

PREFACE

The Books of Kings tell the story of King Solomon and the kings of Israel and Judah down to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC. The first edition was compiled during the reign of King Josiah towards the end of the seventh century BC. This was revised during the Babylonian Exile in the following century. The authors drew on *The Annals of the Kings of Judah* and *The Annals of the Kings of Israel* as well as earlier written material. Unfortunately their source material is no longer extant. The aim of the authors of the Books of Kings was not to repeat the history, but to offer an interpretive commentary, focusing on the way they understood God to have been present and active in their past. They wanted to encourage their contemporaries to learn from the past so as to be faithful to the covenant they had with their God. They wanted to form 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. Hence the central role of the prophets. Hence the inclusion of these writings among the Prophetic Scrolls.

Those of us who want to be disciples of Jesus will need to read these texts through Jesus' eyes, for his understanding of God transcends the limited understanding of the authors of these books.

Similarly for the Second Book of Chronicles. Writing some centuries after the Books of Kings, the author revisits the story of the kings of Judah, highlighting behaviour that exemplified what to do, and what not to do, to be faithful to their God, while tracing the history of the religious practices that were current in the Judaism of the fourth century BC.

For suggestions as to further reading I recommend the bibliography prepared by Father Jean Louis Ska SJ, who is currently professor of Old Testament Studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome (see his website: http://www.biblico.it/doc-vari/ska_bibl.html). Go to Section VIII for Kings and Section X for Chronicles. On Kings I would add *1 & 2 Kings* by Walter Brueggemann (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, 2000) and *2 Kings* by Robert L. Cohn (Berit Olam Series, Michael Glazier, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota 2000). On Chronicles I would add *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* by H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge University Press 1977).

This translation is heavily dependent on the NRSV and the work of many scholars.

I thank Father Warrick Tonkin for the time and care he put into reading the manuscript and granting it the 'Nihil Obstat', and Archbishop Mark Coleridge for permission to publish. My prayer is that this Introductory Commentary will enrich your appreciation of these ancient and inspiring books.

– Feast of the Epiphany, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Beauty and Truth

The experience of beauty and the many ways in which we give expression to it arise from defined, delineated and limited experiences. That moment on a bridge crossing the Nattai river. The people there with me. Everything grey in the fading light of dusk. The sudden rush of ducks disturbing the silence as they splash their wings against the water and head off into the gathering night. The cold with the anticipation of a fire and a pleasant night spent with friends. All this and much more makes that moment a treasured memory that sets it apart from other experiences which have since faded and are lost. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful.

An early morning in Port Moresby after an evening when the full moon had cast its spell over our companionship. A pure white flower had emerged overnight from a place where I would have least expected to see it – a cactus! The surprise, the contrast, the sheer beauty, has left a memory that will not fade – though the flower itself lasted only for a day. Nothing abstract and generalised here. Every element precise, and beautiful. It is always so. It is our limitations that make us special, that set us apart, and it is precisely in our limitations that beauty lies and is revealed.

It is the same with truth. There is a place for abstraction, for general principles, for learning wisdom that can guide one's life. But every time we have an insight into the way things really are (as distinct from the way we are in the habit of thinking about things, or the way we would like things to be) it is by way of insight into a precise, delineated and necessarily limited experience. We gain insight into truth not in spite of our limitations, but in and through them. This is the way things are in the real world.

The Bible

This is the way things were for those who composed the Bible. There is a danger that we could be so fascinated by the notion that what we are reading is inspired by God that we might imagine that the precise, delineated and defined parameters of ordinary human experience are not factors to be considered when reading this sacred text. There is a danger that we could think of the Bible as being dictated by God in such a way that the human limitations of the inspired writers and of the circumstances in which they wrote have no relevance to what we find in the text. We could read the Bible texts as though they came straight from God and share in God's transcendent truth, somehow unrelated to history or to human experience. We could read them as if they expressed some abstract and eternal truth that is equally relevant in every age and to every person, because it comes from God who is unchanging Truth, and whose words, therefore, transcend the limitations of time, place and language.

The Bible is not like that. It is a record of limited human insights inspired by God that real people have expressed to other real people in limited human words and in specific cultural and historical circumstances. There is beauty and truth in the Bible texts. To find this beauty and this truth (as distinct from imposing on the text our own preconceived notions) we will need to explore the historically conditioned and necessarily limited human experiences that gave rise to their inspired insights.

