Introduction

'Questions are the new Answers'
(advertisement, New York City, April 2010)

Every couple of months I contribute to my BBC local radio station's 'Friday Reflection'. Broadcast live just after the 6 a.m. news bulletin, it provides a few moments to pause in the midst of an otherwise fast-paced mix of presenter banter, music and the inevitable early morning travel and weather reports. Often the presenter emails me in advance, asking me if I'm doing anything interesting that he might mention to listeners (what clergy get up to is a source of never-ending interest). On this particular occasion, I reported that in the days following my broadcast I was to attend a family wedding in a Scottish castle, and deliver a lecture entitled 'Liberating Scripture' at a conference. I predicted that the castle event would invite some further enquiries once I was in the studio. I was wrong. The presenter announced the castle wedding to the listeners, and misread what I had typed about my latter engagement, informing everyone that I was to deliver a lecture on 'Liberating *Sculpture*'. Not surprisingly this caused hilarity; was I lecturing about emptying England's museums of overseas archaeological objects? I wasn't at all prepared for him then to ask me: 'So what's that about, then?' Being live radio, you don't get too much time to prepare your thoughts, so at 6.15 a.m. I said the 'h' word: 'hermeneutics'. 'Herma-*what*?' the presenter quipped. My answer? Simply that hermeneutics is about trying to understand what the Bible is saying, and that I wanted to encourage a

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conversational approach to reading the texts of the Bible, with open hearts and open minds. Driving home, I reflected on this unexpected early morning encounter, realizing that it marked an important stage in my own understanding: a chance remark, a conversation, and, dare I say, an element of humour.[1]

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the formal academic attempt to make sense of the Bible (the history of biblical interpretation). There are plenty of books out there that do a very fine job of discussing these and other related matters.[2] While it is hard to avoid these issues completely, the debates they trigger often seem disconnected from the ground-level experience of looking at a biblical passage, reading it, being confused or inspired by it. Discussions about the minutiae of texts have a place, but there is more to be gained ultimately from an approach that examines the texts as they are and invites conversations about meaning. My own encounter with the Bible has taken a number of forms in the past two decades since I began my university studies as an undergraduate, ranging from academic biblical conferences to pre-school assemblies and other areas of my pastoral ministry, and I have become increasingly frustrated by the inaccessibility of a considerable portion of biblical scholarship to the reality of the places in which the Bible is being read (and misread). The problem of the Western obsession with sin, so often the starting point for interpretation, is that it is invariably fixed, lacking in compassion, and dominated by racial, sexual, gender and tribal interests.[3] Too often we hear that such-and-such an opinion is not 'biblical', implying the Bible speaks with a unified voice on any matter, and saying far more about the desire of some to have power and control. Perhaps ironically, any claim to 'orthodoxy'

needs to be generous, not exclusive; voices 'at the margin' have as much right to be heard as those 'at the centre'.[4]

What this book does aim to do is to encourage the asking of questions, knowing that it is not possible to obtain all the answers, allowing for an encounter with God in the spaces in between. This is itself a path of exploration that is rooted in our own particularity as children of God, allowing our own weakness to be held by God's generous grace. It is an approach modelled by the Wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, present in the New Testament, and which involves the continuing search for meaning in life.[5] This search involves living and learning together despite our differences. As has so often been demonstrated, however, it is the negotiating of those differences that so often makes the Bible seem remote and flat, when what we have in the Bible is a vibrant and varied collection of books that leave plenty of room for disagreement and debate.[6] To encounter the Bible is to stand on holy ground, and any debate about it has something to do with God whether we acknowledge that or not.[7]

The art critic Barnett Newton once said that sculpture is often something we bump into when trying to get a better look at a painting.[8] The Bible is itself something we often 'bump' into when trying to get a perspective on our lives or on someone else's life. Transitional events such as baptisms, weddings and funerals typically contain readings from the Bible. If you are a regular churchgoer, the lectionary provides texts that we might not otherwise choose to encounter.[9] Most people are still familiar with the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23 and Paul's 'hymn to love' in 1 Corinthians 13. Then, of course, we encounter the Bible at key points in the Christian year such as Christmas and Easter. Much like a sculpture, the Bible needs to be properly appreciated through direct encounter: an object in several dimensions. It is not monolithic, but is a library of books ranging

across times and cultures. The English title 'Bible' comes from the Greek word *biblia*, which is plural, meaning 'books'. Certainly the Bible contains a collection that is stable, what we call a 'canon', an accepted grouping and order of books providing a 'rule' or authority that holds the texts together.[10] An analogy from the world of art helps here when thinking about the way in which the Bible holds together multiple texts. A description of an exhibition that brings together works of art from many different time periods, called simply 'Brought Together', reads:

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> collections of art lead something of a double life. Physically, they are mainly orderly and stable things – carefully catalogued and preserved for as long as possible in carefully controlled environments. But their meanings are nowhere near as stable. They change minute by minute, in response to the thoughts and enthusiasms of present-day viewers and the works of other artists.[11]

