayed to have their lives taken from them. Their complaints came after failure and suffering, his after victory. However, the force of the parody rides not just on this contrast but on Jonah’s reason for his complaint. He says (4:2): ‘O Lord, didn’t I tell you this would happen when I was still at home? This is why I headed for Tarshish: I knew you were a tender-hearted and kind God, not easily angered, very devoted, and prone to give in’ . . . It is far from the noblest protest ever voiced in Israel. And yet when noble Jeremiah and noble Job trouble deaf heaven with their . . . cries, they no less than Jonah are objecting, finally, to the fact that God is so intransigently godlike . . .

As in all comedy, the book of Jonah has no real villain. By the end of the fourth chapter, Jonah has done his job, Nineveh is saved and a happy ending is held up only by the prophet's childish pout. God's reaction to this is not anger but coaxing . . . The last line in particular, with its closing words . . . 'plus the many animals', must surely prompt a smile; for if Jonah is foolish in his resentment, the Ninevites, dressing their animals in sackcloth and forcing them to fast, have been foolish in their repentance. God concedes this much to Jonah. But the 120,000 who do not know their right hand from their left are not so many actual children. Rather they are 120,000 Assyrian adults who, like the king of Nineveh, had not quite reached the age of religious reason. And with this comment, the book of Jonah and our consideration of its parodic elements are completed.

## **5 From Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, *Bible Lives*, SCM Press 1992, pp.137—148**

The book of Jonah . . . is the story of the prophet who not only refused the call, but went to enormous extremes, to the very brink of death itself, so as to run away from it. Nor do we really know why he refused, for in the manner typical of biblical narratives we are given a description of events but very little in the way of overt evaluation of why things happened. We, the reader, must follow Jonah on his journey, picking up such clues as we can from what occurs, but ultimately investing the story with our own insights and, inevitably, our own experience and private fears.

The call of God is clear and precise . . . 'Rise, go to Nineveh that great city and call out to them that their evil has come up before me!' (Jonah 1:2). We know that Jonah is a prophet because he is called such elsewhere in the Bible (2 Kings 14:25). But he is not named as one in our book, and in fact the whole tenor of the story is to make him into an everyman, not bound by space or time. Yet Nineveh is a real place – the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a military power that cast its shadow of fear across the entire Near East. To the Assyrians goes the credit of inventing the military tactic of uprooting entire populations, settling them elsewhere and replacing them with other defeated peoples. The tactic was to prove successful in destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel . . . Nineveh, for Jonah, was the Berlin of the Third Reich. To Nineveh he is sent, but to Tarshish he flees . . .

To flee from God, Jonah must have sold up his home, left everything behind and set off at the risk of his life. To flee from God, he reproduces the experience of the patriarchs, of ancient Israel and of the Jewish people going into exile, but this time against the will of God. Yet the author hints that his flight is more than just an attempt to escape the immediate task. Three times the Hebrew verb for 'going down' (*yarad*) occurs in the first chapter – as Jonah goes down to Jaffa, and into the boat (v.3), then down into the innermost part of the boat to sleep (v.5) – and then a fourth time, because of a pun in the Hebrew text, when he goes down into a deep sleep (*vayeiradam*). There is a direction in his journey – into unconsciousness as he sleeps through the storm, and ultimately into oblivion, as he asks to be thrown overboard. Jonah in flight is on a journey away from God, on a journey towards death.

But the prophet is not alone on his travels. Others are borne along, and others are thus exposed to the danger he seems to think is merely his private concern. The sailors are characterised as people of remarkable sensitivity and generosity. When the storm threatens to destroy them, they pray to their respective gods. They then apply standard 'technological' ploys to discover the culprit, by casting lots, and the lot falls on Jonah. Instead of throwing him overboard at once, they open up a court of law and ply Jonah with questions trying to establish his identity. What is



he running from? Of what is he guilty? When Jonah, having admitted his responsibility, is asked what should be done, he has the chance to ask to be taken back, but he refuses . . . When finally defeated, they turn to God (1:14). They are trapped in a double-bind; to do nothing means they will drown with Jonah; to throw him overboard means they are guilty of murder and thus condemned to death. Only God can untangle such a paradox. So Jonah's solution of self-immolation<sup>14</sup> is not simply a generous gesture to save the lives of his fellows – otherwise he only needed to jump overboard without involving them at all. So death seems to be the logical conclusion of his flight, and the sailors count for very little; they can only be on the periphery of his concerns . . .

