ENCOUNTERING SCRIPTURE

ENCOUNTERING SCRIPTURE

A scientist explores the Bible

John Polkinghorne

SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 2010

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–06253–9

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by JF Print

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

To my friends in the Parish of the Good Shepherd, Cambridge

Contents

Introduction

Scripture has been very important to me in my Christian life. For more than sixty years I have read the Bible every day and when in middle life I was ordained as an Anglican priest, I undertook the welcome duty of saying the Daily Office. Every year this takes me through the whole of the New Testament, and a good deal of the Old Testament.

The Bible is in many ways a very complex book. The material in it was written over a period of about a thousand years and the process of compilation ended almost two thousand years ago. The biblical writings originated in a variety of contrasting cultures, all with world views different in many respects from our modern, scientifically influenced understanding. Often biblical writers took over stories and insights from earlier ages, modifying and developing them in ways that seemed appropriate to their own times and experience, producing a text that is many-layered like an archaeological site. Much that we read in the Bible may seem strange to us, particularly in the Old Testament, where there are stories of war and violence that trouble us by being presented as if they were fulfilments of the express will of God. Sometimes, when different writers are telling the story of the same events, as is often the case in the Gospels for instance, there are discrepancies of detail that make it clear that we are reading human compositions, and not the result of an inerrant divine dictation. Despite these problems, all of which I shall have to confront in what follows, there is great spiritual truth and beauty to be found in Scripture. Anyone who has listened

to a performance of Handel's *Messiah*, where the text is drawn wholly from the Bible, will have caught a glimpse of the majestic power and hopeful promise that are to be found in the pages of Scripture. Moreover, without the New Testament we would know essentially nothing about Jesus Christ, one of the most striking and influential figures of all time and someone who is of dominant significance in the spiritual history of humankind. The Bible is an indispensable foundational source for Christian thinking.

I have written this little book in the hope that it will be helpful to those who are seeking a careful and thoughtful engagement with the Bible in their quest for a truthful understanding of the ways of God and the nature of spiritual reality, but who are not necessarily concerned to enter into an exhaustive academic study of these issues. I think of the book as a reconnaissance because I want to explore the landscape of Scripture in a manner that notes and takes seriously many of its features, both inspiring and perplexing, but which does not attempt to give an account of the whole biblical terrain. My concern will centre on carefully selected typical examples of what one will encounter on a journey through biblical territory. What I am seeking to offer is a series of insights that have helped me in my own engagement with the Bible, illustrating what I have to say by appropriate citations that raise the issues that I want to address, while not pretending to attain an encyclopedic completeness in what I have to say.

In reading Scripture we should expect to find both inspiration and information. Christianity is a historically oriented religion. Its foundational stories, Christians believe, are not simply symbolic tales given us to stir our imaginations, but are rooted in God's actual acts of self-disclosure, mediated

through particular persons and events. Therefore there is an evidential aspect to what we are told in the Bible. Scripture offers us testimony that has to be evaluated in a careful and honest way when assessing the degree of historical accuracy that is embodied in its pages.

When I became a middle-aged student at a theological college, the lectures I most enjoyed were those concerned with biblical studies. I had had a long career as a theoretical physicist, and the instinct of a scientist in approaching any new field of enquiry is to ask first what are the basic phenomena that will motivate and control the search for a truthful understanding of what is going on. In considering questions of Christian belief, the Bible gives us accounts of the history of Israel, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the first thoughts and experiences of his earliest followers. These are the foundational phenomena of the Christian tradition. I wish to assess them with care and intellectual scrupulosity and so I have endeavoured in this book not to make assertions that do not have significant scholarly support. I have sought only to say things that I believe I could defend with academically respectable argument, even if I do not always set out here all the detail of that argument, often being content simply to indicate its general character. Since the book is angled to the general reader, rather than to the academy, I have not peppered it with scholarly paragraphs and related footnotes that would seek to make good my claim for academic respectability by delving into details of specialist studies. For a similar reason, I have concentrated on trying to illuminate the primary understanding of the text as it stands in the pages of Scripture, rather than moving on to give an account of the extensive theological theorizing that has flowed from that text. In discussing New

Testament issues, for example, my concern is with questions such as the reliability of our knowledge of the historical Jesus and the attitudes of the first generation of Christians, rather than the subsequent history of Christological thinking in the Church. Nevertheless, theological theorizing cannot be wholly absent, and I do comment from time to time about how ancient scriptural insights might relate to modern scientific understandings. But that is not the main burden of the book. Its principal purpose is simply to help the contemporary reader to engage in a serious and intellectually responsible encounter with the Bible.

For those who might want to take the academic issues further, I have added a Further Reading section in which I list a highly selective number of books that I believe might prove useful resources. All my scriptural quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. It is the version I mostly use in my own reading, because it seems to me to stick closely to, and to convey well, the sense of the original Greek and Hebrew.

1

Scripture

Ancient pictures of the four evangelists sometimes show them sitting at their desks while a small bird, representing the Holy Spirit, whispers in their ear to tell them what to write. Is that what the Bible is: a divinely dictated book, every word of which conveys absolute and unquestionable truth? I do not think so. For me it is something altogether more subtle. Just as God does not write universal messages in the sky but works more hiddenly, inspiring and guiding individuals and communities, so in a similar way Scripture is inspired by God but written by human beings, in order to be interpreted and understood by them in their succeeding generations. To use an analogy that comes naturally to me as a scientist, the Bible is not the ultimate textbook in which one can look up ready-made answers to all the big questions, but is more like a laboratory notebook, in which are recorded critical historical experiences through which aspects of the divine will and nature have been most accessibly revealed. I believe that the nature of divine revelation is not the mysterious transmission of infallible propositions which are to be accepted without question, but the record of persons and events through which the divine will and nature have been most transparently made known.

