

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Older Testament is the product of a story-telling culture

In this chapter we will explore what is perhaps the most basic insight that we need to have in order to read properly the literature of the Older Testament. We are right to expect to find truth when we read the texts of the Sacred Scriptures. In the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council we read:

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

– n.11

The Council goes on to explain that inspiration relates to what the inspired authors assert:

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

– nn. 11-12

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

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

Truth can also be communicated through other forms of art which aim to awaken the imagination – as distinct from appealing to the logic of discursive reasoning – and through the imagination to open the way to insight. A video can tell us something of what was actually going on, but so can a painted portrait or a film. These take us ‘inside’ the facts to what is really going on! A well-told story can have the same effect.

History

The Bible is not a history book, but the religious message it communicates is one based on historical experience. Carroll Stuhlmueller writes:

The purpose of the Bible is not to describe ancient events with detailed accuracy, but rather, from the memory of the events, to draw listeners into worshipping God and into reliving the hopes of the ancestors.

– *New Paths through the Old Testament* (Paulist Press 1989) page 41

For a brief statement on the historical dimension of the Bible, you might consult Chapter Five of Carroll Stuhlmueller's Book.

Let us look more closely at history as a way of communicating truth. The writing of history held an important place in the ancient world, as we see in the following statements from the Newer Testament. The first is from the opening words of Luke's Gospel. The second is from the opening words of the First Letter of John. Luke writes:

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

John writes:

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

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

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

– *The Histories* 12.4c

Lucian of Samosata (died 180AD) agrees with modern historians in stating that 'the sole task of the historian is to tell things just as they happened' (*How to write history*, n. 39). However, a little later (n. 58) he writes:

If someone has to be brought in to give a speech, above all let the language suit the person and the subject ... It is then that you can exercise your rhetoric and show your eloquence.

Thucydides (died c.400BC) allows historians to compose speeches, but only after careful investigation and only with the aim of giving ‘the general sense of what was actually said’ (*Histories* 1.22.1).

Story

However, prior to the Greek Period (late 4th century BC) writers in the Ancient Near East, though just as interested in reality, generally expressed their insights, not in ‘history’, but in epic, saga, song and story. Other writings from the ancient world chose the elevated, poetic and sophisticated style of epic literature, a style typical of an aristocratic and ruling class. Not so, Israel. In the Bible we find a more popular style, open to everyone, the style of story-telling. This style links immediately with experience, and provides a simple and effective way of sharing experience, and so truth. This brings us to a key insight that we must have as we approach this inspired literature. It is that, for the most part, the Older Testament offers us truth as truth is expressed in story. The stories draw on facts, but only rarely do we find in them what we would regard as ‘history’.

Those responsible for the Book of Genesis, with its presentation of an Israelite perspective on ancient Semitic myths about the primeval ‘beginnings’ of the universe, those responsible for the presentation of the essence of Yahwism in the stories concerning Moses, and those responsible for the prophetic interpretation of the history of the Israelite tribes and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, were interested in history, in the sense that they were interested in real people and their lives, but their aim was to connect their contemporaries with the precious religious insights that had come down to them from their ancestors, and they had no trouble in using folklore and legend if this helped to achieve their aim. Like all the writings of the Ancient Near East, they drew on oral tradition, in which on-going interest wields more power than concern for historical accuracy. They drew on written sources, too, where these were available. They wrote to engage the imagination, and encourage fidelity to tradition, so they relied heavily on story to communicate insight into the truth. We are familiar with this from the parables of Jesus.

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

The Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning [depicting] of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an unexhausted source of delight for a hundred generation of readers. But that pleasure of imaginative play is deeply inter-fused with a sense of great spiritual urgency. The biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality, because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores Him, responds to, or resists, Him.

Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.

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

We tend to look for 'historical truth' in the stories: Did the Israelites actually cross the Red Sea?(Exodus 14:22)? Did YHWH truly instruct Moses to tell the people to kill all the Midianite women and children (see Numbers 31:17)? Was Samuel's mother actually incapable of conceiving (1Samuel 1:6)? Did Saul offer sacrifice when he should have waited for Samuel to arrive (1Samuel 13:9)? Did David actually eat consecrated bread at the sanctuary at Nob (1Samuel 21:6)? 'History' for those responsible for the writings of the Older Testament was a way of understanding their destiny in the world as a people special to YHWH. To be an Israelite is to share in the faith of a people who believe that God liberates from slavery, and that the way to receive the special blessings promised them by God is to listen to YHWH and do his will. The biblical writers are not seeking to give their readers historically accurate information about their past; they are interested in forming the consciousness of the nation by keeping before them the stories that remind them of who they are and what they are called to be.

If we are wondering how much of these stories is an accurate record of events, and how much is an imaginative statement intended to highlight the presence and action of YHWH in the lives of the ancient Israelites, and in the lives of those for whom the writing was intended, it is worth recalling that, for example, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are included in the Hebrew Bible as books of prophecy, not history. Their primary focus is on YHWH, not on Moses, Samuel, or the kings that led Israel and Judah in the years before the Babylonian Exile. The 'truth' that is the primary object of their assertions is the truth of YHWH's choice of them as his people, and YHWH's fidelity to his commitment to his chosen people.

To be an Israelite is to share in the faith of a people who believe that God liberates from slavery, and that the way to receive the special blessings promised by God is to listen to YHWH and do his will. Though stories about Moses, Samuel, and David would have been told and retold over the generations, it was all far too long ago for the authors of the stories to attempt to establish the historical facts, nor was that their interest.

Their interest was in their contemporaries and they tell the story of their distant ancestors in such a way as to shed light on the situations the people were facing at the time of writing.

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

They shape and re-tell the stories in order to keep Israel's faith alive so that their contemporaries will be faithful to their past in the way they live their present. Did the authors of the inspired books and those who read them and listened to them think they were enjoying a dramatic story, or did they think they were recalling past events? In a sense the answer is both one and the other, so long as we remember that they were not asking the question as we would ask it. The fine (and important) distinctions we make did not enter their consciousness. The picture presented of their past is a true one. It is true that they as a people have a special place in YHWH's heart. It is true that those who lived faithfully the covenant Israel has with God found communion with God in doing so. It is also true that the history of Israel is littered with human infidelity and consequent suffering.

The authors wanted their contemporaries to learn the lessons of the past, and to be faithful to the faith of their ancestors. It is this faith that is expressed powerfully, memorably, and truly in the 'stories' presented in the Older Testament.