We may also read this story inside out – for how do we come to recognise that our journey is actually a flight? Perhaps in the damage we do to others on the way, if the realisation ever penetrates to our awareness.

Certainly for Jonah other messages were continually coming through. In one of the most subtle ploys of the author, the words of the captain to Jonah when he asks him to rise up and call on his God (1:6) are identical with the words of God's call. For the captain they merely mean, 'Wake up and pray!' For Jonah the words of God echo in the air, waiting for him to respond. Thus the captain becomes the unconscious messenger of God's word, and indeed the wind, the storm, later on the fish, the gourd, the worm, all of nature, become the agents of God, bringing the divine word to the recalcitrant prophet. . . .

Was Jonah's time in the fish one of those transforming experiences? Did he emerge with a new heightened consciousness or at least a greater insight into his situation and his nature? . . . Surely such an experience – a regression to the womb, the dark night of the soul, sensory deprivation – must have done something to him. And yet – there is a stubborn obliviousness about Jonah that is hearteningly consistent. True, he prays. But the psalm he recites is remarkable for all that is left out.

In its outer edges it says quite bluntly to God – you threw me in (v.4) and you pulled me out (v.7), with not a word about how this came about. More sensitive is the play on Jonah's gradual physical descent ('the waters closed over me; the deep was round about me, weeds wrapped over my head, I went down to the base of the mountains . . .', 2:6—7), which is matched by a spiritual rise. Whereas at the beginning he says: 'I am driven out of your sight, yet still I look to your holy Temple' (2:5). At the end, when he speaks of God's holy Temple, the wording is quite different: 'When my soul was fainting within me, it was the Eternal that I remembered, and my prayer reached out to you, to your holy Temple' (2:8).

What gets lost in the translation is the emphatic 'I' that comes to the fore in the Hebrew of Jonah's prayer. In v.5 it is a strong: 'And as for me, I said . . .', with the implication that Jonah considered himself still the master of the situation. Yet as he sinks lower and lower into the depths (another phase of the 'descent' that began in chapter 1) something happens to him. In the matching first-person statement in v.8, as he faints away, the 'I' disappears completely, and a disembodied prayer manages to reach the Temple of God, stripped of all pride and egoism. Jonah has indeed undergone some change of perspective – for one brief moment the centre has moved outside his limited self and located itself within the Temple of God. But it becomes rapidly reconstituted two verses later at the conclusion (v.10) where, in an echo of the standard thanksgiving psalm, Jonah says: 'And as for me, I will sacrifice to you with thankful voice; what

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<sup>14</sup> i.e. self-sacrifice

I have vowed I will fulfil'. The 'I' is restored, as indeed it must be, as Jonah moves back from the fish to the outer world.

And yet what has really changed? There is a puzzling beginning to chapter 3 where we read: 'The word of the Eternal came to Jonah a second time' (3:1). There then follows virtually the identical message (certainly the three words of his call reappear) as we had in chapter 1.

Why must God repeat the divine command if Jonah has now become reconciled to his task? Presumably the answer lies in the closing statement of Jonah's prayer that we have just read. For in this moment of dutiful piety, Jonah has just made an oath to head for Jerusalem and make sacrifices and fulfil vows, presumably intoning the words of the thanksgiving psalm he has just composed. Surely this is the pious step he should now undertake. No! says God. There is still a task awaiting you in Nineveh, and that is where you should be heading!

For Jonah the retreat into piety is yet another evasion of the call from God. When flight *from* God does not work, there is always flight *to* God, or to that convenient God who makes no demands beyond those the worshipper can comfortably offer.