Together with their Jewish brothers and sisters, Christians believe that God chose ancient Israel as the people through whose history the divine purpose for all humanity would begin to be most clearly disclosed. It might perhaps seem odd for God to have concentrated on a single nation in this way, and I certainly do not think it means that there was no divine concern for other peoples. In fact, I believe that all the great world faith traditions preserve, in their different manners and in different degrees, genuine accounts of encounter with sacred reality. Yet I believe that God's dealing with Israel had a special significance. This specific focus on Israel reflects an aspect of what it means to speak of God in personal terms, as 'Father' rather than 'Force'. The force of gravity is always the same. It will cause the death of saints and sinners alike if they step off the top of a tall building. Persons are different. They express their personhood by behaving in specific ways in response to specific situations. Of course, personal language about God is being used in some 'stretched' or analogical sense – no one believes that God is an old man with a beard way above the bright blue sky. What this language is seeking to express is the important truth that God is not simply a Being of abstract generality – a universal creative principle, or the God of the philosophers, say – but a God who does particular things with particular people in particular circumstances. The calling of Israel, and the role of particular persons in its history (the individual prophets, for example), reflect this personal style of divine self-disclosure.

This 'scandal of particularity', as it is sometimes called, is even more intensely encountered in the form of a second belief, foundational to Christianity, which asserts the unique significance of Jesus Christ. At the heart of Christian faith

lies the mysterious and exciting idea that the infinite and invisible God, beyond finite human powers to conceive adequately, has acted to make the divine nature known in the most fitting and accessible manner possible through the life of a first-century Jew in whom humanity and divinity were both truly present. I shall not stop here to explain why I believe this astonishing claim to be true (it is a task that I have attempted elsewhere; see Further Reading), but it is essential to grasp this belief if we are to understand the proper role that Scripture plays in Christian thinking. The Word of God uttered to humanity is not a written text but a life lived, a painful and shameful death accepted, and the divine faithfulness vindicated through the great act of Christ's resurrection. Scripture contains witness to the incarnate Word, but it is not the Word himself. Its testimony is that 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only Son, full of grace and truth' (John 1.14).

For the Christian, the unique significance of the Bible is that it gives us indispensable accounts of God's acts in Israel and in Jesus Christ. Without that scriptural record we would know little about Israel and very little indeed about Jesus of Nazareth. These events happened in the course of history and the accounts that we have of them necessarily originated at specific times and in particular cultural contexts. Yet the revelatory character claimed for them implies that insights of enduring significance are embedded in the pages of Scripture. A central task for the Christian interpreter of Scripture is to discern what in the Bible has lasting truthful authority, rightly commanding the continuing respect of successive generations, and what is simply time-bound cultural expression, demanding no necessary continuing allegiance

from us today. Absolutely no one is free from having to make judgements of this kind. Even the most conservative biblical interpreters are not so single-mindedly fundamentalist as to feel that they must refrain from planting two kinds of seed in the same field or wearing clothes made of two sorts of material (Leviticus 19.19; Deuteronomy 22.9–11). These injunctions are so obviously irrelevant to us today that their abandonment passes essentially unnoticed in the Christian community. At quite the other end of the spectrum is the much more serious and perplexing issue, about which there is a great deal of strongly expressed contemporary disagreement, of what degree of relevance there might be for the Christian today in the clearly expressed prohibition of homosexual sexual intercourse given in Leviticus 18.22. Is this simply a condemnation uttered in a society which saw such activity as wilful perversion and had no possible notion of the modern insight that there is a significant innate element in sexual orientation? Or is it much more than that? The problems that are currently agitating the Anglican Communion on this issue essentially arise from deep-seated differences concerning the nature of Scripture and scriptural authority.

The issue of what is temporary and culturally adventitious in Scripture and what is permanently insightful and authoritative is not confined to the Old Testament. Almost all Christians today treat Paul's emphatic insistence on women covering their heads at worship (1 Corinthians 11.2–16) as no more than a culturally specific way of expressing a degree of dignified respect, in a manner that was appropriate in his particular society but which is not binding on ours. But equally, all Christians will attach abiding significance to the verses that follow (23–26), which give Paul's account of

Christ's institution of Holy Communion at the Last Supper. The problem of discriminating between the time-bound and the permanent is one that will recur throughout this book.

Not all of the Bible is great literature. Some parts are plainly pedestrian and some downright boring (for example, 1 Chronicles 1—8). Yet much of its writing is profound and touches us at very deep levels. In the English-speaking world, the King James Version (AV) contains some of the most moving and best loved passages in our literature. Its cadences have been an influence shaping English literary style over centuries, and many of its characters have powerful archetypal status, even today. Think of the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Samson and David. There is an inexhaustibly rich character to all great literature, whose depths are never fully plumbed. There is always the possibility of further meaning awaiting the receptive reader. One of the defects of a self-confident and narrow Biblicism is to ignore this fact by attempting to insist on the single meaning of an allegedly plain text. Such an approach may suit the cookery book, but it will not do for the Bible. Of course, I am not arguing for an 'anything goes' approach to scriptural interpretation, but affirming the expectation that a multilayered over-plus of meaning will often be found in the sacred text. We shall see something of this flexible search for significance when we come later to consider how the New Testament writers made use of the Hebrew Bible, which provided them with their scriptural context. In the early Christian centuries, the Church Fathers often sought to recognize four levels of meaning present in the Bible, essentially the literal, the moral, the symbolic and the spiritual. Sometimes this scheme could lead to strange flights of fanciful interpretation, but in general it was a sound insight to be open to the wealth of