The aim of this Introductory Commentary is to discover and express what it was that the inspired the authors of the Books of Kings, and the Chronicler, intended to say by their words, what their contemporaries understood from these writings, why people found these writings inspiring, and why they cherished them, preserved them, copied them and handed them on. The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH*, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation.

Since they believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history, the authors readily prefaced their inspired insights with expressions such as 'YHWH said' – a way of stating that the words that followed expressed God's will as best they were able to discern it. They expected that God's will would be beyond their ability to comprehend fully, and so they approached the inspired texts expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered there. The Rabbis liked quoting Jeremiah: 'Is not my word like fire, says YHWH, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?' (23:29). They liked to break open the word to see the sparks of light which issued from it, revealing the divine enlightenment hidden within. The more meanings they were able to discover, the better. They delighted in playing with the text as one might play with a prism, enjoying the hundred and one reflections and flashes of colour that delight the eye and enlighten the heart. The texts expressed inspired insights into the presence and action of a living God in their history. No text could hold it all, and so the history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

This continued into the Newer Testament. Jesus' disciples reflected on the sacred texts in the light of the new revelation that they experienced in Jesus of Nazareth. They came to what they believed was a deeper understanding of God's intention in inspiring the scriptures – an understanding that was hidden prior to God's revelation in Jesus. When Paul, for example, comes to quote from the scriptures he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads with eyes enlightened by the love of the one whom he describes as 'loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). He came to see that the love of God revealed in the heart of Jesus embraces every person, for it is the love of God. Furthermore, he recognised this as the mission confided by God to Abraham and to Israel and he did his best to carry out that mission as a faithful Jew. He carried on the tradition of the inspired authors who went before him in recognising the limits of earlier insights and earlier expressions, limits that were brought to light by the presence and action of God in Jesus.

*spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word 'adonāy ('Lord').

Paul and Origen

This is not the place to examine the history of the ways in which the Scriptures have been interpreted by Christian commentators in the early, medieval and pre-modern Church, but a short examination of the approach of the first great Christian exegete, Origen (185-254), may help define what is different in the way modern scholarship approaches the sacred text. Origen saw himself as developing the methods used by Paul, and, though others disagreed with his methods, his influence on subsequent Christian interpretation was immense.

Origen

While he was in charge of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, Origen wrote his *Peri Archon* ('On Principles'), detailing principles of interpretation of scripture. Later, after his move to Caesarea, he wrote a commentary on Genesis (239-243AD). In his commentary on the scene in which Abraham attempts to pass Sarah off to Abimelech as his sister (Genesis 20), Origen writes (quoting 2Corinthians 3):

'If there is anyone who tries to turn to the Lord', he ought to pray that 'the veil might be removed' from his heart – 'for the Lord is the Spirit'. He ought to pray that the Lord might remove the veil of the letter and uncover the light of the Spirit, that we might be able to say that 'beholding the glory of the Lord with open face we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.'

Origen often quotes Paul: that what is written is written 'for us'(1Corinthians 10:6,11); that 'the letter kills, it is the Spirit that gives life'(2Corinthians 3:6); that the Law has value but only when it is read 'spiritually'(Romans 7:14). He refers, too, to the following from the Letter to the Hebrews: 'the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the true form of these realities'(Hebrews 10:1). All scripture, in Origen's view, has a spiritual (by which he generally means 'allegorical') sense. The literal sense is to be followed, but not when the literal meaning is 'illogical', 'impossible' or 'unworthy of God'. In such cases, the literal meaning of the words (what, following Paul, he calls the 'letter') was not the meaning intended by God. It was put there by God to alert us to the need to look more deeply for a 'spiritual' meaning.

In obedience to the Saviour's precept that says: 'Search the Scriptures', one must carefully investigate how far the literal meaning is true, how far it is impossible, and to the utmost of one's power one must trace out from the use of similar expressions the meaning scattered everywhere through the scriptures of that which, when taken literally, is impossible

– On Principles, Book 4, 19-20.

When Origen uses the word 'illogical' he means it in its most profound sense: 'without the Logos', 'without the Word-made-flesh'. This attempt by Origen to read all the scripture in the light of Jesus has its value, and it influenced interpretation right down to our own day. It has, however, two limitations. Firstly, it does not attempt to discover the meaning the Scriptures had in their own historical setting. Origen's focus was on Jesus and therefore on what he saw as the fullness of revelation. He was not concerned with the human imperfections of God's inspired instruments. Secondly, since he lacked appropriate criteria to check the allegorical meanings that he found in the texts, there was the obvious danger of reading into the inspired word meanings that had no connection with their intended meaning.