This evaluation of Jonah's piety may seem harsh – but it may be backed by one other ironic touch that underlies the same theme. Jonah ends his prayer on a triumphant note: *yeshuatah ladonay*, 'Salvation belongs to the Eternal!' For God has heard his prayer and God has saved him. And indeed God hears, and speaks to the fish, and with a fine sensitivity to the ambiguity of Jonah's confession of faith, the fish vomits him out!

In chapter 3, after bringing Jonah reluctantly to Nineveh – it takes three days to cover the city, Jonah travels for one day only (compare 3:3 and the beginning of 3:4) – the story turns to the actions of the Ninevites. It starts with a groundswell of public feeling: the people fast and put on sackcloth and ashes, the traditional response to threatened disaster. The news reaches the king who in turn removes his robes, dons sackcloth and sits in ashes. Finally, by decree of the king, all are commanded to fast and don sackcloth, human beings and animals alike.

There would seem to be a degree of repetition and, indeed, redundancy, in this threefold description of sackcloth and fasting. However the author has been building a rising tide of activity as the jumping-off point for the king's final command. For till now these actions are part of a conventional response to danger, which indeed the repetition firmly establishes. With the king's closing words, we leap into a totally new dimension: 'And let everyone turn from their evil way, and from the violence of their hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent, and turn back from God's fiery anger, so that we perish not. (3:8—9)

With these words, borrowed from the book of Jeremiah (Jer. 26:3, 13, 19), and thus bearing an added ironic edge in the mouth of a pagan king, the response of the Ninevites moves out of the area of fatalism into the realm of moral choice. . . . As the chapter is constructed, we have here a stepwise build-up of activity ending with the breakthrough to a new dimension of religious hope – and there at the peak, God is waiting. In our previous chapter, as Jonah sinks lower and lower, he too breaks through to a new experience of God – there at the lowest reach of hopelessness and despair, God is waiting to meet him. The two chapters form mirror images of each other (and compare Psalm 139:8) . . .

So the centre of our book pivots around this ladder leading into the depths and the heights. In chapter 1 we have had enormous activity as Jonah fled, in the closing chapter, on the surface at

least, we have a moment of stillness – for Jonah sits and sits and sits.

Jonah takes his place outside Nineveh, knowing that the people have repented, yet nevertheless hoping for, and indeed willing, God to destroy it anyway. His is not the stillness of acceptance, of harmony, of reconciliation, for Jonah rages. There is even an ironic overtone to the picture of Jonah's position. For within the city the king in sackcloth sits in ashes in great discomfort praying for the city to be saved; while outside, Jonah sits in reasonable comfort beneath his shelter, praying for the city to be destroyed.

Why is Jonah angry? First, we should note another exquisite touch of the author in presenting Jonah's second prayer in the book (4:2—3). Jonah begins with the conventional terminology of prayer – the same, in fact, used by the sailors in chapter 1. 'I beg you, Eternal . . .', and at the end he will use the same form of request – an imperative softened by the added 'I beg you': 'So now, O Eternal, I beg you, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live'.

But between these two expressions, there bursts through all the resentment he has bottled up inside since the beginning of this absurd mission: 'Did I not say just this while I was still on my own land? That is why I tried first to flee to Tarshish, for I know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, generous in love, who relents from punishing!'

Jonah is here quoting the list of God's qualities first revealed to Moses (Exodus 34:6—7), God's compassion and mercy, love for humanity and enduring patience in the face of their wrongdoing. But Jonah is spitting them out into God's face – I knew you'd end up forgiving them, and you shouldn't!

That at least is Jonah's overt argument. But what he actually objects to is still a matter of conjecture. Some feel that Jonah is a nationalist who does not wish to see the enemy Nineveh go unpunished, perhaps in anticipation of the destruction they will bring to the Northern Kingdom – this would make Jonah a heroic patriot, prepared to die so as to save his people. Others extend the sentiment but in a negative way, and see in Jonah an expression of a narrow particularism that resented the idea that God's love could be extended to people beyond Israel's borders. Others see Jonah as a champion of rigid justice, offended by God's softness of evildoers. One might go further and see Jonah as someone who wishes the universe to be governed by clear, unambiguous rules, wherein there is the security of knowing that action A will lead to consequence B with no random factor, like God's seemingly anarchic love, to confuse the system. All these are elements in Jonah's viewpoint, and yet behind them there remains the deeper question of the tension between the private, limited ego of human beings and the will of God, in whatever form and with whatever terminology we envisage this interaction.

