

INTRODUCTION

Beauty and truth

The experience of beauty and the many ways in which we give expression to it arise from defined, delineated and limited experiences. That moment on a bridge crossing the Nattai river. The people there with me. Everything grey in the fading light of dusk. The sudden rush of ducks disturbing the silence as they splash their wings against the water and head off into the gathering night. The cold with the anticipation of a fire and a pleasant night spent with friends. All this and much more makes that moment a treasured memory that sets it apart from other experiences which have since faded and are lost. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful.

An early morning in Port Moresby after an evening when the full moon had cast its spell over our companionship. A pure white flower had emerged overnight from a place where I would have least expected to see it – a cactus! The surprise, the contrast, the sheer beauty, has left a memory that will not fade – though the flower itself lasted only for a day. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful. It is always so. It is our limitations that make us special, that set us apart, and it is precisely in our limitations that beauty lies and is revealed.

It is the same with truth. There is a place for abstraction, for general principles, for learning wisdom that can guide one's life. But every time we have an insight into the way things really are (as distinct from the way we are in the habit of thinking about things, or the way we would like things to be) it is by way of insight into a precise, delineated and necessarily limited experience. We gain insight into truth not in spite of our limitations, but in and through them. This is the way things are in the real world.

This is the way things were for those who composed the Bible. There is a danger that we could be so fascinated by the notion that what we are reading is inspired by God that we might imagine that the precise, delineated and defined parameters of ordinary human experience are not factors to be considered when reading this sacred text. There is a danger that we could think of the Bible as being dictated by God in such a way that the human limitations of the inspired writers and of the circumstances in which they wrote have no relevance to what we find in the text. We could read the Bible texts as though they came straight from God and share in God's transcendent truth, somehow unrelated to history or to human experience. We could read them as if they expressed some abstract and eternal truth that is equally relevant in every age and to every person, because it comes from God who is unchanging Truth, and whose words, therefore, transcend the limitations of time, place and language.

The Bible is not like that. It is a record of limited human insights inspired by God that real people have expressed to other real people in limited human words and in specific cultural and historical circumstances. There is beauty and truth in the Bible texts. To find them (as distinct from imposing on the text our own preconceived notions) we will need to explore the historically conditioned and necessarily limited human experiences that gave rise to their inspired insights. The aim of this Introductory Commentary is to discover and express what it was that the inspired authors of Genesis intended to say by their words, what their contemporaries understood from these writings, why people found these writings inspiring, and why they cherished them, preserved them, copied them and handed them on.

The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH*, the lord of creation and the lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation.

Since they believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history, the authors readily prefaced their inspired insights with expressions such as 'YHWH said' – a way of stating that the words that followed expressed God's will as best they were able to discern it. They expected that God's will would be beyond their ability to comprehend fully, and so they approached the inspired texts expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered there. They liked quoting Jeremiah who said: 'Is not my word like fire, says YHWH, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?'(23:29). They liked to break open the word to see the sparks of light which issued from it, revealing the divine enlightenment hidden within. The more meanings they were able to discover, the better. They delighted in playing with the text as one might play with a prism, enjoying the hundred and one reflections and flashes of colour that delight the eye and enlighten the heart. The texts expressed inspired insights into the presence and action of a living God in their history. No text could hold it all, and so the history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

This continued into the Newer Testament. Jesus' disciples reflected on the sacred texts in the light of the new revelation that they experienced in Jesus of Nazareth. They came to what they believed was a deeper understanding of God's intention in inspiring the scriptures – an understanding that was hidden prior to God's revelation in Jesus. When Paul, for example, comes to quote from the scriptures he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads with eyes enlightened by the love of the one whom he describes as 'loving me and giving himself for me'(Galatians 2:20). He came to see that the love of God revealed in the heart of Jesus embraces every person, for it is the love of God. Furthermore, he recognised this as the mission confided by God to Abraham and to Israel and he did his best to carry out that mission as a faithful Jew. He carried on the tradition of the inspired authors who went before him in recognising the limits of earlier insights and earlier expressions, limits that were brought to light by the presence and action of God in history.

However, Paul's method of interpreting sacred texts is different from the way modern scholarship approaches them, and from the method that this commentary will follow.

*spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word 'adonāy ('Lord').

We attempt to understand the meaning intended by the human author and understood by those for whom the text was written. To do this we try to grasp the historical context within which the author was writing, and the kind of questions he was attempting to address. Paul's contemporaries lacked the instruments to do this, and it was not their focus. A good example of Paul's method of interpreting the texts of the Older Testament is in Galatians 3:6-14. Paul has just returned from a mission in Galatia, and a successful one, for some Jews embraced Jesus as their Messiah, and some non-Jews joined them without being asked to be circumcised first. Paul had said that physical circumcision was not necessary. When certain members of the Christian movement from Jerusalem heard of this they went around the churches of Galatia demanding that the non-Jews not only be circumcised but also commit to following the Jewish Torah. As they understood it, the Torah expressed God's will and none of it could be set aside. Naturally, the Galatian Christians were confused. Paul heard of it and his response is his Letter to the Galatians. This is not the place to outline Paul's response in its entirety, but his method of arguing in 3:6-14 gives us a good illustration of the way Paul uses scripture in argument. It was a method understood by those against whom he is writing and considered normal in Jewish circles at the time.

He begins by quoting from Genesis two texts, one of which states that 'those who believe are the descendants of Abraham' (Genesis 15:6), and the other which declares that 'all the nations will be blessed in you [Abraham]' (Genesis 12:3). So far he could expect agreement from his opponents. They, however, would argue that the only way the Gentiles can enjoy the blessing given to Abraham is to embrace the Jewish law. Paul goes on to cite four texts, the first from Deuteronomy, the second from Habakkuk, the third from Leviticus and the fourth, once again, from Deuteronomy. He quotes them, not because the authors of the texts would agree with Paul's conclusion (that non-Jews can become part of the community through faith, without having to obey the Jewish law) – nothing could have been further from the minds of the authors. He quotes these texts because they are linked by the repetition of various words: faith, law, blessing, curse, life, Gentiles. We would not find this especially significant. Paul and his contemporaries, however, were taught to look at such connections as one way of discovering hidden meanings intended, not by the human author, but by God.

The gist of Paul's argument is that the law, while indicating God's will, does not have in itself the power to enable us to do that will. Moreover, God has revealed in Jesus his will to transcend the law in order to reach out in love to every human being. This is what Jesus did, even though it cost him his life. What God wants of us is not that we embrace a special culture (the Jewish one) to be saved, but that, with the power of Jesus' Spirit, we do what Jesus did: give our lives in love for each other because we believe (we know-in-faith) that this is God's will and that God is making it possible through the gift of his Spirit. The key point I am making is that Paul shows no interest in what was intended by the authors of the various texts that he quotes. His insights came, not from the texts but from Jesus. He then reflects back on the texts and breaks them open to discover the insights hidden there. Today we seek to discern the insights expressed in the texts themselves.

The same could be said of Paul's exegesis of the story of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4:22-31, or his treatment of the relative importance of faith and circumcision in Romans 4. Likewise his reading of the story of the Exodus (1Corinthians 10:1-13), where he insists that what is written in the sacred texts is there 'for us' (1Corinthians 10:6,11), and so its deeper meaning has to do with Christ. He takes a similar approach in his reading of the scene where Moses veils his face when he comes down from the mountain (2Corinthians 3:6-18). Paul insists that 'the letter kills. It is the Spirit that gives life' (2Corinthians 3:6). The Law has value but only when it is read 'spiritually' (Romans 7:14): that is, enlightened by the Spirit of God that is in Jesus. One example is that of circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14):

It is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.

– Philippians 3:3

A person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal.

– Romans 2:28-29

In none of these examples is Paul attempting to discover what was in the mind of the inspired human authors or in the minds of those who first listened to these sacred texts. Paul's focus remains on Jesus, and this enables him to discover what he has come to understand as God's intention in revealing the scriptures – meanings that were hidden prior to God's revelation in Jesus. This poring over the scriptures in the light of historical experience is not new in Judaism. The Bible itself is the product of just such a process.