For all the beauty of their reflections, this lack of clarity recurs regularly in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, of the medieval scholastics, and of pre-modern theological manuals. Their methods of interpretation carry with them the danger of using scriptural texts to support positions (however valid), instead of being open to the surprise of God's inspired word.

Modern Scholarship

Modern scholarship shares the attempt of earlier times to reflect on the sacred texts in order to remember the past and to discern in the present the presence and action of God. It is also committed to attempt something that was not possible in earlier times; namely, to discover the meaning the texts had for those who were inspired to write them. The tools to attempt this were not previously available. It is not always an easy task to know when texts were composed, what words and phrases meant in their original context, and what kinds of questions ancient writers were addressing when they composed their texts. However, to the extent that our attempt is successful it does help us avoid the danger of reading meanings into a text that are alien to the meaning intended by its authors and the meaning understood by those to whom the text was originally addressed. The attempt to enter into the world of the inspired authors can also have the advantage of opening us up to the fresh surprise of the inspired texts, and in this way enrich the reflections we make on God's presence and action in our times.

Inspiration

It is important to attempt to clarify what we mean when we say that the texts are 'inspired by God', for our understanding of inspiration will surely affect the way we read the texts, if not consciously then certainly unconsciously. We begin with four preliminary considerations.

The first is the importance of recognising that revelation and inspiration are not restricted to the biblical texts and their authors. As Paul says: God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4). Jesus assures us that God wants everyone to 'have life and have it abundantly'(John 10:10). It follows that God must constantly be revealing himself to everyone, and inspiring everyone to respond to grace in the most liberating and creative way, special to each person. Pope John-Paul II expresses this simply in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* when he writes: 'Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart'(n.29).

Of course, it is one thing for God to reveal himself. It is another for a person to recognise and respond to the revelation. When Jesus expresses his delight that God has revealed himself to 'little children'(Matthew 11:25), he is not saying that God is not revealing himself to others. Rather, he is delighting in the fact that there are those who are open to receive and welcome the revelation: those who are 'poor in spirit'(Matthew 5:5), 'humble'(Matthew 18:4), 'meek and humble of heart', like himself (Matthew 11:29). When we inquire about inspiration we are not looking for something found only in the Bible. Rather, we are looking for what makes the inspiration and revelation that we find in the Bible so special.

Inspiration

Secondly, while it is true that the claim that the texts are inspired and reveal God is not subject to any scientific proof, it is also true that it is not an arbitrary claim. It is based on experience, for the texts have been found to be inspiring, and have helped people live beautiful and truthful lives by any standards that we might reasonably apply. People have continued to experience a special link between these texts and their experience of God. In the final analysis, the claim is an expression of how a community understands itself. Jesus' words apply here: 'You will know them by their fruits'(Matthew 7:16), as does his invitation: 'Come and see'(John 1:39).

Thirdly, we note two statements from the New Testament on the subject of inspiration. One is from Paul who writes to Timothy: 'All scripture, inspired by God, is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness'(2Timothy 3:16). Paul is speaking of the 'Old Testament' (an expression used by Paul in 2Corinthians 3:14), and he is encouraging Timothy to draw inspiration from the sacred scriptures, for they are useful in living a life that is faithful to God, and useful also in teaching others.

The second statement is from Peter who states that 'no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'(2Peter 1:21). Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, makes the same point: 'A prophet has no utterance of his own. All his utterances come from elsewhere. They echo the voice of Another'(Who is the Heir, 259). We have an example of this in Jeremiah, who tells us that he is tired of the rejection he experiences when he relays to the people what comes to him in his prayer. Yet he has to speak, for, as he says: 'within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot'(Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah is conscious of *speaking* out of his communion with YHWH – something the false prophets failed to do (see Jeremiah 23:22). The concept of inspiration is applied also to the *written* text. We are told: 'Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of YHWH that he had spoken to him'(Jeremiah 36:4). We think, too, of the prophet who could say: 'The Spirit of YHWH is upon me'(Isaiah 61:1) – a text with which Jesus identified (see Luke 4:21).

Peter's statement and the above texts give us some insight into certain experiences of individual prophets and into some of the material found in the prophetic scrolls. However, there is no justification for generalising and seeing the prophetic experience as a model for inspiration throughout the Bible. Much of the Bible (including the material that is the subject of this commentary) does not claim to be the words of prophets.