Throughout this story we have seen this confrontation: God hurled a wind on to the sea; Jonah went to sleep through the subsequent storm. God says Nineveh will not be destroyed; Jonah wills that it should be, and will sit there until it happens. In this final chapter, the author even organises the conversation so that words match words and actions match actions, as the two protagonists confront each other. In the Hebrew text the identical number of words are given to Jonah's great speech of complaint at the beginning (4:2—3) and to God's long speech of explanation at the end (4:10—11). And God finally spells out their point of difference, again by using personal pronouns to give the emphatic form of expression to both of the 'characters': 'As for you, you felt pity for the gourd . . . As for me, should I not feel pity for Nineveh . . .' Again . . . the call of God is a calling to account. The God from whom Jonah cannot flee demands that he confront the very problem he wishes to avoid . . .

... Nineveh is saved because of God's patience. No less wondrous is God's patience with the reluctant prophet, a patience that goes beyond the confines of the book. For though the religious traditions try to supply an affirmative answer to God's final question to Jonah, the Bible story wisely ends without it. We do not know if Jonah has a change of heart, if he is convinced by God's argument. We do not even know if this extraordinary man who has been subjected to the most intensive series of experiences, emerges at the end any different from before. We want to think he has, because religious and healing professions alike need the myth that human nature is changeable; that repentance, insight, growth, whatever terminology we use, are available and that we, practitioners, can somehow help to bring them about. But perhaps it is refreshingly necessary to encounter a Jonah once in a while, who asserts the right to remain stiff-necked, blind and wilful, despite the most frenzied efforts of others to persuade or even force such a person to change. For whether Jonah changes or not, it seems that he cannot ever escape the call to change that set him off on his adventures in the first place.

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### Questions

What have you found to be the meanings of the book of Jonah for your own life? In what ways has it been personally and spiritually helpful and/or challenging to explore this text?

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Close this chapter with a time of prayer on the issues raised by the book of Jonah for those in Christian ministry:

- **Evasion:** Are there things we're evading? Aspects of ourselves or our past? What aspects of God's call feel so uncomfortable that's we'd rather go down to almost any depths to avoid them?
- **Egotism:** What part does our ego play in our response to God's call. How far do we see things through the distorting lens of our ego, rather than daring to experience God and others in all the vulnerability of our true selves?
- **Piety:** How far do our words and actions, as God's ministers, serve our own ends rather than God's? In what ways might we be tempted to use piety as a means of getting our own way? How can we distinguish false piety from faith?
- **Half-heartedness:** Which parts of God's call to us to become transformed into the likeness of Christ do we respond to half-heartedly? Do we expect God to play a part in our world, or are we truly willing to risk being part of God's world?

### Further Reading

David M Gunn & Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

Jonathan Magonet, *Bible Lives*, SCM Press, 1992

Yehuda T Radday & Athalya Brenner (eds), *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1990.



## Chapter 8

# The Word Revealed

### Aims

- To study John's Gospel, using exegetical and interpretative skills
- To see the Gospel as a whole, with themes and patterns running through it
- To revisit John as a source of spiritual nourishment for our own journeys.

Read through the whole of John's Gospel in a modern translation, if possible at a single sitting.

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### Questions

- What stories, words or phrases strike you particularly?
- What themes or recurring patterns have you noticed in John?
- What are the advantages of reading it through as a whole, rather than studying lectionary-sized segments?
- Try to sum up, in a simple phrase, what you think is the main purpose of John's gospel (i.e. why it was written).

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As far as possible, draft an exegesis for John's Gospel *as a whole book*. You may find the *optional* reading below helpful.