Paintings are kept safe in galleries, but perhaps there is a risk of overprotecting the Bible in carefully controlled environments such as the church, and the lecture room? Risk, however, is often a necessary part of life, and risk is an inherent part of the story that unfolds in the Bible.[12]

It takes time

This book also suggests that making sense of the Bible is a process that takes time. The need to read and engage slowly runs against the grain of Western culture, where speed typically means success and intelligence.[13] There is a serious problem with attempts to make the Bible readable in 10 words, or 100 minutes, because that hardly makes the Bible more attractive, nor does it allow the richness or diversity of texts to be fully

appreciated. I vividly remember receiving, when I was ordained in 2005, what my fellow ordinands and I nicknamed the 'credit-crunch' Bible, which consists of the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs. 'What about the rest of it?' I wanted to ask the bishop. It is rather like looking at a painting reproduced on a T-shirt or a mug. Gone are the intricate details of the brushwork and the vibrancy of the colours. 'Never trust a placemat,' writes the art critic Justin Paton.[14] Such a reductionist approach to the Bible typically elevates the 'good bits' over the 'bad' or 'boring' bits. Walter Brueggemann says that 'the text lingers'.[15] Of course, it is not just the text itself that 'lingers' but the trajectory of events contained therein that can linger too. In the incident of the woman caught in adultery recorded in John 7, Jesus writes on the ground. What was he writing? Much ink has been spilled on this mystery. Perhaps, however, the answer lies not in *what* he wrote, but in the act of writing itself. Archbishop Rowan Williams suggests that Jesus 'hesitates':

> He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation, tell the woman who she is and what her fate should be. He allows a moment, a longish moment, in which people are given time to see themselves differently precisely because he refuses to make the sense they want.[16]

Unfortunately, we live in a world of full-blown and instant opinion, and the notion that meaning requires finality, when it does not. Stories don't so much give closure as allow for moments of *dis*closure.[17] The reader needs to be prepared to wrestle critically and creatively with the parts of the Bible that seem to be the most confusing, fantastical and abhorrent. It is ultimately about finding an appropriate balance. Rather like a child looking at a painting of soap bubbles and making her cheeks go 'pop', the painting holds us in a moment, but the child's sense of the inevitable moves that moment on.[18] The

texts linger, but they don't stay static. If we don't strive for that balance, that patience, then we surely court unimaginative interpretation that defies our heritage. The 'hermeneutical space' that we all inhabit is broad, yet in the present climate of debates about aspects of Christian belief it is being narrowed by an unwillingness to engage in critical and creative conversation, both with the text and with each other. We can only really engage in conversation if we feel able to, or invited to, and too often conversations seem to exclude rather than invite participation by everyone.[19]

Hospitality

One of the predominant motifs in the Bible that has produced many book-length studies is that of hospitality: of God's generous hospitality, and of our own hospitality to others through following the example of Christ.[20] The point here is that you can't experience hospitality unless you are willing to become vulnerable, to engage, to listen, learn and, crucially, contribute to the process of dialogue with the text, and with others. In order to be truly attentive to someone or some*thing* requires energy; it is not about passively letting it 'wash over us'. To be truly present to each other is to face Christ in each other, and if we face Christ in each other, then lives can be transformed. Too often the level of humility and vulnerability that is required to interpret the Bible is flattened by arrogance and a desire for power and sadly, the Church is often the worst offender. No wonder then that the vast majority of people who might 'bump' into the Bible are either indifferent to it, or crushed and confused by it.

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The chapters of this book represent stages in the (patient) process of the search for meaning. The Polynesian artist Fatu Feu'u suggests that we need to 'go back to origins to find solutions'. Chapter 1, which is perhaps the most in-depth of the chapters, concentrates on the theme of stories contained in the Bible, and related to this, how we tell those stories so as to allow our own lives to draw meaning from the texts, and to contribute meaning to them. This latter exercise is very much the aim of Alan Jacobs, whose work on the role of testimony and the Christian life has influenced my own thinking in this area.[21] Significantly, this desire to go back to origins, to retell, and in so doing to reinterpret for a 'present' context, is a process that is found constantly in the Bible. The author of John's Gospel (re-)presents the 'nativity' of Jesus in a way that is deliberately evocative of the creation story in Genesis 1. In Acts 17 when Paul stands to speak before the assembled crowd in the Athenian Areopagus, his testimony starts with 'the beginning' ('God who made the world and everything in it', 17.24). Even the book of Revelation, perhaps the most misunderstood book in the Bible, begins to make some sense when we read it against the creative struggle first presented in the book of Genesis, the Bible's first book.

