

CHAPTER SIX

Scientific Study of the Bible

In Chapter Two we looked at the Bible as an expression of religious experience and as an invitation into religious experience. Our interest was in the movements of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the one reading the sacred text. The text acts like a mirror. We look at it and we see ourselves reflected there. Listening to the text, we are listening to God who is drawing us into closer communion with him. It is with this attitude that we should approach the text and this is the spirit that should inform all our reading and study. Pope John-Paul II reminded us of this in an address which he gave in 1993 on the occasion of the publication by the Pontifical Biblical Commission of a document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* pages 19-20):

To arrive at a completely valid interpretation of words inspired by the Holy Spirit, one must first be guided by the Holy Spirit and it is necessary to pray for that, to pray much, to ask in prayer for the interior light of the Spirit and with docility to accept that light, to ask for the love that alone enables one to understand the language of God who is love. While engaged in the work of interpretation, one must remain in the presence of God as much as possible.

In this chapter we turn our attention to the task of outlining the various approaches to the text used by scholars in an attempt to enrich our understanding of this inspired literature. For the biblical text is more than a mirror. It is also a window inviting us to look beyond ourselves and to enter the world of Israel to discover what the writers and original readers of the text understood about God and their relationship with God. There is a problem if our attention is only on our own responses. We may be unable to grasp any meaning that lies beyond our present horizons. We may be closed to, or just unaware of, the power that the text has to shake us free from our false assumptions. If we were able to know not just how we respond to the text, but what the authors of the text were asserting when they wrote it, and why the readers of the text thought it worth preserving, the inspired words of Scripture may be able to call us to a radical conversion.

Finding the answer to these questions in a methodical way is the aim of the science of biblical hermeneutics (from the Greek *hermêneuô* to ‘explain’). Applying the principles of the science to individual texts is the craft of exegesis (from the Greek *ex*, meaning ‘from’ and *hêgêsis*, meaning ‘guiding’).

Official Statements of the Catholic Church

There have been some important moments in the recent history of the scientific study of the Bible by Catholic exegetes. In 1893 Pope Leo XIII issued a statement, *Providentissimus Deus*. Pope John-Paul II in the address referred to earlier defined the purpose of this statement as being ‘to protect Catholic interpretation from the attacks of rationalist science’(1993, page 13). He went on to say:

The Church is not afraid of scientific criticism. She distrusts only preconceived opinions that claim to be based on science, but which in reality surreptitiously cause science to depart from its domain’.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Providentissimus Deus*, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). The adversaries were no longer those who claimed to be using science to attack the sacred Scriptures. The situation had changed in the fifty years since Leo XIII's encyclical. The attack was coming now from the opposite camp, from those who, according to Pope John-Paul II in the same address, 'oppose the use of science by exegetes' (1993, page 13). The following quotation gives the general tenor of the Pius XII's encyclical:

It is the duty of the interpreter with the greatest care and veneration to seize eagerly upon every smallest detail of what has flowed from the pen of the sacred writer under God's inspiration, in order to reach a deeper and fuller understanding of his meaning ... Well equipped, then, with a knowledge of ancient languages and with the aids afforded by the art of criticism, the Catholic exegete must approach the most important of the tasks imposed upon him: that of discovering and expounding the genuine sense of the sacred books. In doing so interpreters should bear in mind that their chief aim must be to discern and determine what is known as the literal sense of the words of the Bible ...

It is the duty of the exegete to discover and expound not only the 'literal' meaning of the words which the sacred writer intended and expressed, but also their spiritual significance, on condition of its being established that such meaning has been given to them by God ... since the faithful want to know what it is that God himself means to say to us in the Sacred Scriptures, rather than what some eloquent speaker or writer is expounding with a dexterous use of the words of the Bible ...

What the ancient oriental authors intended to signify by their words is determined not only by the laws of grammar or philology, nor merely by the context; it is absolutely necessary for the interpreter to go back in spirit to those remote centuries in the East, and to make proper use of the aids afforded by history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences, in order to discover what literary forms the writers of that early age employed.

The encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XII, therefore, complement each other. The first insists, against those who saw value only in rational argument, on the essentially spiritual nature of the biblical material. The second insists, against those who saw no value in rational argument, on the need for scientific study of the biblical material.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council issued a Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Then, in 1993, to celebrate the centenary of *Providentissimus Deus*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued a document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. This draws on the earlier ones and provides a fine statement of mature Catholic thinking on the state of the science of biblical study today. We also have two other documents published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission: one in 2001 entitled *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*; and the other in 2008, entitled *The Bible and Morality: biblical roots of Christian conduct*.