Paul reflects upon the sacred scriptures because for him they remain a vital source of revelation, inspiration and communion with God. Paul never lost his love for Judaism. What died for him when he came to know the risen Jesus was not Judaism. It was not the law or the sacred texts. It was his over zealous fixation that was so locked into finding security in the law that it prevented him from recognising the surprise of God in Jesus or in the community of Jesus' followers. Paul went beyond Judaism in obedience to God, he did not abandon it. When he was rejected by the synagogue, and went out to the Gentiles (see Acts 13:46), he did not reject the synagogue. He went out because he was commissioned to do so by God and by the risen Jesus. And he went out as a Christian Jew.

He saw that it was members of the synagogue who were rejecting the vocation which was theirs from the beginning, a vocation clearly expressed in God's words to Abraham (see Genesis 12:1-3). As Jews, in a covenant with God, they were graced and called to share their faith with the Gentile world. Jesus showed them how, but they refused to accept him or the challenge which he offered them. Paul took up the challenge, as a Jew.

Through the grace of God, he was committed to doing what every Jew was called to do. When they refused, he took up the challenge for them and on their behalf. There was much in the law that would benefit people other than the Jews. Paul never rejected the law. He rejected only the law as used as an instrument for not accepting Jesus and the will of God as revealed in him.

Paul and Origen

To repeat what was said above: when Paul quotes from the scriptures, he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads it with new eyes and saw that it is God's will to build a human community that is not divided by walls of religious prejudice or habit, a community of believers where people could come as they are, and not think that they must be like someone else to be loved. The love of God, revealed when God revealed his own Son, embraces everyone. Jesus, as a Jew, called his brother and sister Jews to be faithful to the covenant which they had with God, a covenant of love, open to the world. It was this Spirit that Paul caught. Paul wants to show that the scriptures can be read in another way – in the Spirit who inspired them, the Spirit seen in its fulness in Jesus.

The value of Paul's inspired interpretation is obvious, but it does not tell us what was in the mind and heart of the authors of the sacred text or of those who welcomed, treasured and handed on these ancient writings. At the same time, as I hope will become obvious in this commentary, Paul did pick up the essentially 'catholic' ('universal') view of God that is expounded in the Genesis text, even if it is only imperfectly expressed there and in the other books of the Torah. Modern scholarship is committed to using the tools available to attempt to discover the meaning the texts had for their authors. Such an attempt takes nothing from what Paul and his approach has to offer. It may add to it, by discovering the limited but truthful insights of the inspired authors.

Origen

This is not the place to examine the history of the ways in which the Scriptures have been interpreted by Christian commentators in the early, medieval and pre-modern Church, but a short examination of the approach of the first great Christian exegete, Origen (185-232), may help define what is different in the way modern scholarship approaches the sacred text. Origen saw himself as developing the methods used by Paul, and, though others disagreed with his methods, his influence on subsequent Christian interpretation was immense.

While he was in charge of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, Origen wrote his *Peri Archon* ('On Principles'), detailing principles of interpretation of scripture. Later, after his move to Caesarea, he wrote a commentary on Genesis (239-243AD). In his commentary on the scene in which Abraham attempts to pass Sarah off to Abimelech as his sister (Genesis 20), Origen writes (quoting 2Corinthians 3):

'If there is anyone who tries to turn to the Lord', he ought to pray that 'the veil might be removed' from his heart – 'for the Lord is the Spirit'. He ought to pray that the Lord might remove the veil of the letter and uncover the light of the Spirit, that we might be able to say that 'beholding the glory of the Lord with open face we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.'

Origen often quotes the statements of Paul noted in the previous section – that what is written is written 'for us' (1Corinthians 10:6,11); that 'the letter kills, it is the Spirit that gives life' (2Corinthians 3:6); that the Law has value but only when it is read 'spiritually' (Romans 7:14). He refers, too, to the following from the Letter to the Hebrews: 'the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the true form of these realities' (Hebrews 10:1). All scripture, in Origen's view, has a spiritual (by which he generally means 'allegorical') sense.

The literal sense is to be followed, but not when the literal meaning is ‘illogical’, ‘impossible’ or ‘unworthy of God’. In such cases, the literal meaning of the words (what, following Paul, he calls the ‘letter’) was not the meaning intended by God. It was put there by God to alert us to the need to look more deeply for a ‘spiritual’ meaning.

In obedience to the Saviour’s precept that says: ‘Search the Scriptures’, one must carefully investigate how far the literal meaning is true, how far it is impossible, and to the utmost of one’s power one must trace out from the use of similar expressions the meaning scattered everywhere through the scriptures of that which, when taken literally, is impossible

– On Principles, Book 4, 19-20.

When Origen uses the word ‘illogical’ he means it in its most profound sense: ‘without the Logos’, ‘without the Word-made-flesh’. This attempt by Origen to read all the scripture in the light of Jesus has its value, and it influenced interpretation right down to our own day. It has, however, two limitations. Firstly, it does not attempt to discover the meaning the Scriptures had in their own limited historical setting. Origen’s focus was on Jesus and therefore on what he saw as the fullness of revelation. He was not concerned with the human imperfections of God’s inspired instruments. Secondly, since he lacked appropriate criteria to check the allegorical meanings that he found in the texts, there was the obvious danger of reading into the inspired word meanings that had no connection with their intended meaning. For all the beauty of their reflections, this lack of clarity recurs regularly in the writings of the Father of the Church, of the medieval scholastics, and of pre-modern theological manuals. Their methods of interpretation carry with them the danger of using Scriptural texts to support positions (however valid), instead of being open to the surprise of God’s inspired word.

Modern scholarship shares the attempt of earlier times to reflect on the sacred texts in order to remember the past and to discern in the present the presence and action of God. It is also committed to attempt something that was not possible in earlier times; namely, to discover the meaning the texts had for those who were inspired to write them. The tools to attempt this were not previously available. It is not always an easy task to know when texts were composed, what words and phrases meant in their original context, and what kinds of questions ancient writers were addressing when they composed their texts. However, to the extent that our attempt is successful it does help us avoid the danger of reading meanings into a text that are alien to the meaning intended by its authors and the meaning understood by those to whom the text was originally addressed. The attempt to enter into the world of the inspired authors can also have the advantage of opening us up to the fresh surprise of the inspired texts, and in this way enrich the reflections we must make on God’s presence and action in our times.

Inspiration

It is important to attempt to clarify what we mean when we say that the texts are ‘inspired by God’, for our understanding of inspiration will surely affect the way we read the texts, if not consciously then certainly unconsciously. We begin with four preliminary considerations. The first is the importance of recognising that revelation and inspiration are not restricted to the biblical texts and their authors.

Inspiration

As Paul says: God ‘desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’(1Timothy 2:4). Jesus assures us that God wants everyone to ‘have life and have it abundantly’(John 10:10). It follows that God must constantly be revealing himself to everyone, and inspiring everyone to respond to grace in the most liberating and creative way, special to each person. Pope John-Paul II expresses this simply in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* when he writes: ‘Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart’(n.29).

Of course, it is one thing for God to reveal himself. It is another for a person to recognise and respond to the revelation. When Jesus expresses his delight that God has revealed himself to ‘little children’(Matthew 11:25), he is not saying that God is not revealing himself to others. Rather, he is delighting in the fact that there are those who are open to receive and welcome the revelation: those who are ‘poor in spirit’(Matthew 5:5), ‘humble’(Matthew 18:4), ‘meek and humble of heart’, like himself (Matthew 11:29). Did he not exclaim once: ‘Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it’(Matthew 10:15)? Our first point, then, is that when we inquire about inspiration we are not looking for something found only in the Bible. Rather, we are looking for what makes the inspiration that we find there so special.