## John's Gospel – Some Comments

**1 From Rene Kieffer, 'John', (in Barton & Muddiman, eds, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 2001 (pp. 960—61)**

In comparison with the Synoptics, John's gospel is much more unified in content and style. It has sometimes been called 'seamless, woven in one piece' (cf. John 19:23). The differences between John and the Synoptics have been used in both positive and negative ways, especially concerning their reliability. But one should not forget all that unites John with the other gospels: it is about Jesus' public life, death and resurrection, with concrete biographical indications that may not always satisfy a modern historian.

My view is that John in his structure and in many details has been inspired by Mark, perhaps even by Luke (or common traditions behind Luke and John). But John also has his own information, which allows him to treat his material in a sovereign way . . . He wants primarily to show that Jesus really is the Messiah and the Son of God (cf. John 20:31). Matthew has already dared to group Jesus' preaching into five or six longer discourses in order to favour his own theological purpose; John is even bolder when he freely organises his material according to his theological views, making no stylistic difference between what John the Baptist, or he himself

has to say.

The Johannine presentation is permeated with contrasts between light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, heaven above and the earth below. Ambiguous expressions are used to create a kind of suspense. Subtle, ironic devices suppose that the reader is shrewder than those who meet Jesus without understanding. The Master who stands in the centre of the text is described with the help of lively metaphors. His encounters, his words and his miracles often have both a concrete and a metaphorical meaning . . . Sayings of Jesus in the Synoptics . . . are stamped by simple images and parables. In John these give way to long and complicated monologues and dialogues, with a rather limited vocabulary used very skilfully . . .

My own view [about the authorship of John] is that the main author, whom I call ‘the evangelist’, tries to unite his community by transmitting the testimony of the beloved disciples. This person is presented in such a way that the reader who knows the Synoptic tradition can identify him with John the son of Zebedee. Historically it is possible that someone other than the apostle John was the mediator, but the evangelist wants us to identify the beloved disciple with the apostle. . . The final version of the gospel was probably produced around 90—100 in Ephesus. . .

### *Suggested outline*

#### **Prologue: The Word became flesh and revealed the Father (1:1—18)**

#### **Book 1: Jesus reveals his glory to this world (1:10—12:50)**

##### *1:19—3:21 First geographical grouping*

The Baptist’s testimony (1:19—34)

Jesus’ first disciples (1:35—51)

The first sign at the wedding in Cana (2:1—12)

Temple-cleansing in Jerusalem (2:13—35)

Dialogue with Nicodemus (3:1—21)

##### *3:22—5:47 Second geographical grouping*

The Baptist’s last testimony (3:22—30)

Jesus comes from above (3:31—6)

Jesus’ work in Samaria (4:1—42)

The second sign at Cana: the healing of the royal official’s son (4:43—54)

Jesus heals a lame man: he gives life to whom he wishes (5:1—47)

##### *6:1—10:39 Third geographical grouping*

Jesus feeds 5000 and walks on the sea: he is the bread of life (6:1—71)

Jesus at the Festival of Booths (7:1—8:59)

Jesus restores sight to the blind man (9:1—41)

Jesus is the door and the good shepherd (10:1—21)

Jesus at the Festival of Dedication (10:22—39)

*10:40—12:50 Fourth geographical grouping*

Back across the Jordan (10:40—42)

Jesus who raises Lazarus must himself die (11:1—54)

Jesus is anointed and acclaimed before his death (11:55—12:36)

Faith and unbelief (12:37—50)

## **Book 2: Jesus reveals the glory of his death and resurrection to the disciples (13:1—21:25)**

Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and points out the traitor (13:1—30)

The first part of the farewell discourse (13:31—14:31)

The second part of the farewell discourse (15:1—16:4a)

The third part of the farewell discourse (16:4b—33)

Jesus' prayer to his Father (17:1—26)

Jesus' passion, death and burial (18:1—19:42)

The risen Christ (20:1—21:25)

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### **Questions**

- Do you think that the differences between John's account of Jesus' life and ministry and that of the Synoptics, is important for a life of faith? Does it matter who is 'right'?
- An example of the differences is the positioning of the cleansing of the Temple in Jesus' life and ministry. In John, this takes place early in Jesus' ministry (John 2:13—22); in the other gospels, it takes place in the last week of Jesus' life. Why might this be? What purpose might the evangelists have for positioning the material where they do?