While we acknowledge the diversity of stories within the Bible, we must not ignore the observation that for most, the Bible is encountered as a single collection (a literal, physical 'book') and that this 'book' has what a television producer friend of mine once described as 'a narrative arc'. Yet if we take this particular 'arc' to be the covenantal 'arc' (or 'bow') of the flood narrative in Genesis 9.13, then it is fair to say that the stories that make up the colours and contours of that arc represent the variety of paths that prevail. The covenant has its root in the relationship between God and his 'chosen people' Israel, and yet God's 'chosen people' are not God's 'frozen people' (they

have a mind and move about), and the narrative 'arc' does not present itself in an orderly manner.[22] The 'narrative arc' isn't quite how we might imagine it to be. It is anything but 'neat and tidy'.[23]

Chapter 2 explores the theme of 'contexts'. I owe an appreciation of the importance of context in how we find meaning in the Bible to my undergraduate studies and in particular to the work of Professor Philip Esler and the community of biblical scholars known as 'The Context Group', who gather annually to discuss their own research, but do so very firmly rooted in their Christian faith with a strong desire to bridge the gap between their scholarship and Christian life. 'Context' can mean a variety of things, of course, and in this chapter we explore different types of contexts: the literal context in which the texts were written, and the contexts that we the readers try to faithfully inhabit when we encounter those texts. For this latter area I owe a great debt to another of my former teachers, A. K. M. Adam, who helped balance my 'youthful' enthusiasm for the context of the text with a more stringent and self-conscious examination of what it actually 'means' to read the text.[24]

Chapter 3 bears the title 'Encounters'. Here we briefly explore both the heritage of our interpretative tradition and the variety of approaches that have been offered to help us find meaning, all the while wrestling with the reality that just because we have plenty of choice it does not follow that we are more 'free' (as any trip to the cereal aisle of a supermarket will tell you). Insights from other creative media (particularly the world of art) remind us, too, that often the way we 'encounter' (and perhaps 'bump' into) is through direct experience where the texts are being proclaimed, pictured or performed.[25] The encounter should leave us wanting to discern more about the life of the text. In that way, 'hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church' might

be a more helpful liturgical invitation to respond to a reading than the declaration 'this is the word of the Lord'.[26]

Chapter 4 begins to set the tone for how we might continue our task of making sense of the Bible: through examining the medium of 'conversations'. The way to make anyone listen is not to shout, but rather to speak quietly and clearly (perhaps even to whisper). In 1 Kings 19 Elijah encounters God in the 'still small voice' rather than the louder options that were available to him. There are countless examples of conversations in the texts of the Bible, and of the search for meaning in those conversations: Job's dialogue with his friends about his life situation, Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in John 4 in which he reveals his true identity for the first time ('I am [he]', 4.26), to name just two. The purpose of conversation is ultimately that some sort of connection is made. Connection is not about thinking exactly the same thing, but it does not negate 'the complex unity of God's purpose'.[27] As this excerpt from E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End* suggests, connection is made to achieve an important outcome:

> *Only connect!* That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.

We should not just be connecting with the elements we can see or know for ourselves; we should be seeking out the voices in the conversation that are missing (not just the voices of present-day readers, but the voices contained in the texts themselves). Furthermore, the issue of language itself becomes relevant. We encounter the texts of the Bible in translation, and translation is itself an act of interpretation. Then, of course, there are those elements in conversation that are unspoken, and perhaps even more open to misinterpretation. Yet followed faithfully and

actively, the hermeneutical process can lead to greater meaning through an appreciation of the disparate voices that are participants in the conversation between ourselves and the texts, and between ourselves and those with whom we are in dialogue. This is very much at the heart of traditions that form part of our Christian heritage, particularly the Jewish rabbinical method of interpretation. Ultimately there is truly something of value at stake in the conversation, particularly if we acknowledge the desire to know more about ourselves and about God when we encounter the texts. Hermeneutical theories are all very well, but the 'So what?' question lingers as we seek further meaning in more overtly theological questions, such as 'What is God like?' The conversation doesn't end with the interpretation; it continues, held by God's overwhelming grace.

When all is said and done, this book is about more than making sense of the Bible; it is about making sense of who we are in relationship to God. The incarnation is surely one of the most profoundly engaging and risk-taking images that the Bible offers us. The occasion of God fully embracing humanity in all its messy diversity is an active and dynamic reality that rightly requires the perspective of a variety of angles. It is no wonder that the story of the incarnation is presented in different ways by the Gospel writers (Matthew 1.18—2.23; Luke 2.1–20; John 1.1–18), and the meaning of it is teased out by numerous other references in the New Testament, most notably in the Pauline letters (Philippians 2.6–11, to cite one example). It is here that we perhaps need to return to the 'What?' questions, scrutinizing what it is we are looking at, and from which perspective. The diversity of stories makes us want to know more deeply what it all means.[28] At the same time, if we are willing to acknowledge that diversity is inherent to the very texts we are seeking to make meaning of, then that search for meaning allows many voices to be heard.

An art installation entitled *Something Transparent (please go round the back)* featured the raftered ceiling of a portion of an art gallery reproduced on the gallery floor, contained in an area bounded by walls with two viewing areas. Except it wasn't at all obvious to me what I was meant to be looking at, even when I walked round the other side (as instructed by the title of the piece). It was only when I asked a member of the gallery staff for an explanation that it became clear – well, sort of – but then that was the point.[29] It all depends on your frame of reference, and where you are standing (literally). Through the asking of questions, the pondering of meaning, this book suggests that there is more than one lesson to be learned, and that in the words of the art critic and writer Justin Paton, it may well be that 'you find the map you need only after the trip has ended'.[30]