Secondly, while it is true that the claim that the texts are inspired and reveal God is not subject to any scientific proof, it is also true that it is not an arbitrary claim. It is based on experience, for the texts have been found to be inspiring, and have helped people live beautiful and truthful lives by any standards that we might reasonably apply. People have continued to experience a special link between these texts and their experience of God. In the final analysis, the claim is an expression of how a community understands itself. Jesus’ words apply here: ‘You will know them by their fruits’(Matthew 7:16), as does his invitation: ‘Come and see’(John 1:39).

Thirdly, we note two statements from the New Testament on the subject of inspiration. One is from Paul who writes to Timothy: ‘All scripture, inspired by God, is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’(2Timothy 3:16). Paul is speaking of the ‘Old Testament’ (an expression used by Paul in 2Corinthians 3:14), and he is encouraging Timothy to draw inspiration from the sacred scriptures, for they are useful in living a life that is faithful to God, and useful also in teaching others. The other statement is from Peter who states that ‘no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’(2Peter 1:21).

Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, makes the same point: ‘A prophet has no utterance of his own. All his utterances come from elsewhere. They echo the voice of Another’(Who is the Heir, 259). We have an example of this in Jeremiah, who tells us that he is tired of the rejection he experiences when he relays to the people what comes to him in his prayer. Yet he has to speak, for, as he says: ‘within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot’(Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah is conscious of *speaking* out of his communion with YHWH. At times his *writing* also comes from the same communion: ‘Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah’s dictation all the words of YHWH that he had spoken to him’(Jeremiah 36:4).

Peter's statement and the above texts give us some insight into certain experiences of individual prophets and into some of the material found in the prophetic scrolls. However, there is no justification for generalising and seeing the prophetic experience as a model for inspiration throughout the Bible. The prophetic scrolls do not claim that everything in them was spoken to the prophet by YHWH, and much of the Bible does not claim to be the words of prophets.

Fourthly, it is clear that Jesus has profound respect for the sacred scriptures. He states that 'Scripture cannot be deprived of its validity' (John 10:35), and he warns against failing to obey it (see Matthew 5:19). This does not mean, however, that Jesus or his disciples judge the Older Testament to be the last word of God on any issue. Quite the contrary. Jesus' disciples see him as the fulfilment of God's promises to them, such that all previous expressions of God's revelation have to give way before the revelation offered in Jesus. Jesus did say: 'Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Matthew 5:18). But he also said that now that the law is accomplished, now that it has reached its goal, all that is imperfect must give way: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...' (Matthew 5:21ff). Those among Jesus' contemporaries who considered themselves to be experts in the scriptures were the ones most offended by the freedom that Jesus, and later Paul, had to by-pass or correct scripture in order to give expression to its essential thrust.

Having made these preliminary points, let us now try to understand what it is we are claiming when we say with Paul that 'all scripture is inspired by God' (2 Timothy 3:16). Firstly, we are not claiming that inspiration means that God dictated the words that the inspired authors wrote. As noted above there were times when the prophets experienced something close to this. We read in Jeremiah, for example: 'YHWH put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth"' (Jeremiah 1:9). On another occasion Jeremiah was told: 'Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you' (Jeremiah 36:2).

However, even then, the words written by Jeremiah were Hebrew words with their own necessary limitations. Nor did God choose Jeremiah because he was a man who was not of his time. If God is going to inspire someone to speak the truth, God must choose a limited, real, human being. There are no others from whom to choose. Furthermore, what the prophet had to say was directed to real people with their own real limitations of language, culture and experience.

The model of an individual prophet speaking out of his inspired prayer is of little help when we ask about inspiration of the Books of the Torah. There we discover different 'schools' of thought struggling to make sense of their situation in the light of their faith tradition. Many generations of scribes worked on the material we find in Genesis. The text as we have it is a hard-won consensus that resulted from much earnest debate, dialogue and soul-searching. Inspiration must include a special providence that guided this process. We might wish it were otherwise. We might wish that the truths inspired by God in the sacred scriptures connected us immediately to God in such a way as to give the reader a share in God's absolute truth.

History and Truth

For then we would not have to undertake the task of finding out what it was that the inspired authors were actually saying, or how they were understood by their contemporaries, or why their words were treasured, copied and handed on. The inspired texts guided people to live their lives in their real world. They did not remove them from it.

History, Story and Truth

We are right to expect to find truth when we read the texts of the Sacred Scriptures. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council we read:

‘Those divinely revealed realities that are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the book of both the Old Testament and the New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church’(3.11).

The document continues:

‘Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, assert should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures ... Seeing that, in sacred scripture, God speaks through people in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred scripture, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of the words’(n. 11-12).

Truth is found in the judgment. We communicate truthfully when what we assert expresses the way things are, as distinct from the ways we think they are, or would like them to be. The hard-earned gains of empirical science have rightly made us take great care that our judgments are based on discerned data. We want to know ‘the facts’ and are loath to trust those who start from abstract principles and deal out what they claim to be ‘truths’ without being able to ground them in tested experience.

There are many ways of communicating truth. The writing of history is one way. It involves the careful establishing of the data (what actually happened), as well as a careful attempt to express something of the significance of what happened. Of course, there are limits to the writing of history. We can’t possibly express everything that happened, and the kinds of answers we give are dependent on the kinds of questions we ask, and the perspective from which we approach the past.

Truth can also be communicated through art of various kinds, which aims to awaken the imagination – as distinct from appealing to the logic of discursive reasoning – and through the imagination to open the way to insight. A video can tell us something of what was actually going on, but so can a painted portrait or a film. These take us ‘inside’ the facts to what is really going on! A well told story can have the same effect. Let us look more closely at history as a way of communicating truth.

The writing of history held an important place in the ancient world, as we see in the following two quotes from the New Testament. Firstly, the opening words of Luke's Gospel (composed in the latter part of the first century AD):

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

The opening words of John's First Letter read:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands,

Today we have strict expectations of the style and method which we judge appropriate for historians. We do not expect poetry or drama from them, nor contrived rhetorical flourishes intended to impress. While we expect historians to be imaginative in the way they arrange their material, they should present the 'facts' without adornment. Writing of 'history' in the ancient world allowed for more liberty of expression, but there were criteria expected of historians. In his *The Histories* (12.4c), the Greek historian Polybius (died c.122BC) asserts that it is best if a historian writes about matters which he has personally witnessed. However, he acknowledges that this is not always possible:

Since many events occur at the same time in different places, and one man cannot be in several places at one time, nor is it possible for a single person to have seen with his own eyes every place in the world and all the peculiar features of different places, the only thing left for a historian is to inquire of as many people as possible, to believe those worthy of belief, and to be an adequate critic of the reports that reach him.

Lucian of Samosata (died 180AD) agrees with modern historians in stating that 'the sole task of the historian is to tell things just as they happened' (n.39). However, a little later (n.58) he writes: 'If someone has to be brought in to give a speech, above all let the language suit the person and the subject ... It is then that you can exercise your rhetoric and show your eloquence' (*How to write history*, 58). Thucydides (died c.400BC) allows historians to compose speeches, but only after careful investigation and only with the aim of giving 'the general sense of what was actually said' (*Histories* 1.22.1).

However, prior to the Greek Period (late 4th century BC) writers in the Ancient Near East (and elsewhere) were just as interested in reality, but they expressed their insights not in 'history', but in epic, saga, song and story. Other writings from the ancient world choose the elevated, poetic and sophisticated style of epic literature, a style typical of an aristocratic and ruling class. Not so, Israel. In the Bible we find a more popular style, open to everyone, the style of story telling. This style links immediately with experience, and provides a simple and effective way of sharing experience, and so truth.

This brings us to a key insight that we must have as we approach this inspired literature. It is that, for the most part, the Bible offers us truth as truth is expressed in story. Only rarely do we find in it what we would regard as 'history'.

Story and Truth

The authors are interested in history, in the sense that they are interested in real people and their lives, but they are interested in connecting their contemporaries with the precious religious insights that have come down to them from their ancestors, and they have no trouble in using folklore and legend if they help to achieve this aim. Like all the writings of the ancient Near Eastern world, they draw on oral tradition, in which on-going interest wields more power than concern for historical accuracy. They write to engage the imagination, and so they rely heavily on story to communicate insight into the truth.