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## **2 From Gail R. O'Day, 'John' (pp.293, 294 in Newsom & Ringe, eds, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, SPCK 1992)**

The formative issue for the Gospel of John seems to have been the question, Who is Jesus? The Gospel narrative is an attempt to provide fresh answers to this question. It seeks to move the reader away from overly confident assumptions, false certitudes, and complacency about Jesus' identity. It offers each reader of the Gospel the opportunity to discover Jesus for himself or herself. This purpose, to lead the reader to his or her own experience of Jesus, accounts for the distinctive literary style of John. The 'I am' sayings (e.g. 6:20, 35; 8:12; ,11:25) provide fresh alternatives to the more traditional titles for Jesus. The intricate blend of narrative and discourse, the use of figurative language and the extensive dialogues between Jesus and other characters, all combine to open the story to the reader's own experience . . .

### ***Structure and contents***

The Gospel of John, unlike the other Gospels, begins not in story but in *song*. John 1:1—18,



known traditionally as the Prologue to John, consists of a hymn to the Word of God become flesh (1:14). Details about John the Baptist are interspersed throughout this hymn (1:6—8, 15), but the primary purpose of John 1:1—18 is hymnic celebration of the grace that believers have received from God through Jesus (1:16).

The Prologue also provides a clue to the overall structure of the Gospel. Verses 11—12 read, ‘He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God’. These two verses help to explain the break in the narrative that occurs between chap.12 and chap.13. Chapters 1—12 narrate Jesus’ coming to ‘what was his own’ and his reception by ‘his own people’. Jesus’ teachings are offered to a broad public in chapters 1—12. Chapters 13—21, particularly chaps 13—17, narrate Jesus’ teaching and ministry to those who ‘believe in his name’, to his disciples. Chapters 1—12 are sometimes called the Book of Signs because they narrate the miracles and dramatic acts in Jesus’ public ministry. Chapters 13—21 are sometimes called the Book of Glory because they narrate the passion of Jesus.

### **Comment**

Women play significant roles in the Gospel of John. This significance is evident both in the number of stories in which women appear and in the theological importance of those stories. The opening miracle in Jesus’ ministry occurs at a woman’s initiative (2:1—11). Women are Jesus’ main conversation partners in three stories that reveal Jesus’ identity and vocation and the nature of faithful discipleship (4:4—42; 7:53—8:11; 11:1—44). Jesus’ passion is watched over by the women from its preparation (12:1—8), through Jesus’ death (19:25—7) and resurrection (20:1—18). Men do not have a monopoly on witness and discipleship in John; rather, the Gospel of John narrates a faith-world that would not exist without women’s participation in it.

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### **Questions**

In Mark’s Gospel it is Peter who confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 8:29); in John, it is Martha (John 11:27). Does the difference matter? (You might like to reflect on the role of Peter in the early Church, and the authority this gives his confession; or at what it means to have a woman as the first to recognise the true nature of Jesus.) Look at the settings in which the declaration is made: which do you personally find more helpful, and why?

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### **3 From Barnabas Lindars SSF, *John* (Sheffield Academic Press 1990), pp.95—6**

The study of the Fourth Gospel needs to be done in depth in order to gain a true understanding of John. In the process, preconceived ideas are challenged and have to be discarded, and new and unsuspected features of John’s thought begin to emerge.

For most new students the first problem is to come to terms with the problem of historicity<sup>15</sup>. John’s narratives and dialogues are so vivid and circumstantial that at first sight they compel acceptance as eye-witness accounts. It takes times to realise that they were never intended to be historical reports. Too great a concern with historical problems is counterproductive, because it leads away from the more important task of understanding what John has to say.