Scientific tools used to discover the meaning of the inspired text.

The process of distinguishing authentic meanings supported by the text from meanings that cannot find this support requires the contribution of scholars from many disciplines. We owe an immense debt of gratitude to thousands of people who have given their lives to this task over the centuries and still in our own day. What we are seeking, as with any scientific exploration, is a convergence of probabilities to guide us in our pursuit of truth. The science of biblical hermeneutics is advancing by leaps and bounds in our day, especially by the application of what is called the historico-critical method (see Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993 pages 35-42).

The word ‘critical’ is used here not in the popular sense of fault finding, but in the scientific sense of applying the mind in a systematic way. The word ‘criticism’ derives from the Greek *krinō*, meaning ‘to distinguish, decide or judge’.

It is called ‘historico-critical’ because those who carry out the research recognise that God’s revelation occurs in specific historical circumstances and is revealed to specific people. The more we can understand the circumstances in which the revelation occurred the more confident we can be in grasping the content of the revelation. Pope John-Paul II writes:

The Church of Christ takes the realism of the incarnation seriously, and this is why she attaches great importance to the ‘historico-critical’ study of the Bible. Far from condemning it, as those who support “mystical” exegesis would want, my predecessors vigorously approved it.

– 1993, page 17

The need for scientific study involving many disciplines is brought out clearly by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993, pages 132-133):

When fundamentalists relegate exegetes to the role of translators only (failing to grasp that translating the Bible is already a work of exegesis) and refuse to follow them further in their studies, these same fundamentalists do not realise that, for all their very laudable concern for total fidelity to the Word of God, they proceed in fact along ways which will lead them far away from the true meaning of the biblical texts, as well as from full acceptance of the consequences of the Incarnation. The eternal Word became incarnate at a precise period of history, within a clearly defined cultural and social environment. Anyone who desires to understand the Word of God should humbly seek it out there where it has made itself visible and accept to this end the necessary help of human knowledge. Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language. Proper respect for inspired Scripture requires undertaking all the labours necessary to gain a thorough grasp of its meaning.

The various disciplines involved in scientific study of the Bible

The topic for this chapter is the various subdivisions of what is generally called ‘Biblical Criticism’, the craft of analysing the various biblical texts with a view to making informed judgments about their meaning through knowledge of their origin, transmission, and interpretation.

Establishing the text

Prior to the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, the oldest manuscript of the complete Hebrew Bible was the Codex Petropolitanus (also known as the Leningrad Codex, 1008AD). The Aleppo Codex is slightly older (930AD) but nearly all the Torah is missing. We also have the Cairo Codex from 895AD, which has the prophetic books. The Qumran scrolls, discovered in 1947, gave us manuscripts that are over a thousand years older. It is interesting to note that where there is more than one manuscript of a text, there are variations in the Hebrew. The Qumran scrolls pre-date the work of the Rabbis in the closing decades of the first century AD to establish an official, standard text. Some manuscripts from the first Roman war (66-74AD) were discovered at Massada.

It is important to recall here what was said in the previous chapter about the editorial work that was part of the handing of the inspired texts. Editors were most careful to preserve the texts they received, but they also wanted to bring out the meaning of the texts for their contemporaries. We should not assume that everyone was in agreement with the results of the editor's work. It is more in keeping with what we know to assume that from the beginning there existed a plurality of textual traditions.

The rabbis at Jamnia, in the closing decades of the first century AD, faced with the emergence of Christianity, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman army, were determined to establish a standard Hebrew text. This does not guarantee that what they produced represents an 'original text', or that it is necessarily 'more inspired' than other extant versions. In 1952 biblical manuscripts from the period of the second uprising (132-135AD) were discovered in a cave at Wadi Murabba'at, eighteen kilometres south of Qumran. They witness to the success of the work begun by the Rabbis at Jamnia, for there is less variation.

All these ancient manuscripts witness to the immense care that went into copying: they confirm the accuracy of the Cairo, Aleppo and Leningrad Codexes.