The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation.

The texts do not provide the kind of evidence needed to establish a secure history. What they do, however, is offer us powerful stories which carry a rich variety of attempts to come to terms with profound human experiences seen in the light of faith in YHWH. In these times of insecurity that continue to spawn a fundamentalism in many areas, including the reading and interpretation of biblical texts, it is important to emphasise the part played by imagination and storytelling in the Bible. Robert Alter in his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Allen & Unwin, 1981, page 189) writes:

The Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning [depicting] of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an inexhausted source of delight for a hundred generation of readers. But that pleasure of imaginative play is deeply inter-fused with a sense of great spiritual urgency. The biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality, because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores Him, responds to, or resists, Him. Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.

The faith of Israel is a historical faith, essentially related to ways in which God has been experienced in their history, but truth does not have to be expressed by accurate statements of historical fact. The authors were real human beings whose aim was to alert their contemporaries to the meaning of their history for their current circumstances, not to establish an accurate historical record. Their explicit focus was not on accurate historical detail but on the way they understood God to have acted in the past and to be acting in their present.

We tend to look for 'historical truth' in the stories: Was there once a flood that killed every living creature except for those in the ark (Genesis 7:21)? Was Jacob really Esau's younger twin (Genesis 25:25-26)? 'History' for them was a way of understanding their destiny in the world as a people special to YHWH.

To be an Israelite is to share in the faith of a people who believe that God liberates from slavery, and that the way to receive the special blessings promised them by God is to listen to YHWH and do his will. The biblical writers are not seeking to give their readers historically accurate information about their past; they are interested in forming the consciousness of the nation by keeping before them the stories that remind them of who they are and what they are called to be. Though stories about the founders of the various tribes (the ‘patriarchs’) would have been told and retold over the generations, it was all far too long ago for the authors of Genesis to attempt to establish the historical facts. Their interest is in their contemporaries and they tell the story of their distant ancestors in such a way as to shed light on the situations the people were facing at the time of writing.

The question to be asked as we read these stories is not: ‘Can we be confident that we are reading historically accurate accounts of past events? It is rather: ‘Is God really the way he is presented here? And are we to respond to God in the way this account states?’ In light of the fact that so many good people are responsible for the writing, and that the stories have been reflected on, treasured, preserved and handed on by faithful people for centuries, allowing for the necessary imperfections of people and language, we should surely trust that the inspired insights will guide us well. The stories in the Older Testament do not claim to give us the complete truth. Furthermore, as disciples of Jesus we have his revelation to help us see some of their limitations. If we are to benefit from them, however, we must read them from within their own context. Otherwise we will miss the limited truths that they do convey.

A further consideration is that inspiration cannot be understood if we think of it as applying only to those who produced the final text as we have it. All along the line people were attentive to the movement of God’s Spirit in their hearts, in the way they lived and in the way they gave expression to their experiences. Surely Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were inspired to do what they did. And what about the many Israelites who lived lives that were faithful to the covenant they believed they had with God? What about those who expressed their response to God in the poems, prayers and folk tales that kept their history alive for their children’s children? Generations of scholars were responsible for the evolving sources that the final authors drew on, and there were those who cherished these ancient scrolls and copied them and made sure they were handed on. Inspiration has to cover this whole process of reflecting, listening, discussion and prayer.

In his commentary on Isaiah 1-39 in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday 2000), Joseph Blenkinsopp expresses what seems to me to be a key insight that we need to have if we want to understand inspiration. He speaks of ‘an Isaian tradition carried forward by means of a cumulative process of reinterpretation and reapplication’ (page 74). Making the same point later he writes: ‘The book has undergone successive restructuring and rearrangement in the course of a long editorial history’ (page 83). I am quoting this because it applies just as truly to the Torah as it does to Isaiah.

The biblical authors were faithful to the writings that they inherited, for they saw them as an inspired expression of the action of YHWH in their history. They pored over them, wanting to discover the will of YHWH. They also reflected on the meaning of past events and past law for them and for their contemporaries.

Inspiration

It would make life easier for us if they had kept their comments and reflections separate from the inherited texts, but that was not their way. They expressed their reflections in comments within the text, and in the way they restructured and rearranged the material. They also reinterpreted the texts in the light of their contemporary experience and presented the text in ways that shed light on what was happening to them. This makes it difficult to know with certainty which parts of the text can safely be attributed to the original authors or to which group of later author/editors, but the thrust of the message is usually not unclear, and inspiration covers the whole process of transmission so that our understanding is enriched by the insights of the scribes that diligently explored the material that they inherited. We must learn from them, so that when we read these texts, we, too, are open to God's spirit inspiring us to see the implications of the sacred text for ourselves and for our world.

Surely inspiration must be speaking about the presence of God's Spirit guiding people in their lives and in their teaching, including those who composed the final text and those who welcomed it as a true (though, of course, necessarily, limited) expression of their faith convictions. For, in the final analysis, it is the community of believers that recognises the texts as inspired, because it is the community that continues to find them inspiring.

We might think of Beethoven being 'inspired' to compose the music. At times we might find a particular conductor 'inspired' in the way he can bring the best out of the orchestra and translate the wonder of the score in a striking way. Finally if no one finds the music or the performance inspiring, it is unlikely to long survive. Those responsible for the texts that we experience as inspired wanted their contemporaries to listen to the past so as to listen to the ways – at times the surprisingly new ways – that God was inspiring them to live now. The texts are religious texts intended to encourage fidelity and prayer. Saint Augustine insists that all the scriptures are there to provoke love – and we could add gratitude, repentance, praise and joy.

God's inspiration is everywhere. God's grace bears its marvellous fruit wherever people are attentive to this inspiration and let it guide them. What is special to the texts of the sacred scriptures is that the people of Israel (not just individual Israelites) considered them to give expression to God's action among them and so to their faith. Disciples of Jesus continued to see them in this way in so far as these sacred writings reached their fulfilment in Jesus. To say that the material we are about to study is inspired is to accept that there was indeed a special divine providence guiding the people of Israel, and that this providence encompassed the writings which the community accepted as giving a genuine (if necessarily limited and imperfect) understanding of God's action in their history.

As the Second Vatican Council states, we can be confident that these texts express 'without error *that truth which God willed to be put down in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation*' (*Dei Verbum*, 11). Before all else the Bible is a truthful statement of God's faithful love, expressed of course in the limited, imperfect, and historically conditioned way in which human authors necessarily speak and write of such matters. The community considers these texts foundational, and continues to experience God's inspiration through them.

If we are to be open to the movements of God's Spirit as we read them, if we are to read these texts in the spirit in which they were written and preserved, and be guided in our response to God's will in the changing circumstances of our lives, we must do all we can to understand what the texts aimed to say and why they were preserved and handed down to us.

While doing all we can to read the texts of the Older Testament within their own context, it remains important that the texts be read from within the faith community to which they belong. For Christians, this means to read the texts in the light of Jesus, the one in whom God's word was made flesh, and in our reading to be guided by his Spirit. Yet even here, this is not enough. Even with the help of Jesus walking with them the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not understand the meaning of the scriptures till they encountered Jesus 'in the breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35). It is at the Eucharist, when Jesus' disciples assemble, that the texts have their proper place, just as they were read when the people of Israel assembled in the temple or the synagogue to remember and to celebrate their faith.

Those who claim that the sacred scriptures are inspired are not claiming that they are free from error in areas that are not central to the witness that they give of God's action in the history of Israel and of how the people ought to respond. It is essential also to recognise that even in this their central thrust, they are human documents and, as we shall hope to show, they are not free from mistaken assumptions that were part of their time and their culture. However, with all these necessary limitations, they continue to inspire, for in their precise beauty they reveal God. To say that these texts are inspired is to say that God was guiding his people, and that this guidance includes a special providence in guiding the writings in which their history is expressed. In much the same way Christians trust that the Spirit of Jesus is with us guiding us to the fullness of truth (see John 16:13; Matthew 28:20). The authority of scripture lies in the power these texts have to transform people's lives.

Who wrote the Torah?