It soon becomes apparent that the purpose of the Gospel could not have been achieved if it had been another volume of the same type as the Synoptic Gospels. The church fathers sensed this,

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<sup>15</sup> i.e. historical authenticity, whether events actually happened exactly as John describes them.

and that is why Clement of Alexandria referred to it as ‘the spiritual gospel’. The aim is to promote belief in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God so that ‘you may have life in his name’ (20:21). The words ‘in his name’ briefly point to the personal relationship of mutual indwelling between Jesus and the disciples which is the essential teaching of the Gospel. The idea of ‘life’ as the object of the religious quest replaces the traditional preference for the kingdom of God, in accordance with the aspirations of the readers, whether Christians or unbelievers.

Thus the Gospel is concerned with historical tradition only in so far as it helps this spiritual purpose.

**4 From Morna Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, SCM Press, 1997, pp.75, 78—83.**

At the *historical* level, the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels is more believable than the Jesus described by John. But that does not mean that John’s Jesus is any less authentic. It is easy to see what has happened. *All* the evangelists are presenting us with ‘gospel’ or ‘good news’. They want to persuade us that the Christian interpretation of what Jesus did and said – that is, that God was at work in him – is the correct one. All of them . . . tell the story of Jesus. As we read that story, we realise that there are different ways of interpreting it . . .

We shall perhaps understand what is going on behind the pages of the Fourth Gospel if we think of it as a gigantic take-over battle. The old, established firm is Judaism. The newcomers are the Christians, and they lay claim to everything within Judaism. But the basis of their claim is, as it were, that the original founder of the firm had intended them to take it over, and that the previous team, who had been running the firm, had merely been put in as caretakers, until the time was ripe for their successors to take over.

They lay claim to everything within Judaism: and that means, above all, to the Torah, the ‘Teaching’ or Law, given to Moses. In one of the first controversies in the Gospel, Jesus is said to have claimed that Moses wrote about him (5:46). This is of course what the other evangelists claim by quoting from the Old Testament. It is what Jesus himself is said to have claimed, in Matthew 5:17, when he declared that he had come to fulfil the Law and the prophets. But John spells out the meaning of that fulfilment in a slightly different way. It is not just that particular passages from the OT are applied to Jesus . . . Rather, the whole purpose of the Law finds its fulfilment in Jesus. It is intriguing to discover that many of the nouns used in the famous ‘I am’ sayings were already used in Judaism to describe the Law. ‘I am the Bread, the Light, the Life, the Way, the Truth’: all these terms have been used of the Jewish scriptures. And now John tells us that Jesus is claiming to *be* these things. But of course! For if Jesus is the true revelation of who God is, and not just the written copy given to Moses, then he must be all that was ever claimed for the Law and far more. . .

These claims about who Jesus is are, moreover, backed up by actions. The ‘I am’ sayings are normally found in conjunction with miracles which correspond with the claims. Jesus’ claim to be living bread (6:35, 48, 51) is found in a sermon following the miracle of the feeding of a large crowd of people. His claim to be the light of the world (8:12; 9:5) is followed by the gift of sight to a man who was born blind (chapter 9). His claim to be the door of the sheepfold and the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (10:7, 9, 11, 14) points forward to his crucifixion. His claim to be the resurrection and the life (11:25) follows the raising of Lazarus from the dead. But because Jesus’ opponents have failed to listen to God’s Word in the past, they fail to recognise that Word in the person of Jesus, even though he speaks God’s words and does his works.

The theme of John's prologue is the Word, which brings life and light to the world; but for God, to speak is to do, and so we are not surprised to find that his Word is revealed in *action* as well as in *speech*. The theme of the Fourth Gospel is the words and works of Jesus, which bring light and life, and which are, in fact, none other than the words and works of God himself, and so a manifestation of his glory . .