In spite of the immense care taken in copying the sacred text, copyists are human and make mistakes. Copyists working from a written manuscript can unintentionally repeat a word, or, if the same word occurs at the end of two successive lines, they can skip a line. These are two standard and easily recognised errors. If copyists are hearing a manuscript read out, another set of errors is possible through confusion of words that have a similar sound.

It is important also to remember that the cost of writing prohibited the disposal of manuscripts that were seen at the time to have made mistakes. The person checking the copy would arrange for the correction to be placed in the margin. A problem arises here from the practice of copyists writing their own reflections in the margin, either to explain unknown or obscure words or phrases, or to explain historical illusions, or to enhance or mitigate the force of the text, or even to note their personal reactions to it. These extraneous marginal notes are called 'glosses'. When a person was copying from a copy that had glosses, it was possible for them to think that a scribal comment was in fact a correction and so include it in the body of the text, thus introducing extraneous material.

Ancient translations play an important role in our attempt to establish the true Hebrew text. The Greek Septuagint (LXX) from the second century BC is especially significant. Not infrequently there are differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text developed by the Masoretes (MT), the scholars whose aim it was to oversee the accuracy of copies of the Hebrew text. Each variant has to be examined and tested on its own merits. Sometimes the difference points to a misunderstanding of the Hebrew by the Greek translators. Sometimes the Septuagint indicates that copyist errors have found their way into the Hebrew text. The reader may be interested in two examples where the editors of the New Revised Standard version (NRSV) judged the Septuagint to be correct and the Hebrew text to contain errors.

The NRSV translates Psalm 28:8 as ‘The Lord is the strength *of his people*’. This is a direct translation of the Septuagint (*tou laou autou*). The Hebrew has ‘The Lord is strength to him’ (*lâmô*). The Greek fits the context better, which leads scholars to judge that the MT contains a scribal error, and that the original Hebrew was not *lâmô* (‘to him’) but *le’âmô* (‘to his people’).

The NRSV translates Psalm 49:11 as ‘Their *graves* are their homes forever’. Once again this is a direct translation of the Septuagint (*taphoi*). The Hebrew has *qirbam* (‘inner thoughts’). The Greek fits the context better, which leads scholars to judge that the received Hebrew text contains a scribal error, and that the original Hebrew was not *qirbam* (‘inner thoughts’) but *qibram* (‘graves’).

Sometimes the difference between the Hebrew and Greek Versions points to the Septuagint being a translation of a Hebrew text that is more original than the accepted Masoretic text. We have already spoken of inspiration as covering the whole process of the development of the text. The fact that a text is older does not mean that later additions are not inspired. What comparisons with translations can help establish is the date of various strands of the material, and this, in turn, helps us understand the context within which additional material emerged, and therefore our understanding of it.

While refinements are still going on, the task of establishing the text has, for the most part, been successfully completed. We can be very confident in the text we now have. It is rare to find variations that significantly affect the meaning of a particular text.

Establishing the Meaning of the text

A number of scientific disciplines combine in an attempt to discover the literal meaning of the inspired text.

Establishing the meaning of words and grammatical constructions

Scholars are constantly refining our understanding of the nuances of different words and of different grammatical constructions in ancient Hebrew and in the Greek spoken and written in the East at the time of the translation of the Old Testament into Greek in the third and second centuries BC. Sometimes Hebrew words are found in the Old Testament only once. It is difficult, without comparison, to determine the exact meaning just from the context.

The discovery of the library of Ashurbanipal of Niniveh in 1853, the discoveries at Ugarit in the 1920's and other discoveries have greatly enlarged our understanding of ancient Semitic languages. I offer one example to illustrate the point.

In Ezekiel 33:1-9 the prophet is presenting his understanding of the proper role of a prophet. This includes the obligation to *zahar* the people. The NRSV translates 'warn'. The Hebrew uses the causative form (hiphil) of the verb, which is found in Ezekiel a number of times. Outside Ezekiel, this form is found in only 3 passages in the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures: 2Kings 6:10 where the NRSV also translates 'warn'; 2Chronicles 19:10 where it is translated 'instruct'; and Exodus 18:20 where Moses is told that his first obligation is to 'stand before God for the people', and his second obligation is to come out from God's presence and *zahar* the people. The NRSV translates 'make known to'. When we look at related words in Arabic, Syriac, Aramaic and Ugarit, we find the idea of 'brightness' to be present. This fits with the only two times that the related noun *zahar* is found in the Hebrew Bible (Ezekiel 8:2 and Daniel 12:3). This has persuaded some scholars to translate the hiphil of *zahar* as 'enlighten'. Sometimes enlighten will involve a warning; sometimes it will include instruction, but the primary meaning is probably 'to shed light', to 'enlighten'.