Real people, from their real experiences, wrote the words we are going to read in the Book of Genesis, as well as Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and they wrote them for real people. We want to get as close as we can to understand the historical situation from within which they wrote and the perspective from which they viewed their world. Not to attempt to do so would be to run the risk of missing the limits, and so the precise beauty and truth of their insights. Who are we to think that we will not fall into the trap of using the biblical text to support our prejudices, of hiding behind the words of scripture to avoid the enlightenment that they offer? If we can discover what the authors were intending to say, why they wrote as they did, how they were understood, and why people treasured what they wrote – if we can discover this, then we can have some confidence that we are open to their real and inspired beauty and truth, and that we are to some extent protected against the real danger of using the texts to support our own uninspired prejudices.

Who wrote the Torah?

Prior to the 17th Century everyone assumed that Moses wrote the Torah. They could be excused for thinking that the text, therefore, gives direct insights into the communications received by Moses in prayer, as well as an accurate contemporary description of what actually happened during the escape from Egypt across the Red Sea, at Sinai, and on the journey from Sinai to the Promised Land. Genesis, of course, was different. It was assumed that Moses was relying on privileged information given him by God about events that happened at creation, and up to the flood, followed by historically reliable data from the time of the patriarchs – information that, were it not for God's intervention, would have been lost in the mists of time.

People's basic underlying assumption was that they were reading history, based on facts guaranteed as true because Moses knew what he was talking about, and moreover that he was inspired to write by God. Whenever the conclusion was unavoidable that the texts were not presenting historically reliable data, it was assumed that God was inspiring Moses to give us a deeper truth presented in an allegorical form (see our treatment of Origen). As already noted, the problem here was that, without the help of the tools of modern scientific method, there were no reliable controls guiding allegorical interpretation.

What we have learned, especially over the past hundred and more years, has brought us to a new place, and we must adjust our thinking. As I hope to show, what we have learned takes nothing from the beauty and power of the texts. In fact, freed from the assumption that Moses was the author and that he was giving us a first hand account of what happened on the journey from Egypt to Canaan, and an accurate report of what God told him about the creation of the world and the experiences of the patriarchs, and freed from thinking that we must read as though we were reading history written as we would expect history to be written today, we can read the texts as stories that were written to offer insight into the truth. We also have much better controls to guide us in interpreting the stories in a way that is faithful to the insights that the inspired authors were conveying. Read this way the texts can communicate their beauty and their truth more clearly, and open for us new depths of meaning that can enrich and enlighten us, and guide us in ways that we never thought possible. Here as in all matters we need have no fear of the truth, for it will set us free.

What can modern scholarship tell us about the authors of the Torah? We cannot hope to achieve complete success here. Scholars still differ among themselves, even on significant details. However there does seem to be a converging of probabilities happening, and I offer the following summary in the confidence that it will provide a safe guide as we attempt to read these texts in a way that is open to their rich and inspired insights. The attempt itself to seek answers liberates us from the worst excesses and distortions that happen when we impose our mistaken assumptions onto the text. Furthermore, as I hope the reader will find for him/herself, the journey will help us be surprised by the amazing wealth of wisdom that the inspired texts have to offer.

Forty years ago there was a general consensus among scholars that went something like this. Stories about the patriarchs and about Moses were handed down orally from generation to generation. As well as this, there would have been small pieces of writing – mostly legal and cultic texts – etched on stone, on metal, or on papyrus, even on plaster.

However, the earliest substantial document of the beginnings of the human race, of the story of the patriarchs, and of Moses – so it was thought – was composed during the reign of King Solomon (10th century BC). Scholars identified this document (**J**) by its use of YHWH (German **JHWH**) as a name for God prior to the time of Moses. Solomon, according to this hypothesis, saw to it that the stories circulating in the various sanctuaries of Israel and Judah were committed to writing. It was his way of consolidating the union achieved by his father, David. This seemed an attractive hypothesis forty years ago, but closer scrutiny of the texts by scholars, as well as the findings of archaeology, have made it untenable. The economic and social conditions necessary to support a project of writing in any substantial way first occurred not in Judah, but in Israel in the latter part of the eighth century.

Scholars discerned a strand of writing from Israel that differed from **J** in its perspective and language. They gave it the distinguishing symbol (**E**) because, when writing about the time before Moses, it spoke of God simply as God ('Elohim). They thought that it, like **J**, was a substantial document covering the story of the beginnings, of the patriarchs and of Moses. Perhaps it was the first major source of the Torah? However, once again, scholarship has brought us to a new place. When the refugees poured into Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria in 721BC, they brought with them stories about Jacob, Joseph and Moses. Some of these stories may well have already passed from oral to written form. They brought their stories about Joshua, the Tribal heroes, Elijah and Elisha. Some of these may have also been in written form. Then there were the saying of the prophets Hosea and Amos, words spoken just before Israel's collapse. Perhaps also some legal and cultic texts. The idea that they may have brought south a substantial unified document, however, has been abandoned.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is a text that is composed to be preached. Its aim is clear: to educate the listener as to the essence of the revelation given to Moses by YHWH. It takes the form of a testament given by Moses to the people as they are preparing to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Before he dies and hands over the leadership to Joshua, Moses takes the people of Israel to the heart of what it is that identifies them as a special people, chosen and set apart by YHWH. He instructs them on how they must live if they are to welcome and enjoy the fruits of this special relationship.

Deuteronomy is clearly different from the other three books that focus on YHWH's revelation to Moses. The books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers show a dominant influence from another School that we will mention shortly: the Priestly School. Those responsible for Deuteronomy – the 'Deuteronomistic School' – are not priests. This will become clear when we compare their treatment of matters concerning the cult with the treatment of the Priestly School. Most scholars today think that Deuteronomy comes from the scribes of the royal court and the school that continued the tradition during and after the exile. They focus on the importance of social ethics. They are also interested in proper worship, but when they speak of it they leave ceremonial detail to those whose special responsibility lies in organising the cult.

The name ‘Deuteronomy’ comes from the Septuagint translation of the text that states: ‘When the king has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests’ (Deuteronomy 17:18). ‘Copy of the law’ (mišneh ha tôrâ) is translated by the Greek word ‘deuteronomion’. The name suits the book for its authors consciously present it as an interpretation, a second look at the tradition which they inherited. The setting for Deuteronomy is Moab, ‘beyond the Jordan’ (Deuteronomy 1:1), not Horeb (Sinai), the mountain on which God revealed himself to Moses. They portray Moses as looking back to Horeb and presenting the revelation to a new generation. Presenting the essence of God’s revelation to new generations is what the Deuteronomic School sees as its aim.

There are good reasons for locating the origins of the School in the northern kingdom as a resistance movement against the compromises allowed and sometimes encouraged by the political leadership in Israel. This came to a head in the eighth century with increasing Assyrian influence. The Deuteronomists would have welcomed the critique offered by the prophets Hosea and Amos in the years leading up to the catastrophic collapse of Samaria (721BC), for the Deuteronomic School and the prophets shared the same zealous opposition to the syncretism, idolatry and injustice which they recognised as a betrayal of all that it means to be YHWH’s chosen people. When the Assyrian army overran Israel and destroyed Samaria, members of the School fled to Judah where they found an ally in King Hezekiah (his reign was probably from 715 to 687BC). It may have been they who helped persuade him that the reason for Israel’s collapse was its infidelity to the covenant, and that the only way to save Judah was to return to loyalty to YHWH. In any case this is what Hezekiah attempted to do.

The situation Hezekiah inherited from his father, Ahaz, was no better than what was happening north of the border. Recognising Assyria as the growing power in the region, Ahaz had tried to win its support against the plotting of both Aram (Syria) and Israel to take control of Judah. The people of Judah reacted to the regional insecurity by indulging their superstitions and worshipping any deity they thought might help them. Ahaz led them in turning to the ancient gods of Canaan (see 2Kings 16).

