

## INVITATION OR . . . ?: THE BIBLE'S ROLE\*

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הַלְאֵל תְּדַבְּרוּ עִוְלָה וְלוֹ תְּדַבְּרוּ רַמְיָה  
(Job 13:7)

I want to begin by quoting what I believe is a fairly traditional statement of the Bible's role: "this body of literature, considered critically in the light of the tradition, forms the stuff of revelation." In making that my own, I would want to sharpen its focus a little and broaden the scope of its address a little. I prefer: "this body of literature, read carefully, reveals my God to me." "Read carefully", in my view, extends "critically" slightly and still holds fast to "the light of the tradition"; critical reading is normally restricted to scholars, while careful reading need not have that connotation. "Reveals my God to me" is, for me, more direct and less hedged than "forms the stuff of revelation." I want to insist that revelation applies to "this body of literature"; although perhaps not to each and every isolated part, except as they belong within the body of literature and are to be read in all their frailty, in all their complementarity or contrariety.<sup>1</sup>

### ISSUES

There are some words of Ernst Käsemann's that bear repeating in this context: "If we possess the canon only by continually rediscovering it, we experience the Gospel in the same way. The Yes and the No here are

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<sup>1</sup>The base for the discussion here is well-known, whether we speak of it as the multiplicity of vantage points within the Bible, the complementarity of views expressed, or the contradictions presented. What concerns me in this paper is the conclusion drawn from these observations. Is the role of the biblical text the provision of information, the imposition of thought, the offering of witness to direct revelation, or the invitation to thought? Experience of the text leads me to the last, to invitation. The implications are there for those who read or pray the Bible, for those who teach in relation to the Bible, and for those who are leaders in communities of biblical faith. The elaboration of these implications will not be undertaken here. Of course, there is challenge, encouragement, energizing, etc.—another story.

fundamentally incapable of being separated.”<sup>2</sup> But that was a generation ago. More recently, Walter Brueggemann has written: “The connections between *normativeness* and *critical analysis* are indeed acutely problematic. I do not, moreover, know how to work that out.”<sup>3</sup> Jon Levenson has struggled with the same issue from a Jewish perspective in the modern scholarly world. He comments: “The authority of the Torah does not require faithful exegetes to deny the contradictions within it, but the frank recognition of the contradictions does not allow them to base religious life and practice on something less than the whole.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the passions of my life is the exploration of the Older Testament. I do not find there the “normativeness” that troubles Walter Brueggemann; I do not find there the “simultaneity” that is important for Levenson. I find myself needing to name what it is that generates my passion for the Older Testament. What does it mean for me to say that the Bible “reveals my God to me”?<sup>5</sup>

A saying that I have not heard contested or queried sharpens the issue. It is a matter of observation, not an axiom. “We do not believe something because we can quote it from the Bible; we quote something from the Bible because we believe it.” This leads me to two questions: i) By what process and for what reasons do we come to believe something of relevance to our faith, if it is not on the authority of the Bible? ii) Why

<sup>2</sup>Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (NTL; London: SCM, 1969) 264.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Brueggemann, responding to three reviews of his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) in *RBL* (1999) 1-21, see p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Jon D. Levenson, “The Eighth Principle of Judaism and the Literary Simultaneity of Scripture,” *JR* 68 (1988) 205-25, see p. 223. The eighth principle of Maimonides—that the Torah is from heaven—requires that “equal divine status be accorded every verse” (p. 219). Levenson comments: “It is important to note that by reading these differing bodies of literature as if they are one simultaneous reality—as indeed they are in the Torah—the rabbis produce a law for which *no* one passage in the Torah provides evidence. ... Quite so, because at least in the sense of the Jewish conception of the Mosaic corpus, the canon tells us that *neither* should be taken as the dominant” (p. 220). The passages Levenson quotes are Exod 21:6 and Deut 15:17 [the case of the slave for life, forever] and Lev 25:10 [“you shall return, everyone of you”], so the slave who has declined freedom in the seventh year is to be released in the fiftieth year (p. 220). A final remark is worth noting: “My point is that the authorless text presupposed by a synchronic, or holistic, mode of analysis has certain affinities with the divinely authored text of premodern Jewish tradition” (p. 221).

<sup>5</sup>There is considerable complexity concealed within that “my God to me.” I am an individual deeply steeped within a community of religious faith, at its various levels. To that extent, within that faith community, “my God” is “our God”. My community of faith may not want to identify with all that the “I” that is me has become and believes. To that extent, “my God” may not be “our God”. The relationship of individual and community is complex.

then do we quote from the Bible in support of what we believe? What need is operative in us?