Fourthly, it is clear that Jesus has profound respect for the sacred scriptures. He states that 'Scripture cannot be deprived of its validity'(John 10:35), and he warns against failing to obey it (see Matthew 5:19). This does not mean, however, that Jesus or his disciples judged the Older Testament to be the last word of God on any issue. Quite the contrary. Jesus' disciples saw him as the fulfilment of God's promises to them, such that all previous expressions of God's revelation had to give way before the revelation offered in Jesus. Jesus did say: 'Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished'(Matthew 5:18). But he also said that now that the law is 'accomplished', now that it has reached its goal, all that is imperfect must give way: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you ...'(Matthew 5:21ff).

Having made these preliminary points, let us now try to understand what it is we are claiming when we say with Paul that ‘all scripture is inspired by God’ (2 Timothy 3:16). Firstly, we are not claiming that inspiration means that God dictated the words that the inspired authors wrote. As noted above there were times when the prophets experienced something close to this. We read in Jeremiah, for example: ‘YHWH put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth”’ (Jeremiah 1:9). On another occasion Jeremiah was told: ‘Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you’ (Jeremiah 36:2). However, even then, the words written by Jeremiah were Hebrew words with their own necessary limitations. If God is going to inspire someone to speak the truth, God must choose a limited, real, human being. There are no others from whom to choose. Furthermore, what the prophet had to say was directed to real people with their own real limitations of language, culture and experience.

The model of an individual prophet speaking out of his inspired prayer is of little help when we ask about inspiration in regard to the Books of Kings and the writings of the Chronicler. The material found in these books owes much to a long oral tradition. Many generations of scribes worked on the stories handed down in this way. The Deuteronomists responsible for the Books of Kings were writing in Judah in the second half of the seventh century. members of the same School in exile in Babylon, and perhaps even later, continued to edit the material. Each step along the way till the final edition expresses the point of view of those responsible. The more we know about each step the more we can appreciate the text. It is probable that it was late in the fourth century BC that the Chronicler put his own perspective on the material. Inspiration has to include a providence guiding this long process and the earnest debate, dialogue and soul-searching that went on.

We might wish it were otherwise. We might wish that the truths inspired by God in the sacred scriptures connected us immediately to God in such a way as to give the reader a share in God’s absolute truth. For then we would not have to undertake the task of finding out what it was that the inspired authors were actually saying, or how they were understood by their contemporaries, or why their words were treasured, copied and handed on. We cannot, however, avoid this task, for the inspired texts guided people to live their lives in their real world. They did not remove them (and they do not remove us) from it.

History, Story and Truth

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).

History and Story

The document 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 words (n. 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 the writing of history. 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

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 which 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* (12.4c), the Greek historian Polybius (died c.122BC) asserts that it is best if a historian writes about matters which 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.

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 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’ (n. 58). Thucydides (died c.400BC), a contemporary of the Chronicler, 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’.

The Deuteronomists, responsible for the Books of Kings, and the Chronicler, responsible for the Books of Chronicles, 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 (see page 19). The main thing to remember is that 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.

Story

The Books of Kings cover the ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel from the death of David (962) to the destruction of Jerusalem (587). Though they offer us the most reliable timeline we have for these ancient kingdoms, it is essential to remember that the aim of the Deuteronomists was not to create a reliable historical record, but to offer an interpretive commentary, focusing on the presence and action of YHWH. This is why the Books of Kings are included among the prophetic scrolls in the Hebrew Bible.

In these times of insecurity that continue to spawn a fundamentalism in many areas, including the reading and interpretation of biblical texts, it is important to emphasise the part played by imagination and storytelling 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.

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. 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. Though stories about Solomon and other kings would have been told and retold over the generations, it was all far too long ago for the authors of the Books of Kings to attempt to establish the historical facts. Their interest is 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 (we will return to this shortly). 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 books of Kings 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 fathers’. It is this faith that is expressed powerfully, memorably, and truly in the ‘stories’ presented here in the Books of Kings, and repeated, from a different perspective, in the writings of the Chronicler.

Back to Inspiration

We have noted two things about inspiration. Firstly, that we are not claiming that inspiration means that God dictated the words that the inspired authors wrote, and secondly, that we are dealing, for the most part, with inspired story. A third consideration is that inspiration cannot be understood if we think of it as applying only to those who actually produced the final text as we have it. All along the line there were people who were attentive to the movement of God’s Spirit in their hearts, in the way they lived and in the way they gave expression to their experiences. Inspiration has to cover the whole process of listening, discussion and prayer.