Literary Criticism

Literature has never consisted in simply adding words to words or sentences to sentences. Its aim is to communicate and to do this successfully it takes a certain shape. The role of literary criticism is: 'to determine the beginning and end of textual units, large and small, and to establish the internal coherence of the text'(Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, page 39).

Genre Criticism

To interpret the text accurately, it is obviously necessary to know what kind of literary form we are dealing with. 'Genre criticism seeks to identify literary genres'(Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, page 39). Poetry can communicate truth wonderfully, but not in the same way as an eyewitness report. The Bible is a composite of many different literary forms. Scholars are constantly analysing the material, and comparing it to other material from the same milieu and period (much of it only recently discovered thanks to the advances of archaeology and linguistic studies). This enables us to get a better understanding of literary form, of composition, structure, style, mood etc, and so of meaning. 'The reader who is ignorant of these forms is the one who is likely to deform the author's work, just as would a musician who mistook the key or mood of the composer'(Luis Alonso Schökel "*Hermeneutics in the light of language and literature*" CBQ 1963, page 379).

As an example let us take the account of creation found in the opening verses of the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1:1 - 2:4). It is important to recognise this as a liturgical hymn of praise and not an attempt at a factual, scientifically verifiable, account of the way creation actually happened. The hymn begins with a triumphant shout of praise of God, accompanied (presumably) with a blast from the trumpets! 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth!'

The Babylonians among whom the authors were living in exile believed that the gods emerged from the cosmos. Not so, cry the faithful of Israel. Everything that exists comes from God who is its Source. Creation is portrayed as bringing order to what was previously chaotic. Original chaos (they cannot imagine ‘nothingness’!) is described in poetic imagery borrowed from the prophet Jeremiah. They think of primeval chaos as swirling waters, and speak of it as one would speak of the howling wastes of the desert: ‘The earth was without form and empty [like a devastating, trackless waste] and darkness was over the face of the primeval deep, and God’s spirit was moving to and fro over the face of the waters’.

The rhythm of their days was determined by the four phases of the moon and so, like us, they had a repeated unit of seven days. For this reason, the liturgical drama of creation was composed in seven scenes. On day 1, God creates light, just by his all-powerful word (to bring order into chaos you need to be able to see what you are doing!) On day 2 God clears a space for his work by fashioning the sky (imagined as a solid roof), and uses it to separate the waters above (which come down as rain when God permits it), from the waters beneath (which well up as springs, and forms rivers). On day 3 God tells the waters under the sky to come together, which they do, forming seas. When this happens the earth, which is presumed to have been there all the time, appears. God then commands the earth to bring forth all sorts of vegetation. On day 4 God focuses attention on the heavens and he creates two big lights and many smaller ones (the ‘stars’). The two big lights are not named in the text because the Babylonians worshipped the moon and the Egyptians worshipped the sun. The author of the biblical account is saying that the sun and the moon are not gods. The larger of the two lights (the sun) separates night from day, and the smaller (the moon) tells us when festivals are due.

On day 5 God fills the sea with fish and the sky with birds. On day 6 God creates all kinds of wild and domesticated animals, and then creates humankind (*’ādām*), from the reddish-brown loose earth (*’adāmâh*). Humanity consists of male (*’ish*) and female (*’ishâ*). They are to carry on God’s work of creation. Their role is to continue to bring order into chaos by ordering the world. They are able to do so because they, and they alone, are created in God’s image and likeness in that they can listen to God and respond. They can commune with God.

Seven times throughout the hymn, we are told that God saw that what he was making was good. Three times he blesses what he has made – that is to say, he makes his creatures able to carry on the work of creation by giving life. He does this first to the fishes and birds. Then he does it to the animals and mankind together (for they belong intimately together and depend on each other for survival), and finally, when all is completed, on the seventh day he blesses the Sabbath, for this is a day especially holy to the community which comes together in the synagogue to remember and to fill the earth with the praise and glory of God.

By recognising the literary genre employed by the author, we are able to reject false understandings of the creation account and grasp the truths that the author intended to communicate. There is clearly no conflict between this poetic and religiously significant account and attempts by modern science to establish how our universe came into being.