I do not want to fashion a response from Kohlberg or Fowler or other non-biblical sources. In this context, a response has to begin with exploration of the biblical text. Only the biblical text itself can tell us what sort of a text it is. It will help to begin there, with the Bible. Toward the end, we can return to these two questions.

I find the metaphor of signposts useful. Signposts may be vital to travellers on a journey. A signpost pointing in a single direction is helpful, if the direction is the right one and the signpost has not been tampered with. Several signposts, pointing in different directions to the same destination, invite reflection. They may be misleading, having been interfered with by vandals for example, but it is not necessarily so. Several routes can lead to the same goal; sometimes, the longest way round (in distance) is the shortest way there (in time or effort). Further exploration may be needed; reflection is invited. Many readers will find that the Bible often offers conflicting signposts (i.e., competing YHWH faith claims), from extensive issues—such as creation, flood, deliverance at the sea, sojourn in the desert, conquest of the land, emergence of monarchy, and even divine providence—to matters that can be compassed in a verse or two. The biblical text tends not to adjudicate, but to amalgamate. In such cases, readers are invited to thought; the signposts point in differing directions.

The decision about what is predominantly the nature of biblical text and how it functions is one that needs to be remade out of the experience of the text by each generation of its readers. Any other way risks dogmatism or superstition. Each generation must study its Bible. These considerations should not deflect attention from the complementary roles of the biblical text: to arouse feeling, fire imagination, and fuel faith. It will be our task in this paper to experience the biblical text and to reflect on its signposts.

## BIBLICAL TEXT

### *Creation*

The Bible offers us manifold allusions to creation, whether lengthy descriptions or shorter references. Psalm 104 moves magnificently from the earth on its foundations and the deep as its cover to the ocean with ships sailing on it and Leviathan sporting in it. Proverbs 8 has a marvelous image of creation, with wisdom's primacy over everything else, "the first of God's acts of long ago" (v. 22) through to rejoicing in the world and delight in the human race (v. 31). Job 38, opening God's discourse out of the whirlwind, has a wonderful series of questions about the laying of the foundation of the earth, the shutting in of the sea with doors, the origins of morning and the dwelling of light, the storehouses of the snow

and the channels for the rain. Genesis 2 has the forming of a man and God's search for human completeness, achieved in the forming of a woman. Genesis 1 has the creation of our visible world, majestically segmented into days, finding its completeness in the hallowing of the seventh day, the creator God's observance of Israel's sabbath.

Alongside these, in the sophistication of Isaiah, Job, and Psalms, we have allusions to creation by combat and the dismembering of the primeval sea monsters—with Rahab cut in pieces in Isa 51:9; with the dragon (Tannin), Rahab, the Sea, and the serpent (Nahash) all featuring in various parts of Job (e.g., 7:12; 9:13-14; 26:12-14); with Leviathan being crushed in Ps 74:14 and Rahab crushed in Ps 89:10. When, in its times of distress, Israel needed a God with grunt, the awesome power of the conqueror in creation was available.

In all of these, God creates. Nothing else is common. We have witness to faith in God as creator. As to the "how" of creation, we are invited to reflection.

### *Flood*

We know well that there are at least two traditions of the Flood. They are interwoven because both end with God's solemn commitment never to destroy sinful humankind again (Gen 8:21-22; 9:1-17). Arranged any other way, one would subvert the other.

In one set of traditions, the flood is portrayed in 40-day blocks, comes from a great rainstorm, and with the preservation of seven pairs of clean animals as well as one pair of each of the unclean has surplus enough for a great sacrifice. In another set of traditions, the flood is portrayed in 150-day blocks, comes from the bursting forth of the fountains of the great deep and the opening of the windows of the heavens, and with the preservation of only one pair of all animals fortunately does not end in a sacrifice.

We may be comforted by faith in a God who has come to terms with innate human evil. If we wish to know more, we are invited to reflection.

### *Sea*

The deliverance at the Sea, whether Red Sea or Reed Sea, is one of the great images in Israel's experience of salvation worked by God (cf. Deut 11:1-7; Josh 2:10; 4:23; 24:6; Pss 106:7-12, 22; 136:13-15).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Martin Noth comments: "the event at the Sea was so unique and extraordinary that it came to constitute the essence of the primary Israelite confession and was regarded as the real beginning of Israel's history and the act of God fundamental for Israel" (*A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* [Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981—reprint of 1972 ET; German original, 1948] 50). That this became a