The biblical authors were faithful to the writings that they inherited, for they saw them as an inspired expression of the action of YHWH in their history. They pored over them, wanting to discover the will of YHWH. They reflected on the meaning of past events for them and for their contemporaries. When we find statements that appear incompatible, it is probably because the editors are faithfully reproducing material that they have inherited that are not consistent. They present different points of view, because their sources express different points of view. They also reinterpreted the tradition that had been handed down to them in the light of their contemporary experience and presented the text in ways that shed light on what was happening to them.

Inspiration

We must learn from them, so that when we read these texts, we, too, are open to God's Spirit inspiring us to see the implications of the sacred text for ourselves and for our world. Surely inspiration must be speaking about the presence of God's Spirit guiding people in their lives and in their teaching, including those who composed the final text and those who welcomed it as a true (though, of course, necessarily, limited) expression of their faith convictions. For, in the final analysis, it is the community of believers that recognises the texts as inspired, because it is the community that continues to find them inspiring. We might think of Beethoven being 'inspired' to compose the music. At times we might find a particular conductor 'inspired' in the way he can bring the best out of the orchestra and translate the wonder of the score in a striking way. Finally if no one finds the music or the performance inspiring, it is unlikely to long survive. Those responsible for the texts that we experience as inspired wanted their contemporaries to listen to the past so as to listen to the ways – at times the surprisingly new ways – that God was inspiring them to live now. The texts are religious texts intended to encourage fidelity and prayer. Saint Augustine insists that all the scriptures are there to provoke love – and we could add gratitude, repentance, praise and joy.

God's inspiration is everywhere. God's grace bears its marvellous fruit wherever people are attentive to this inspiration and let it guide them. What is special to the texts of the sacred scriptures is that the people of Israel (not just individual Israelites) considered them to give expression to God's action among them and so to their faith. Disciples of Jesus continued to see the sacred writings of the Older Testament in this way in so far as these writings reached their fulfilment in Jesus. To say that the material we are about to study is inspired is to accept that there was indeed a special divine providence guiding the people of Israel, and that this providence encompassed the writings which the community accepted as giving a genuine understanding of God's action in their history. As the Second Vatican Council states, we can be confident that these texts express 'without error *that truth which God willed to be put down in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation*' (*Dei Verbum*, 11). Before all else the Bible is a truthful, though imperfect, statement of God's faithful love, and how we need to respond to this love.

The community considers these texts foundational, and continues to experience God's inspiration through them. If we are to be open to the movements of God's Spirit as we read these texts, if we are to read these texts in the spirit in which they were written and preserved, and be guided in our response to God's will in the changing circumstances of our lives, we must do all we can to understand what the texts aimed to say and why they were preserved and handed down to us.

While doing all we can to read the texts of the Older Testament within their own context, it remains important that the texts be read from within the faith community to which they belong. For Christians, this means to read the texts in the light of Jesus, the one in whom God's word was made flesh, and in our reading to be guided by his Spirit. Yet even here, this is not enough. Even with the help of Jesus walking with them the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not understand the meaning of the scriptures till they encountered Jesus 'in the breaking of bread' (Luke 24:35).

It is at the Eucharist, when Jesus' disciples assemble, that the texts have their proper place, just as they were read when the people of Israel assembled in the temple or the synagogue to remember and to celebrate their faith.

Those who claim that the sacred scriptures are inspired are not claiming that they are free from error in areas that are not central to the witness that they give of God's action in the history of Israel and of how the people ought to respond. It is essential also to recognise that even in this their central thrust, they are human documents and, as we shall hope to show, they are not free from mistaken assumptions that were part of their time and their culture. However, with all these necessary limitations, they continue to inspire, for in their precise beauty they reveal God.

To say that these texts are inspired is to say that God was guiding his people, and that this guidance includes a special providence in guiding the writings in which their history is expressed. In much the same way Christians trust that the Spirit of Jesus is with us guiding us to the fullness of truth (see John 16:13; Matthew 28:20). The authority of scripture lies in the power these texts have to transform people's lives.

Who wrote the Books of Kings?

What can modern scholarship tell us about the authors of this material? We cannot hope to achieve complete success here, but there does seem to be a converging of probabilities happening, and I offer the following summary in the confidence that it will provide a safe guide as we attempt to read these texts in a way that is open to their rich and inspired insights. The attempt itself to seek answers liberates us from the worst excesses and distortions that happen when we impose our mistaken assumptions onto the text. Furthermore, as I hope the reader will find for him/herself, the journey will help us be surprised by the amazing wealth of wisdom that the inspired texts have to offer.