What happened in Israel persuaded Hezekiah that Assyria could not be trusted, and, encouraged perhaps by the members of the Deuteronomic School, he attempted to bring Judah back to the faithful following of YHWH. Part of his strategy in his war against idolatry and superstition was to centralise the cult in Jerusalem. This involved destroying the other sanctuaries in Judah. When writing a summary of Hezekiah’s reign, the Deuteronomic School reveals its admiration for what he tried to do:

He did what was right in the sight of YHWH just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole ... He trusted in YHWH the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to YHWH; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses. YHWH was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

2Kings 18:3-7

His rebellion against Assyria, occasioned by the death of Sargon in 705BC, was short lived. The authors of 2Kings go on to tell of the siege of Jerusalem (701BC) and its ‘miraculous’ escape. However Judah was completely ravaged and the price of Jerusalem’s survival was an enormous tribute paid to Assyria. The collapse of Judah meant the collapse, too, of Hezekiah’s attempt at religious reform. Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, inherited his father’s failed revolt and had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. There would have been those in Judah, including probably priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh’s long reign (687-642). Things fell apart religiously (see the Deuteronomic judgment on him in 2Kings 21), but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity. The members of the Deuteronomic School went underground, and it was probably in these years that they wrote a lot of what was to develop into the Book of Deuteronomy. They planned it as a blueprint for a loyal king whom they trusted God would send them: one who would no longer swear allegiance as a vassal of a foreign king, but who would lead his people to be loyal vassals to the great lord, YHWH. Manasseh’s son, Amon, succeeded his father on the throne but was assassinated after only two years and in 640BC Amon’s eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne. There is no record of who was responsible for the assassination, or who acted as regent while Josiah was still a boy, but Josiah developed into just the kind of king the Deuteronomic School had been praying for. Asshurbanipal, king of Assyria, died in 628, and Josiah, now twenty and able to take control in his own name, picked up where his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had left off.

Assyria was preoccupied with the rising power of Babylon (in fact, its empire was falling apart), and Josiah took the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for the previous sixty years. He was determined to win back for Judah the kingdom reigned over by David, and he brooked no opposition to reforming the religious life of his people. Summarising his reign, the historians of the Deuteronomic School wrote:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

This was the graced opportunity that the members of the Deuteronomic School had been waiting for. They had a champion ready to carry out with rigorous efficiency the reform for which they had been preparing. According to the account written by the Deuteronomic historians (but absent from the account given by the Chronicler, see 2Chronicles 34-35), on Josiah’s orders the temple was being cleared of Assyrian altars with a view to being reconsecrated, when a document, called ‘the book of the law’, was discovered. This was 622BC. We are told that when Josiah heard ‘the words of the book of the law’ he

made a covenant before YHWH, to follow YHWH, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

– 2Kings 23:3

According to the account in the Book of Kings, the document expressed YHWH's anger against his people and threatened punishment for just the kind of behaviour that had brought about the collapse of Israel and that had flourished in Judah under Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh. This discovery re-inforced Josiah's determination to purify Judah and the reconquered territories of all signs of cult of any other deity but YHWH. Josiah insisted that all cult had to take place in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else. This centralising of the cult was the single most influential change brought about by Josiah's reform. It is backed up again and again in Deuteronomy, and accounts for many changes that dramatically affected the way worship was carried out in Judah. Things would never be the same again. Did this document contain the blueprint of the reform that the Deuteronomists had been sedulously preparing?

There is not enough evidence to draw a certain conclusion, but what is certain is the close parallel between the reforms that Josiah put in place and the legislation in Deuteronomy. For the next eighteen years Josiah went from success to success. He cleared Judah and the reconquered territories of cult sites, and expanded the borders in every direction. However, tragedy struck in 609BC when the Egyptian Pharaoh, Necho, on his way to support Assyria in its war with Babylon, had Josiah assassinated at Megiddo. The young king (he was only thirty-nine) who carried with him the ideals of the Deuteronomic School was dead. In 597BC Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadrezzar, and Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, and the leading citizens were taken into exile. Ten years later an ill-conceived revolt led to the destruction of the city and the temple and a second wave of exiles.

The Babylonian Exile

What manuscripts did the fleeing exiles take with them into exile? There were some prophetic scrolls as well as writings of the Deuteronomic School. There were fragments, and perhaps more than fragments, of patriarchal stories from the north and from Judah. There were individual texts covering aspects of social organisation from Samaria and Jerusalem. The priests would have put in writing some regulations covering key aspects of the cult, perhaps from Shiloh or other local sanctuaries, and also from the Jerusalem temple. There were individual stories about Moses and about the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, as well as struggles the different tribal groups had in Canaan and in Transjordan. There would have been records from Samaria and Jerusalem of battles and treaties. But if we think in terms of a continuous organised account that includes primeval history, the patriarchal narratives, the epic of the Exodus, the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, the sojourn of Israel in the wilderness, and the conquest of Canaan, the evidence available favours the conclusion that at the beginning of the exile (early sixth century BC) no such document yet existed.

This leads to a most significant conclusion. The Torah as we have it was composed against the background of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the end of the monarchy, and the exile in Babylon. We should expect to find these calamitous events casting a huge shadow over the text, as well as supplying the key questions that the authors were desperate to answer as they pieced their story together.

The Babylonian Exile (597-538BC) demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances that they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701BC – despite all this, the Babylonian army had razed YHWH's city to the ground.

Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, they had lost their king. Despite their belief that the temple was the house of their God, YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national, institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic success. In Babylon, they found themselves living in what was, in many ways, a superior culture, but not religiously. The concept of monotheism (there is only one God), as distinct from monolatry (among the gods only YHWH is to be worshipped) began to emerge (see Isaiah 44:6-23; 45:18-25), as well as a sense of their missionary vocation (see Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:6). Instead of identifying themselves in relation to the Davidic dynasty, they began to see themselves as a community defined by worship. In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray. This was the beginning of the institution of the synagogue, which has remained central to Judaism ever since. They had to ask themselves how the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy could have happened. It was impossible for them to contemplate the possibility that their God, YHWH, was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians.

So they concluded that it must have been their God who brought about the catastrophe that they were experiencing. Since God is just, the problem had to be their infidelity to their part of the covenant, and they interpreted their loss and suffering as God's punishment for their sin, as God's way of purifying them.

Where had they gone wrong? What must they do to bring about the purification without which they could not enjoy God's blessing? These are some of the questions that were being asked by a number of different 'Schools' during the long years of exile. Since our focus is the Torah, we will concentrate on two of the Schools: the Deuteronomistic School (**D**) and the Priestly School (**P**). We are left to imagine the dialogue, debate and discussion that went on between them, and with the other concerned groups, struggling to make sense of what had happened to them, among which the Isaiah School played an especially significant role.

The 'Deuteronomistic School' composed a 'history' from the beginnings of Israel's presence in the land through to the Exile. The word 'history' is put in quotation marks, for the aim was not to create an accurate record of historical facts, though such facts can be found in what they wrote. The aim, rather, was to focus on what God had done and was doing among them, and on their obedience or disobedience to God. The aim was to inspire fidelity to the essential elements of the covenant that they believed their ancestors had entered into with God, a covenant that identified them as a people. They were convinced that only obedience would ensure blessing and so success.

The Deuteronomic and Priestly Schools

Besides composing a history, the Deuteronomic School continued to work on the Book of Deuteronomy, which, like the other books of the Torah, is the fruit of a long editorial process. In his *Deuteronomy: issues and interpretation* (T&T Clark, 2002, page 9), Alexander Rofé writes:

It seems that Deuteronomy incorporates some four centuries of legal, historical and meditative work, from the tenth century to the sixth. This legacy came from the prophetic, priestly and court-wisdom circles, all of which contributed to the special literary form of the book: the admonitory and persuasive oration.

Not all scholars would go back as far as the tenth century, and some would see the process continuing beyond the sixth century into post-exilic Judah. The Deuteronomists treated the texts with the greatest reverence and care. They believed that YHWH was guiding their history and they pored over the written scrolls, searching for YHWH's will for them as a people. In Rofé's words: 'they wrote under the burden of inheritance' (page 226). However, they wrote, necessarily, from their own perspective, and it is wonderful that, right at the heart of the Torah, we have their view to supplement, enrich and provide a balance to that of the Priestly School that had a dominant role in the production of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History has been called the Bible's first great theological synthesis.