Jesus is seen as the 'fulfilment' of the Law and the prophets. But Jewish faith was expressed, not in obedience to the Law alone, but in the worship of God, which was focused on certain festivals. Now one of the interesting thing about John's Gospel is that the outline of his story is very different from that followed by the other three evangelists. True, the story of Jesus' death and resurrection comes, inevitably, at the end; but before that, the setting is often very different. Instead of being based in Galilee, Jesus spends much of his time in Jerusalem, and he makes several visits there, instead of just the one. In the Synoptic Gospels, we hear about just one celebration of the Passover, the one at which Jesus dies. John mentions three Passovers, and various other festivals in between; moreover, these various festivals seem to play an important role in the telling of the story, for we find that many of the words and miracles of Jesus are appropriate to the theme of the particular festival at which they take place. Around the time of the second Passover mentioned by John (6:4), for example, Jesus feeds a large crowd of people, and speaks about the theme of bread. Further, he contrasts the bread which God gave to the people in the wilderness through Moses with the bread which he himself offers them: the bread which is himself, since, he says, 'I am the bread of life' (6:35) . . . Jesus, then, is the fulfilment of all the festivals, the one through whom God is truly worshipped and glorified . . .

For this evangelist, however, the revelation of divine glory is focused on one event in particular: on the cross. The fact that Christians cheerfully sing the hymn, 'In the cross of Christ I glory', without batting an eyelid shows the extent to which we have forgotten just how extraordinary it is to speak of a crucifixion in terms of glory. Crucifixion was designed to bring shame and humiliation, as well as excruciating pain, to its victim, and 'glory' was perhaps the most inappropriate word that could have been chosen to describe it. Luke, more logically, speaks of Jesus enduring suffering *before* he entered into glory (Luke 24:26). But in John, the two themes have been coalesced. John plays on the *double entendre* in the verb 'to lift up': Jesus is lifted up to glory at the same time that he is lifted up on the cross (3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34). When John speaks about Jesus or God being glorified, he is more often than not referring to Jesus' death (7:39; 12:16, 23, 28; 13:31f; 17:1). The reason is that the cross is the supreme revelation of the nature of God: the supreme revelation of his love, and of his purpose to save the world. And because God's nature is revealed in the cross, it is by the cross that he is glorified (12:28; 13:31; 14:13; 17:1). Although Jesus reveals God's glory throughout his ministry, he does so above all in his death. The final and ultimate revelation of glory, therefore, comes at the end of the story. Everything has led up to this and pointed forward to it, from the moment that John the Baptist first pointed to Jesus and declared, 'There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29) . . .

The light which shone in the darkness at the creation of the world, and which has shone throughout history in God's self-revelation to his people, has shone in the life and death of Jesus, and the darkness has been unable to quench it. And it is in his last, triumphant work on the cross that, paradoxically, the glory of God is revealed in its fullness. In John, Jesus' last words before his death are a cry of triumph: 'It is accomplished!' It is in the cross, above all, that we see the glory that belongs also to the Father's only Son, here that we acknowledge him to be the embodiment of grace and truth.

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## Questions

'At the *historical* level, the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels is more believable than the Jesus described by John' (Hooker, quoted above). Do you agree? Do you think that the different interpretations by the different evangelists affect the truth about Jesus? Try to explain the reasons for your answer.

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As you reach the end of this chapter, and this module, read John 21 slowly and prayerfully, and reflect in prayer on the following questions:

- What is your experience in ministry of feeling tired, like the disciples, and that your efforts are futile? Is it always easy to recognise Jesus in these situations?
- In what ways does Jesus feed you?
- What do you think it might mean for you, in practice, to tend Jesus' sheep and feed his lambs?
- How hard do you find it to answer Jesus' question, 'Do you love me?' How many times might Jesus need to ask you the question?
- In what ways has your work on John given you new insights into Jesus' command, 'Follow me'?

## Further Reading

Morna Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, SCM Press, 1997.

Morna Hooker, *Endings: Invitations to Discipleship*, SCM Press, 2003.

Barnabas Lindars SSF, *John*, Sheffield Academic Press 1990.

William Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel*, Macmillan 1939, reprinted 1974

# Reflection Sheet for Chapter 8

Make notes in response to as many of the following questions as possible.

- What have you learned in this chapter?
- How do you feel about it?
- What further questions have been raised by this chapter?
- What action will you take, or what will you try to do differently, as a result of this chapter?
- Any other thoughts or reflections?