We can safely work on the premise that it was the Deuteronomists (members of the School responsible for the writing of the Book of Deuteronomy) who were responsible for collecting and editing the material found in the Books of Kings, and that they were working during two distinct periods. The first was during the reign of King Josiah (640-609). Many editorial comments made throughout the text are made against the background of Josiah's reforms and his ambition to reintegrate the northern kingdom, which had fallen to the Assyrians a century earlier. Because of King Josiah, these editorial comments are hopeful that the monarchy, if only it would conform to the Torah, could be YHWH's instrument in saving his people.

Further editing by members of the same School happened during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC. They brought the text up to date. They also were writing in the light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the Davidic dynasty. Their comments, while acknowledging the virtues of individual kings, in particular David, Hezekiah and Josiah, blame the institution of the monarchy for YHWH's rejection, firstly of Samaria and then of Jerusalem.

Who wrote these scrolls?

Prior to the 17th Century people's basic underlying assumption was that they were reading history, based on facts guaranteed as true because of God's inspiration. Whenever the conclusion was unavoidable that the texts were not presenting historically reliable data, it was assumed that God was inspiring the authors to give us a deeper truth presented in an allegorical form (see our treatment of Origen). As already noted, the problem here was that, without the help of the tools of modern scientific method, there were no reliable controls guiding allegorical interpretation.

What we have learned, especially over the past hundred and more years, has brought us to a new place, and we must adjust our thinking. As I hope to show, what we have learned takes nothing from the beauty and power of the texts. In fact, freed from the assumption that the authors were giving us a first hand account of what happened during the years of Solomon and the later kings of Israel and Judah, and freed from thinking that we must read as though we were reading history written as we would expect history to be written today, we can read the texts as stories that were written to offer insight into truth. We also have much better controls to guide us in interpreting the stories in a way that is faithful to the insights that the inspired authors were conveying. Read this way the texts can communicate their beauty and their truth more clearly, and open for us new depths of meaning that can enrich and enlighten us, and guide us in ways that we never thought possible. Here as in all matters we need have no fear of the truth, for it will set us free.

The Deuteronomists

We begin our investigation by looking at the Book of Deuteronomy. It is a text that is composed to be preached. Its aim is clear: to educate the listener as to the essence of the revelation given to Moses by YHWH. It takes the form of a testament given by Moses to the people as they are preparing to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Before he dies and hands over the leadership to Joshua, Moses takes the people of Israel to the heart of what it is that identifies them as a special people, chosen and set apart by YHWH. He instructs them on how they must live if they are to welcome and enjoy the fruits of this special relationship. The other three books that focus on YHWH's revelation to Moses, the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, show a dominant influence from another School: the Priestly School. The Deuteronomists are not priests. They reveal close connections with the prophetic tradition, and may have originated in the northern kingdom as a resistance movement against the compromises allowed and sometimes encouraged by the political leadership in Israel. This came to a head in the eighth century with increasing Assyrian influence. The Deuteronomists would have welcomed the critique offered by the prophets Amos and Hosea in the years leading up to the catastrophic collapse of Samaria (721BC), for the Deuteronomic School and the prophets shared the same zealous opposition to the syncretism, idolatry and injustice which they recognised as a betrayal of all that it means to be YHWH's chosen people.

When the Assyrian army overran Israel and destroyed Samaria, members of the School fled to Judah where they found an ally in King Hezekiah. What happened in Israel persuaded Hezekiah that Assyria could not be trusted, and, encouraged perhaps by the members of the Deuteronomic School, he attempted to bring Judah back to the faithful following of YHWH.

When writing a summary of Hezekiah's reign, the Deuteronomists reveal their admiration for what he tried to do:

He did what was right in the sight of YHWH just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred poles ... He trusted in YHWH the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to YHWH; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses. YHWH was with him.

2Kings 18:3-7

Hezekiah's rebellion against Assyria, occasioned by the death of Sargon in 705BC, was short lived. The Deuteronomists in the Second Book of Kings go on to tell of the siege of Jerusalem (701BC) and its 'miraculous' escape. However Judah was completely ravaged and the price of Jerusalem's survival was an enormous tribute paid to Assyria. The collapse of Judah meant the collapse, too, of Hezekiah's attempt at religious reform. Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, inherited his father's failed revolt and had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. There would have been those in Judah, including probably priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh's long reign (698-643). Things fell apart religiously (see the Deuteronomic judgment on him in 2Kings 21), but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity.

The members of the Deuteronomic School went underground, and it was probably in these years that they wrote key parts of what was to develop into the Book of Deuteronomy. They planned it as a blueprint for a loyal king whom they trusted God would send them: one who would no longer swear allegiance as a vassal of a foreign king, but who would lead his people to be loyal vassals, faithfully adhering to their covenant with the great lord, YHWH.