It seems that the key role in composing the Torah as we have it was taken by priests. Beginning, perhaps, in the exile, and continuing for a number of generations after the return to Judah, it was probably this Priestly School (**P**) who first linked the narrative of creation and the flood, the patriarchal narrative and the Exodus narrative in one work, and so produced Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus, followed later by the Book of Numbers. Their primary interest, as one would expect, was to ensure that the relationship of Israel with YHWH was in accordance with the traditions handed down. Besides reflecting on their own experience, they studied the manuscripts, including the priestly material that they inherited, intent on systematising so that every aspect of God's revealed will would be obeyed.

Back in Judah after the Return from Exile

As their work developed, the various 'Schools' that were responsible for the compiling of the Pentateuch had not only the experience of the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile to ponder over, they also experienced the 'miracle' of the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia, and his edict allowing the exiles to return home to the Promised Land. In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006) page 94 Jean Louis Ska SJ writes: 'The legislative texts and the narratives have been re-read, corrected, reinterpreted and updated several times in accordance with new situations and the need to answer new questions.' He goes on to say (page 141): 'The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community within the Persian Empire created a new situation that undoubtedly called for the revision and reinterpretation of the "data" presented by the sources and the most ancient traditions.' Ska speaks of 'the Priestly Writer' and says: 'He knows the ancient sources and presupposes that the reader knows them. He dialogues with these traditions, corrects and reinterprets them, and proposes a new vision of Israel's history. Throughout all of this he develops his own theology, which is both independent of and related to the ancient tradition' (page 147).

There is a tendency today (not all are in agreement) to locate the Yahwist (if he existed at all) in the post-exilic period, too, and to see his work not as a source but as redactional. He worked on the writings of the Deuteronomic and Priestly Schools to produce a comprehensive text. In any case, we are on solid ground if we think of the final work of composition of the Torah as reflecting the concerns of the post-exilic period. Determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the post-exilic authors wanted to form again the people of Israel, worshipping God faithfully in the restored temple and faithful to the covenant made with them long ago by God. If we place ourselves among these returned exiles we are giving ourselves the best opportunity to read the Torah as it was composed to be read.

Those who produced the Torah in the period after the exile saw their experience as in many ways a reliving of the experience of Moses and their ancestors, who, like them, had lived in exile and had been led across the desert to the Promised Land. They wanted to tell again the story of Moses, to recall the wonders of God's power, mercy and faithfulness. They wanted to tell the story again in a way that their contemporaries could identify their experiences as like those of their ancestors, and so learn from the past what it means to live as God's chosen people. They faithfully included the material that had come down to them from Israel and Judah – how much, we do not know. They did not want to experience again the terrible years of abandonment and exile, so they wanted to warn their contemporaries not to repeat the sins of their forebears, but to live pure lives in accordance with God's will as that will had come down to them from their ancestors.

The post-exilic authors saw their experience also as a re-living of the experience of the patriarchs, for like the patriarchs, they had come from outside and were living in a land, promised to them, but not possessed by them (see the introduction to the patriarchal narratives on page 102-103). They gathered the stories available to them – how much, we do not know – and put them together in such a way as to reflect on the faithfulness of God to his promises, thus encouraging the returned exiles and the people who had stayed behind to continue to believe in the promise and the mission given them by God.

While in Babylon the exiles had come into contact with myths about the beginnings of the world and of the human race – myths like that of Atrahasis, composed in the ancient Akkadian language of the 17th century BC, and the Enuma Elish of the 12th century BC. The priest authors placed the stories of the patriarchs and Moses within the larger perspective of YHWH, the lord of creation as well as of history. They wanted to show that they traced themselves as a people right back to the beginnings. More than that, it was they, the people of Israel, through whom God had chosen to reveal his true Self to the world. They wanted to be faithful to this mission.

What these authors wrote for their contemporaries has a value that transcends the world of Judah in the late sixth and fifth centuries. The continued use of and respect for the text is proof enough of that. However, as has been mentioned a number of times, the closer we can get to the historical context which gave rise to these writings, the more we can appreciate their precise beauty and truth. We cannot always be clear about the origin of the various pieces that they weaved into their final work.

But we can, to some degree, discover why the post-exilic writers placed them where we now find them in the text, how they introduced them and linked them, and how they understood them in the light of their exilic and post-exilic experiences. To the extent that we can do this we can be confident that we are in touch with the inspired text, and we can be protected against reading meanings into it that are at variance with the inspired intention of those responsible for the text as we have it.

Those who were attempting to build a community in Judah that was faithful to the religion of Israel wanted to write the story of Israel in a way that was faithful to tradition and was expressed in ways that would connect with the experiences of their day. One of the stories in the Jacob Narrative captures an essential element of their experience. To enter the Promised Land Jacob had to struggle with his demons (Genesis 32:24-32). He carried the scars of that encounter for the rest of his life, but he did enter the land. So it was with those who composed this story and the book of which it is part. They had gone through their struggle – the exile in Babylon – and it had left them scarred (we will look at some of the scars shortly), but, against all the odds, and in a way that they could think of only as miraculous, they were back in the Promised Land – ‘the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them’ (Deuteronomy 1:8). The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God of Israel – had proved faithful to them, and they wanted to express in written words – and so in a way that would never be forgotten – the story of God’s dealings with their people.

They had experienced a terrible disaster, but also an amazing resurrection. Faced with the need to re-establish themselves as a people in the very different circumstances of a reduced Judah ruled from Persia, it was all the more important to assert that their God, YHWH, is the God who created the universe and the nations. If Judah was under Persian control, that must be God’s will and so it must have a good purpose. Their return was itself a proof of the power and fidelity of YHWH to the promises made to their ancestors. The people must continue to put their faith in this God and to trust that they were still God’s chosen people. Hence the insistence of the text that it is YHWH who created the earth. Hence the insistence of the text that the God who revealed Himself to Moses, the God of Israel, is the God of the patriarchs – the same God who brought them back to their land.

The best way to read the Torah is to put ourselves among the returned exiles and hear it as they would have heard it, keeping in mind that the texts witness to different ways of understanding that history. We, too, need to hold in tension the material from the Priestly School, the Deuteronomic School, and the other ‘Schools’, as they searched for the right way to be faithful to YHWH’s choice and mission.

Factors to remember in reading ancient texts

Ska (pages 165-183) highlights factors that we, as modern readers, need to be aware of as we read the text. I will note three of them here. The first is that, for the authors of the Torah and for those for whom they wrote, the value of anything is directly related to its age: the more ancient, the more value. This is not something that we moderns see as obvious.

For the ancients it was of primary importance. This is why genealogies are so important. They establish the antiquity of a family or an institution. This is why they begin their legislation so often with: ‘YHWH said to Moses’. They want the readers to reflect on the origins of their faith and to read the text as expressing insight into the essence of the revelation that brought them into being in the beginning.

Genesis is an imaginary reconstruction of the Patriarchal Period, for the authors wanted their contemporaries to relate their experiences to that of their ancestors. The monarchy had failed, but the religion of Israel went back well before the monarchy. The temple had been destroyed, but the cult went back well before the temple. Assyria, Babylon and Persia had proved more powerful militarily than Israel, but it was YHWH, the God of Israel, who created the universe and the nations – all of them.

A major problem facing the returning exiles is that those who had not gone into exile resented their return. The returning exiles wanted to reclaim their land – land that others had occupied in their absence thinking that they would never come back. The returning exiles identified closely with Moses and the people who had escaped from Egypt. Those who had stayed in the land identified with Abraham. A key reason for composing the Pentateuch was to form a united people. It was imperative that both groups come to see that the God who revealed Himself to Moses is the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ (Exodus 3:6).