Rhetorical Criticism

For more on rhetorical criticism see Pontifical Biblical Commission: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) pages 43-45.

Much of the Old Testament is a written record of words spoken in the liturgy or uttered by a prophet. It was, for the most part, written to be spoken by a preacher and heard by the assembly. Its aim was not simply to communicate meaning, but also to persuade and to inculcate religious values. This affected the style, and grasping ancient techniques of persuasive language can help us recognise irony, humour and exaggeration in the text – all of which helps us grasp its intended meaning. Without the insights that come from such a study we might take literally what is meant rather to startle, impress, please or persuade. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993, page 45) states:

Rhetorical Criticism aims to penetrate to the very core of the language of revelation precisely as persuasive religious discourse and to measure the impact of such discourse in the social context of the communication thus begun.

Narrative Analysis

For more on narrative analysis see Pontifical Biblical Commission op.cit. pages 46-48.

Because much of the text has its origins in storytelling (we will focus on this in the following chapter), we need to grasp the styles of story-telling in the ancient Near-East. We need also to observe the effects such stories still have upon a community of listeners. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993, page 47) writes:

Narrative analysis insists that the text functions not only as a “window” giving access to one or other period (not only to the situation which the story relates but also to that of the community for whom the story is told), but also as a “mirror” in the sense that it projects a certain image – a “narrative world” – which exercises an influence upon readers’ perceptions in such a way as to bring them to adopt certain values rather than others.

The above disciplines are supplemented by disciplines that aim to establish how the written text as we have it came to be. Of primary importance, of course, is the actual text that the believing community has accepted as inspired and so as communicating divine revelation. However, our understanding of the texts can be enriched by knowing ‘the social milieu that give rise to them, their particular features and the history of their development’ (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, page 39).

Source Criticism

Source Criticism uses literary criteria to determine the pre-history of a biblical text, to get to the meaning of the source material before it was reshaped by the final editor (the ‘redactor’). It involves looking for pre-existing units and also for the influence of these when used as models for later literary construction.

Source Criticism consists in the identification and investigation of the discrete written sources of which the narrative was composed. The source critical model envisions ‘primary’ authors and ‘secondary’ redactor, the latter of whom works like a frugal tailor, fashioning new garments from the old clothes entrusted to him by patching them together as best he can. The mended appearance of the finished product has been the critic’s clue to the identities of the original fabrics, the literary antecedents of the received text.

– R.Cohn “*The literary logic of 1 Kings 17-19*” in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Sept 1982, page 333).

The Torah, for example, (as we will show in Chapter Eight) developed over hundreds of years of writing, copying, editing and re-editing. Furthermore, the earliest writing drew on ancient oral traditions. Those who preserved this material knew that the word of God was living and active. Prophetic insight was brought to bear on the traditional material as they grew to understand more profoundly the ways of God. Scholars focus attention on the meaning of the text as it found final form and as we now have it. But when they are able to isolate the sources used the final editors they are better able to see what the original writers may have intended and how the final editors used this earlier material. The critical analyst attempts to establish the original setting and perhaps the oral tradition of each source, applying to it the criteria for understanding appropriate to its literary form.

Let us illustrate this from the story of the flood. The final redaction was made in the post-exilic period and drew on the work of the Priestly editors. The text in the right-hand column is clearly from a different hand. The perspective is quite different, and our understanding of the text is considerably enriched by recognizing the difference.

Genesis 6:18-21 (The Priestly edition)

I shall establish my promise with you [Noah].
You are to go into the ark, you and your sons,
and your wife and the wives of your sons with you.
And from all that lives, from all flesh, you are to
bring two of each (kind) into the ark,
to keep them alive with you;
they shall be male and female.
From every kind of bird,
from every kind of animal,
from every king that creeps on the ground
two of all these are to come to you to be kept alive.
You are to take for yourself
every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up;
this is to serve as food for you and for them.

Genesis 7:1-3

And Yahweh said to Noah:
Go into the ark, you and
your whole household...
Of every clean animal take
seven pairs, male and female
and one pair of every unclean
animal, male and female,
and seven pairs of every bird
of the heavens,
male and female, to keep
their kind alive on earth.

Genesis 7:11 (The Priestly edition)

In the 600th year of Noah's life, in the 2nd month,
on the 17th day of the month, on this day
all the fountains of the great primeval deep
burst forth
and the windows of the heavens were opened up.