Manasseh's son, Amon, succeeded his father on the throne but was assassinated after only two years and in 640BC Amon's eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne and developed into just the kind of king the Deuteronomic School had been praying for. Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, died in 628, and Josiah, now twenty and able to take control in his own name, picked up where his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had left off. Assyria was preoccupied with the rising power of Babylon and Josiah took the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for the previous sixty years. He brooked no opposition to reforming the religious life of his people.

Summarising his reign, the Deuteronomists wrote:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

Deuteronomy

Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, died in 628, and Josiah, now twenty and able to take control in his own name, picked up where his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had left off. Assyria was preoccupied with the rising power of Babylon, and Josiah took the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for the previous sixty years. He was determined to win back the northern kingdom and to reform the religious life of his people. Summarising his reign, the Deuteronomists wrote:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

This was the opportunity that the Deuteronomic School had been waiting for. They had a champion ready to carry out with rigorous efficiency the reform for which they had been preparing. According to their account, on Josiah's orders the temple was being cleared of Assyrian altars with a view to being reconsecrated, when a document, called 'the book of the law', was discovered (see pages 235-236). This was 622BC. We are told that when Josiah heard 'the words of the book of the law' he

made a covenant before YHWH, to follow YHWH, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

– 2Kings 23:3

According to the account in the Book of Kings, the document expressed YHWH's anger against his people and threatened punishment for just the kind of behaviour that had brought about the collapse of Israel and had flourished in Judah under Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh. This discovery reinforced Josiah's determination to purify Judah and the reconquered territories of all signs of cult of any other deity but YHWH. Josiah insisted that all cult had to take place in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else. This centralising of the cult was the single most influential change brought about by Josiah's reform. It is backed up again and again in Deuteronomy, and accounts for many changes that dramatically affected the way worship was carried out in Judah. Things would never be the same again. Did this document contain the blueprint of the reform that the Deuteronomists had been sedulously preparing? There is not enough evidence to draw a certain conclusion, but what is certain is the close parallel between the reforms that Josiah put in place and the material that we find in Deuteronomy.

For the next eighteen years Josiah went from success to success. He cleared Judah and the reconquered territories of cult sites, and expanded the borders in every direction. It is likely that it was during his reign that the Deuteronomists wrote the first substantial draft of the Books of Kings. They tell the story of king Solomon, and the kings of Judah and Israel from the death of Solomon to the reign of Josiah. However, tragedy struck in 609BC when the Egyptian Pharaoh, Neco, on his way to support Assyria in its war with Babylon, had Josiah killed at Megiddo. The young king (he was only thirty-nine) who carried with him the ideals of the Deuteronomic School was dead. In 597BC Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, and Josiah's grandson, Jehoiachin, and the leading citizens were taken into exile. Ten years later an ill-conceived revolt led to the destruction of the city and the temple and a second group of exiles.

The Books of Kings were finalised during the exile, and edited in the light of the fall of Jerusalem.

The perspective of the Deuteronomists

Three things stand out in Deuteronomists' presentation of the history of the kings of Israel and Judah. The first is that King David, with all his undeniable faults, is portrayed as having the essential qualities required of a king. Subsequent kings of Judah are judged by how they measure up to his standard of fidelity to YHWH. His dynasty continued even when kings were unfaithful because of YHWH's commitment to David. The second is that Jeroboam who is portrayed as being responsible for the northern kingdom breaking away from Judah is judged as guilty of apostasy, and every king of Israel after him is condemned for carrying on the apostasy. The third is that it is YHWH who is determining events (we will return to this later; see pages 31-33), and who expresses his will through his prophets. Whatever the kings think they are doing, it is YHWH who is pulling the strings.

History of the Kings

In their presentation of the reigns of David and Solomon, as well as using court and temple records, and some written narrative material, the Deuteronomists drew on legends that had come down through four hundred years of oral tradition, and they painted a picture of a glorious Golden Age during which the ancient promises made to Abraham were realised. The kingdom of David and Solomon, as portrayed in the writings of the Deuteronomists, was the Holy Land promised by God. The David-story in the Second Book of Samuel and the Solomon story in the First Book of Kings tell us more about the ambitions of King Josiah than about either of these kings. The description of their empire is the empire that Josiah, supported by the Deuteronomists, set out to establish.