The classic image is clear: at the gesture of Moses' hand, the waters were parted to left and right, Israel marched across, followed by the Egyptians who were then swamped. But also, in the same text, there is reference to the pillar of cloud moving from in front of Israel to take up station between Israel and the Egyptians all night (14:19-20\*), to God's wind blowing the water away all night (14:21\*), and finally to God from the pillar of cloud causing panic among the Egyptians at the end of the night so that they retreated across the dry seabed and were swamped by the returning waters (14:27\*)—assuming that God's "all-night" wind stopped with the dawn. Since, at the start of it all, the Israelites were told to turn back and camp by the sea (14:2), they had already gone past it. Crossing the sea was not the problem; escaping the Egyptian pursuit was.<sup>7</sup>

Israel believed they had been delivered. As to how, at best reflection is invited. To quote from Campbell and O'Brien:

The maintenance of duality within this carefully combined text can only be understood as witness to the conviction in ancient Israel that Israel's history did not declare God to Israel without interpretation. Rather Israel's theologians and people of faith read and interpreted their experience of history and declared God from it. The unity achieved in the text attests a faith that the passage from Egypt to the wilderness, from slavery to freedom, a passage symbolic of Israel's emergence from the womb of history, was a moment of such significance to Israel it needed to be focused in the uniqueness of a single story, in which Israel expressed their confession of deliverance by the God who was the source and center of their being.<sup>8</sup>

Israel's authors were professing and celebrating faith; they were not reporting details of fact, not informing the people of the present of precisely what had occurred in the past. Deliverance is revealed; as to the processes, reflection is invited.

### *Wilderness*

In the pentateuchal texts of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, it—the wilderness—is the classic location for Israel's rejection of their God. If we forget for a moment the fleshpots of Egypt and Israel's longing to eat their fill of bread (Exod 16:3), along with the fish, the cucumbers, the

primary confession for *all* Israel may go some way toward accounting for the multiple traditions in the biblical texts.

<sup>7</sup>Among the commentaries, see for example, Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus* (OTL; London: SCM, 1974) 218-30.

<sup>8</sup>A. F. Campbell and M. A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 256.

melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic (Num 11:5), we can hear God's angry complaint to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they" (Num 14:11-12), followed by God's characterization of the people who "have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice" (Num 14:22).

For Jeremiah and Hosea, the wilderness is a time and place for honeymoon fidelity.

For Jeremiah: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown" (2:2).

For Hosea: "I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. . . . There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt" (NRSV, 2:14-15).

Infidelity and fidelity are marvellously mingled. If we seek for understanding, we are invited to reflect.

### *Occupation*

Israel's occupation of its land is as complex an issue as any other in the biblical tradition. For our purposes, we can set aside recent scholarly reconstructions involving infiltration, peasant revolt, social upheaval, and all that sort of thing. It is enough to look at the biblical portrayal. Three traditions dominate the picture; two are enough for us here. In one, Israel wages a military campaign, with God's help. Kings and their soldiers are handed over to the Israelites (cf. Josh 6:2; 8:1-2; 10:1, 16-27; 24:11). In the other, the work is entirely God's, with Israel having little more role than that of being there. These traditions are in the stories of the Jordan crossing, the capture of Jericho, and the failed attack on Ai. The capture of Jericho is a good example. To march around a besieged city once a day for six days and then seven times on the seventh day may be brilliant psychological warfare, unnerving the defenders. But a shout, no matter how fierce, does not cause the walls to collapse. Only God can do that.

If we want to look back to Israel's occupation of the land and reflect on its meaning for Israel's life in the land, we cannot go beyond speculation as to what took place. There is an invitation to thought; there is no imposition.

### *Monarchy*

At least three traditions are preserved about the origins of monarchy in Israel. One reflects Israel's need for defence against its external enemies.

Another reflects Israel's need for internal justice. A third regards the request for a king as apostasy, the rejection of God.<sup>9</sup>

Should we want to think about it, we are not told what to think. We are invited to reflection.

### *Providence*

In much of the wisdom literature, providence and God's relationship to goodness and wickedness is clear. Psalm 1 puts it well: "Happy are those ... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD. ... In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so ... the way of the wicked will perish."

Job's verdict is equally clear: What rubbish! "Have you not asked those who travel the roads, and do you not accept their testimony, that the wicked are spared in the day of calamity, and are rescued in the day of wrath?" (Job 21:29-30).

In all of this, it seems to me clear that the biblical text does not impose thought on us. It invites us to think.

### CONCLUSION

I describe myself as "a New Zealander by birth, a Jesuit in Australia by choice, and a lover of the Older Testament by passion." I have nothing against thinking, but I need something more to account for my passion for the Older Testament.