Genesis 7:10,17

After 7 days the waters of
the flood came upon the earth ...
The flood continued 40 days

The 7 and 40 of the older account are simple in their symbolism. The reason for the precise dates in the Priestly (liturgical) account of the flood becomes clear when we come to Genesis 8:13-14 which reads 'In the 601st year ... in the 2nd month, on the 27th day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth'. That is to say after exactly 1 lunar year and 10 days (= 1 solar year). Clearly the Priest-editors are concerned with a yearly liturgical festival celebrating God's covenant with humanity.

Tradition Criticism

This attempts to supplement Source Criticism by reconstructing the genesis of the text from its origins to its final transmitted form, uncovering the pre-history (oral and written) of each literary unit. 'Tradition criticism situates texts in the stream of tradition and attempts to describe the development of this tradition over the course of time' (Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993 page 39). This is never an easy task and the results vary in their degree of probability. However, the general insight is valid. It is important, for example, to realize that many of the psalms as we have them had a long pre-history. As hymns sung by the assembly they were edited and supplemented as circumstances changed.

A simple and obvious example is the well-known psalm 51. It is a tightly constructed psalm, and analysis of its construction reveal the final verse as a later addition, composed after the walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed. The title of the psalm reads: 'A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba'. The purpose of the title is to direct the thoughts of the assembly to a scene in David's life (see 2Samuel 12).

The structure is indicated by the alphabetical divisions. Note the hinge structure. The repetition of themes is indicated by the underlining and capitals.

Part 1

- a: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
- b: Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
- c: and CLEANSE me from my sin.
- d: For I know my TRANSGRESSIONS, and my sin is ever before me.
- e: Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are JUSTIFIED in your sentence and blameless
when you pass judgment.

e¹ Indeed, I was born in guilt, in sin when my mother conceived me
d¹ You DESIRE truth in the inward being; make me know wisdom in my heart.
c¹ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be PURIFIED;
b¹ wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have CRUSHED rejoice.
a¹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my guilt.

[Insert: Ezekiel 36:25-27]

‘I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you.’

Part 2

a: Create in me a PURIFIED heart, O God,
b: and put a new and right spirit within me.
c: Do not cast me away from your presence,
d: and do not take your holy spirit from me.
e: Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a generous spirit.
Then I will teach TRANSGRESSORS your ways, and sinners will return to you
e¹ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your JUSTICE.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
d¹ For you have no DESIRE in sacrifice;
c¹ if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
b¹ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a¹ a broken and CRUSHED heart, O God, you will not despise.

The final verse stands outside the structure of the psalm. It was added later at a time when the walls of the city were in ruins.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Redaction Criticism

This takes the text in the form in which we now have it, and by analysing the editorial and compositional techniques of the editors attempts to establish their intention, and so the meaning of the text as it was received into the Canon. 'Redaction criticism studies the modifications that texts have undergone before being fixed in their final state; it also analyses this final stage, trying as far as possible to identify the tendencies particularly characteristic of this concluding process ... At this point the text is explained as it stands, on the basis of the mutual relationships between its diverse elements and with an eye to its character as a message communicated by the author to his contemporaries' (PBC, 1993, page 39).

Gottwald in his *The Hebrew Bible: a socio-literary introduction* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985, page 306) alerts us to different kinds of redaction found in the Bible.

Canonical Criticism

For more on canonical criticism see Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993, pages 52-55.

Our main interest, of course, is with the text in the final form in which we now have it, for this is the text that the community has accepted as inspired. This is the text which for centuries now has been a source of contemplation for believers. Enriched by the information gleaned from the various disciplines that we have noted, the exegete must go back to the actual written text for a richer and deeper synthesis of its meaning. A study of the function of the canon in the ongoing community of faith is also informative.

The canonical approach aims to carry out the theological task of interpretation more successfully by beginning from within an explicit framework of faith: the Bible as a whole. To achieve this, it interprets each biblical text in the light of the Canon of Scriptures, that is to say, of the Bible as received as the norm of faith by a community of believers ... The canonical approach rightly reacts against placing an exaggerated value upon what is supposed to be original and early, as if this alone were authentic. Inspired Scripture is precisely Scripture in that it has been recognised by the Church as the rule of faith. Hence the significance, in this light, of both the final form in which each of the books of the Bible appears, and of the complete whole. Each individual book only becomes biblical in the light of the Canon as a whole. It is the believing community that provides a truly adequate context for interpreting canonical texts. In this context faith and the Holy Spirit enrich exegesis. Church authority, exercised as a service of the community, must see to it that this interpretation remains faithful to the great Tradition which has produced the texts.