Linked to this respect for what is ancient is the essentially conservative stance of the authors. For them ancient laws and customs could not be eliminated even when circumstances required their updating. Whatever may have happened in earlier times, the leaders of post-exilic Judah were anxious to be completely faithful to God’s will, so they were meticulously careful not to attempt to harmonise the material that they inherited, even though some of it no longer applied to their changed circumstances. After all, such was their faith in God’s presence and action among them that they considered their laws and customs to have a divine origin: a faith expressed in the words ‘YHWH said’.

They believed that it is God who commanded them to act in certain ways. Of course, God is a living God, and so is free to reveal his will in different situations, and to ‘update’ the law. But they were not free to put aside God’s commands even when God himself had chosen to transcend them. So we will find in the text the ancient law and the more recent updating side by side. We will find ancient and modern accounts of past ‘history’ side by side.

A third and related factor was their desire to demonstrate that the ancient traditions had an ongoing value for their contemporaries. They preserved the ancient material, not as museum pieces, but because they saw it as a revelation from God and they trusted that it could still guide them. We will see how they attempted to point this out in the way they told the stories and in the way they commented on the text. They did not want their contemporaries to get caught up in nostalgia for the past. It was important that they live now in a way that was faithful to God and that would avoid the mistakes of the past for which they had paid such a high price.

It follows from this that, though we have some uncertainty as to how much written material the authors of the text received from earlier generations of writers, we should be confident that the post-exilic authors have a vision of Israel/Judah that transcended their own experience and their own time. The way God is portrayed as relating to human beings and the way religion is expressed in the primeval narrative (Genesis 1-11), and in the patriarchal narrative (Genesis 12-50), is significantly different from the way God is portrayed and religion expressed in the books that aim to capture the essence of Mosaic Yahwism. Though it is clear that the post-exilic authors have adapted the stories (orally transmitted or already written) to speak to the needs of a much later time than that of the patriarchs or Moses, they wanted to present an understanding of God and of God's relationship to the people of Israel, indeed to the world, that reflects the different periods of their history till it reached its highest point in the revelation given to Moses.

Defective concepts of God

We began this Introduction by pointing out that beauty and truth are always precise, delineated, defined. We then examined what we mean when we claim that the Bible is inspired. Now, in the light of what we have written about the necessarily limited views of those inspired by God to compose these texts, we should look at some of the main limitations of understanding that pervade the literature we are about to study, both in regard to their way of conceiving God, and in their way of understanding the appropriate human response to God's revelation. I am encouraged to do this by the words of Karl Rahner: 'Theology can create openings for adventures of the mind and heart, if we have but the courage to embark upon them, and both the courage and the humility to retrace our steps as soon as we become aware of having erred' (*Inspiration in the Bible*, page 7).

There are as many concepts of God as there are minds that conceive, for God cannot be observed directly, put to the test, and made subject to human comprehension and definition. Many concepts of God are clearly erroneous: the so-called 'god' who controls the world from outside; the so-called 'god' who is exalted at the expense of humanity; the so-called 'god' who upholds vested interests, who justifies the successful, who supports apartheid, patriarchy, hypocritical piety, immature dependency and infantile illusions. 'God' can be a projection of our fears: another word for fate, the stars, demons. 'God' can be a projection of our needs for self-indulgence, prestige, or power. 'God' can be a support for our insecurity, anchoring a meaningless life in submission to a power-object. We should not expect the authors of the Pentateuch to be completely free from some of these erroneous ways of thinking. As we emphasised when we looked at inspiration, if God is going to inspire someone to communicate a truth, God is going to have to inspire a limited human being. There are no unlimited human beings to inspire! We do not have to assume that the authors of the texts we are going to study knew everything about everything, and, if we are going to appreciate the truth that they were inspired to write, we need to be aware of where their thinking was limited. Three key areas stand out.

Monotheism

Firstly, not all the material we are about to study is clear on the subject of monotheism. The first eleven chapters of Genesis point in that direction. God the Creator is identified as YHWH, the God of Israel, and the stars, worshipped as gods in Babylon, are declared to be creatures. The rest of Genesis presents a picture of the God of the family of Israel's ancestors. It is not polytheistic, but neither is it consciously monotheistic. In many of the texts of Exodus, however, polytheism seems to be assumed. It is sufficient to recall the commandment: 'You shall not have strange gods before me' (Exodus 20:3). YHWH as conceived in these texts is a very Israelite God. Only one God was to be worshipped, YHWH, not the gods of foreign nations, or the gods of Canaan.

True, in the post-exilic period, the idea of monotheism was in the air, but how thorough was it? Genuine monotheism includes the amazing insight that the mysterious divine presence with whom we experience a profound communion is the one 'God' present and revealed in different ways in different cultures. The writings we are going to study often show the kind of profound respect for other peoples that is surely essential to genuine monotheism. But not always. Where they fall short they fall short of genuine monotheism, for if one genuinely believes that it is the one God who is at the heart of everything, and is expressed and revealed through everything, then one would not disrespect others just because they are different from 'us'. We would still have to deal with error – our own and other people's, but surely monotheism includes the insight that everything is fundamentally an expression of the one Source and so is fundamentally sacred.

Enemies of Israel are enemies of God

A second assumption found throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the enemies of Israel are also the enemies of God: Abraham is promised that his offspring 'will possess the gate of their enemies' (Genesis 22:17), and Judah is told that his hand will be 'on the neck of your enemies' (Genesis 49:8). This idea is more pronounced in the other books of the Torah: 'Have no dread or fear of them. YHWH your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you' (Deuteronomy 1:29-30); 'I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes' (Exodus 23:22; see Numbers 31). We will find texts that open up to a more universalist view of God's love. It is this more universalist view that is endorsed by Jesus: 'You have heard that it was said: you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matthew 5:43-45).

A God who controls the world

A third assumption is that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment. This way of looking at things permeates the texts we are studying. The basis for this misunderstanding is their way of thinking of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control.

Ways of conceiving God

When the authors think of God as ‘Almighty’, declaring their faith that there are no limits to God’s power, they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God’s love-power that has no limits, not God’s exercise of control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus’ contemporaries to see God’s ‘almighty power’ revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as ‘a stumbling block for the Jews’ (1Corinthians 1:23).

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he didn’t punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control.

The texts we are about to study are clear in presenting the compassion and fidelity of God. They are also aware of the responsibility of human beings for bringing about the suffering that we experience. However, they still portray God as the one who brings about the Flood (Genesis 6:13), and who rains down fire and brimstone over Sodom (Genesis 19:24). In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: ‘Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end’ (1Corinthians 13:7-8).

We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, by loving. When creation is open to God’s action, beautiful, ‘miraculous’ things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is essentially free and not determined. We experience this. When we open ourselves to welcome God’s providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God’s gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. Many of the texts we will be reading state this, and state it beautifully, but they are not consistent, and the way the authors understand God’s relationship with the world is quite different.

We do not see God favouring the Babylonians over Jerusalem just because they were victorious. So we do not assume that Jerusalem was destroyed because of human sin. However, it is clear that the authors of the Torah thought this way. Jesus’ contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong.

We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We don't – or at least we shouldn't – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. He was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will. What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The authors of the texts we are about to read understood miracles as divine intervention, rather than as examples of what happens when we human beings open ourselves to God's constant loving action in our lives and in our world. To use Jesus' image, the sun and the rain are constant and are offered to everyone. 'Miracles' are what happens when we welcome God's action and allow God's grace to bear fruit in our lives.

The understanding present in the texts we are about to read is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others to do the same. If we were to do this, think of the 'miracles' that would happen in this world: miracles that only love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: 'Not my will but yours be done' (Mark 14:36).

In the course of history these texts have inspired people from every culture. Their meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them.

We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find. But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the meaning of the words used – the meaning then, not now – and the literary forms, and the way the editors chose to link their sources. I hope the value of this undertaking will be clear to those who choose to walk this journey with me. It has been my pleasure and privilege to be guided by the scholars who have devoted their time and talent to guiding me. I hope you enjoy the journey.

It was in Judah, in this small section of the Persian Empire (see the map on page 30) that the texts as they have come down to us were composed.