What excites my critical interest in the Bible can be caught by naming three interwoven issues and can here be no more than adumbrated at best. Three heavy-duty adjectives help in the naming: incarnational, foundational, and interpretational. The **incarnational**—not restricted to God's becoming one of us, but expanded to reflect our experience of God as unobtrusive and intangible, almost concealed from us in the ordinariness of life—may, at first sight, provoke avoidance or denial of issues arising from the text, reflecting the longing of many to escape the ambiguity and uncertainty of so much human living. The Bible often seems to offer an escape into the certainty and clarity of the divine. Closer acquaintance with it calls us back to explore, be reconciled with, perhaps rejoice in the incarnational (involvement-in-the-human) uncertainty and ambiguity we find in our Bible and ourselves. The **foundational** issue—at the base of faith identity—arises where we quest for what is of ultimate concern to us in our lives. We need to know about the wellsprings in our past that are vital to our present. We yearn for foundations that rest in bedrock. We may need to examine the nature and the quality of the foundations on

<sup>9</sup>See A. F. Campbell and M. A. O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History: Origins, Upgrades, Present Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 217-19, 230-49.

which major aspects of our faith-identity are built—just as people buying a house run checks on foundations and structural soundness, plumbing, roofing, and wiring, etc., or financial institutions contemplating takeovers run due diligence checks. In such a situation, adherents of biblical faith need to explore the Bible. The **interpretational** relates to that risky activity of exploring our present beings, of self-discovery, when we need to make meaning for ourselves of our living, when we need to interpret our lives to ourselves. For many, the exploration of the Bible—rooting around in the foundations of faith and even discovering there something of the incarnational—is an indispensable aid in interpreting life.

To simplify, the attraction exciting much of my critical engagement with the Bible can be spelled out in terms of three activities: being at home with my God, being at home with my faith, and being at home with myself.

### *Incarnational*

The God I experience in my faith today is a God who does not bypass the human, a God experienced as unobtrusive and intangible, almost concealed from us in the ordinariness of life. I would be suspicious if the God of the Bible were much different.

I do not want neon lights, but the soft uncertain illumination that filters through so much of human living and allows for the occasional insight.

I believe I am a modern well-informed and questioning human being, with a pleasantly broad cynical streak. I have a very strong religious faith; I have very deep doubts. I do not find the fact of doubt to be in conflict with the act of faith. What I look for in biblical texts is not in conflict with what I learn from recent science. I do not look for modern science in biblical texts; I do not look for insights into the meaning of life from recent science.

When I look into biblical texts, I can find faith and doubt there. I can find prayer and politics there. I will find faith there, expressed occasionally in terms we would today describe as grossly unscientific. What I find in the wide range of biblical texts is a struggle to find meaning in human existence. That struggle is not denied; that struggle is not always resolved. It is there. Recent science does not for me deny the struggle for meaning; it does not resolve it either. The struggle is there. Biblical text that neither denies nor always resolves the struggle for meaning is for me text that is deeply steeped in the mystery of human experience. It is incarnational and I am at home with it. It can offer meaning that I do not find helpful; it can offer meaning that helps me in making sense of my life, meaning that I can build on and enlarge—and I am at home with that.

*Foundational*

It has been said that a career in the Church was the bolt-hole for the fool of the family. I would be disappointed and uncomfortable to find too many of the family fools among the pillars of the Bible.

I would not want the core documents of my faith to be substantially the work of those who might be characterized as credulous, gullible, and unsophisticated. Fortunately for me, the evidence is quite the opposite.

*Interpretational*

I am happy to encounter text that challenges my understanding of life and of myself. Jeremiah puts it well:

They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water  
and dug out cisterns for themselves,  
cracked cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer 2:13)

I need the challenge of living water; all too easily I can lapse into making cisterns for myself that can hold no water.

As an outcome to these reflections, it may help to summarize the two triads affirmed as reasons for resorting to the Bible.

For a spiritual approach—usually reading rather than study, looking to spirituality, prayer, preaching, etc.

—To arouse feeling

—To fuel faith

—To fire imagination

For a critical approach—usually study rather than reading.

—To explore the incarnational, a God almost concealed in the human

—To probe the foundational, the base of our faith-identity

—To risk the interpretational, the challenge of self-discovery

With this, the two initial questions can now be answered:

i. Why do we believe something, if not on the authority of the Bible? We believe it because it has its proper place within the **interpretation** of ourselves and our world that we have shaped—from our experience of ourselves and the various levels of community within which we have been shaped—based on an insight into ourselves and our world to which we are committed and which gives meaning to our lives.

ii. Why do we quote from the Bible in support of what we believe, if it is not the authority for our belief? Because of **foundations**. We quote from the Bible because it is important to us that our faith-identity and our present belief are in substantial conformity with some aspect of the experience we find articulated within the Bible, in substantial conformity with some aspect of our foundations.

**The Bible's role:  
to reflect on the experience of God and invite us to think about it.**