– PBC, 1993, 52-53

If we are studying a poem or a drama we know that we cannot take one line or one scene and separate it from the rest and claim to understand it properly. It belongs to the whole and must be read as part of the whole. It is the same with music, painting or architecture. A flower arrangement may be 'inspired', but the same could hardly be said of a small twig taken out of the arrangement and placed on its own in a vase. It is the same with the Bible. One part of a particular book must be read in the light of the whole book, and any particular book must be read as part of the whole Bible.

Furthermore, for those who are Christians, the whole of the Older Testament must be read critically in the reflected light thrown upon it by Jesus. The scribes were students of the Scriptures but they did not recognise God in Jesus; they did not recognise him as God's Word-made-flesh. We can make the same mistake if we fail to read the Older Testament through Jesus' eyes.

The Church reads the Old Testament in the light of the paschal mystery – the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – who brings a radical newness and, with sovereign authority, gives a meaning to the Scriptures that is decisive and definitive (Dei Verbum, 4). This new determination of meaning has become an integral element of Christian faith.

– PBC, 1993, 54

Conclusion

In *The Hebrew Bible: a socio-literary introduction* (Fortress Press 1985, page 596), Norman Gottwald writes:

Study of the Hebrew Bible is first and foremost study of a text. The biblical text, however, is not an isolated datum, pure and simple. Precisely as literature, each text in the Hebrew Bible expresses a point of view and reflects a social setting. By focusing now on the text in itself, then on its conceptual world, and again on its social placement, different methods in biblical studies have contributed valuable understandings to the interpretation of the text as a whole. As they deepen and ramify, these literary, conceptual and social understandings, which at first glance appear discrete, press towards convergence and mutual interaction.

Gottwald concludes his study with the following statement (pages 607-608):

A final word is appropriate about how the socio-literary pluriformity of the Hebrew Bible compels Jews and Christians to rethink all forms of confession of faith and of reflective theology that base themselves on these writings as Scripture. It is abundantly clear that the Hebrew Bible, far from presenting a body of fixed religious ideas or doctrines, gives us theological reflections embedded in historically changing social situations and articulated in concrete literary genres and genre complexes. The theology of the Hebrew Bible is thus both 'theology of social struggle' and 'theology of literary imagination'. There is no 'message' of the Hebrew Bible that can be lifted out of its social contexts and literary forms without irreparable loss both of its original meaning and of its potency to speak meaningfully to us. Likewise it is evident that the theological expressions of the Hebrew Bible do not speak into a present vacuum of 'pure faith'.

We Jews and Christians experience God in our own historically evolving social situations through concrete forms of speech and imaging which are not simply repetitions of biblical speech but are the complex product of post biblical religious and secular culture as these realities are presently embodied in ourselves. In employing the Hebrew Bible as a mediator of religious faith and theological reflection, we must at one and the same time interpret both the social situations and the literary idioms of the biblical texts and the social situations and the literary idioms of ourselves as interpreters/actors ... Certain strands of Jewish and Christian 'orthodoxy' try to circumvent the radical socio-historic process of contemporary believing. They attempt to 'protect' God and the Bible by raising them above and beyond qualification by historical circumstances or reduction to the psycho-social sphere of writers and readers.

This defence ploy fails ... because it disembowels the Hebrew Bible of its socio-literary specificity and lobotomises its religious bite and thrust. This 'spiritualising' and 'abstracting' theology is in itself the most severe and destructive form of 'reductionism', for it flattens and denatures the powerful individualities of style and content that play throughout the rich texture of the Hebrew Bible. The lively voices that speak concretely of, for, and to God become a boring and pretentious monotone as out of place in the biblical milieu as in our own.

It is important, therefore to read the text as part of the whole Bible (not in isolation from the rest). It is important to read it within the believing community within which it emerged and was preserved. It is important to read it 'in the Spirit': it is a prayer-text. Finally, it is important to read it in the light of the revelation made in Christ Jesus. Jesus' disciples believed that he brought the part-revelation of the Older Testament to its fulfilment, revealing in fuller light what was inspired in it and correcting what is obscure and imperfect.