The findings of recent archeology reveal Judah at the time of David and Solomon as sparsely populated with no major urban centres. Jerusalem itself was a typical, small, hill country village, and Judah had about 20 small villages, with a few thousand inhabitants, many of whom were pastoralists moving around with their flocks. This reinforces the awareness that the stories of David and Solomon's 'empire' are, like the ancient 'history' of many other ancient empires, an idealisation of the past with a view to building up the pride of those to whom the writings were addressed by getting them to honour their past and live up the values enshrined in their 'glorious history'.

The Deuteronomists name three sources upon which they are drawing. The first is 'The Acts of Solomon' (see 1 Kings 11:41). The second and third are 'The Annals of the Kings of Judah', and 'The Annals of the Kings of Israel'. There is no reason to doubt that the latter two are from the court archives. We have no such confidence in 'The Acts of Solomon'. Unfortunately none of these sources are extant.

A lot is made of the impossibility of synchronising all the information given by the Deuteronomists concerning the dates of the kings of Judah and Israel. For the reader interested in examining this issue, I recommend *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* by E. R. Thiele (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan-Academie, 3rd edition 1983), *The Chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah* by Gershon Galil (Leider, 1996), and the article on 'Chronology' by Mordecai Cogan in the Anchor Bible Dictionary.

Chronology of the kings of Judah

Kings of Judah

The Deuteronomists regularly relate the beginning of a king's reign to the reign of the contemporary king of Israel. If we disregard this for the moment and focus only on the sequence of kings and on the number of years each king of Judah is said to have reigned the following chart offers approximate dates. Following Gershon Galil, it is based on the assumption that Rehoboam's reign began in 931. It also assumes that from the tenth to the eighth centuries Judah followed the Egyptian practice of counting the time (however short) before the New Year as the first year of a king's reign. The New Year after his accession is calculated as the beginning of his second year. In the seventh century under Assyrian influence, they appear to have counted the first year from the New Year after the beginning of a king's reign.

King	Years of reign	Reference	Page
Rehoboam	931-915	1Kings 11:43 - 14:31	98
Abijam	915-913	1Kings 14:31 - 15:2	100
Asa	912-871	1Kings 15:8-24	102
Jehoshaphat	870-846	1Kings 15:24 - 22:50	141
Jehoram	848-841	1Kings 22:50 - 2Kings 9:24	168
Ahaziah	841	2Kings 8:25-29	170
Athaliah	841-835	2Kings 11:3-20	182
Joash	835-796	2Kings 11:21 - 13:13	184
Amaziah	798-770	2Kings 14:1-18	190
[It seems that from 798-796 Amaziah was co-regent with his father.]			
Azariah [Uzziah]	785-734	2Kings 15:1-6	196
[Azariah was co-regent from 785-770; see 2Kings 14:13]			
Jotham	749-734	2Kings 15:32-38	201
[Jotham was co-regent from 749-734; see 2Kings 15:5]			
Ahaz ¹	734-727	2Kings 16:1-20	202
Hezekiah	727-699	2Kings 18:1 - 20:21	212
[Hezekiah reigned in his own right from 715; see 2Kings 18:10,13]			
Manasseh	698-643	2Kings 22:1-18	230
Amon	642-641	2Kings 21:18-25	233
Josiah	640-609	2Kings 22:26 - 23:30	234
Jehoahaz	609	2Kings 23:30-34	245
Jehoiakim	609-598	2Kings 23:34 - 24:6	246
Jehoiachin	597	2Kings 24:6 - 25:29	249
Zedekiah	596-586	2Kings 24:17 - 25:7	250

¹See page 202 for the suggestion that Ahaz reigned for eight (not sixteen) years.

Kings of Israel

If we limit ourselves to the sequence of kings and the duration of their reigns (recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Israel) once again a consistent picture emerges (except for the length of the reign of Pekah, 2Kings 15:27).

King	Years of reign	Reference	Page
Jeroboam	931-910)	1Kings 12:20 - 14:20	97
Nadab	910-909	1Kings 14:20 - 15:31	108
Baasha	909-886	1Kings 15:16 - 16:6	109
Elah	886-885	1Kings 16:6-14	110
Zimri	885	1Kings 16:19-20	111
Omri	885-874	1Kings 16:16-21	112
Ahab	874-853	1Kings 16:28 - 22:40	113
Ahaziah	853-852	1Kings 22:20 - 2Kings 1:17	142
Jehoram	852-841	2Kings 1:17 - 3:1	149
Jehu	841-814	2Kings 9:13 - 10:36	178
Jehoahaz	813-797	2Kings 10:35 - 13:9	187
Jehoash	799-784	2Kings 13:10 - 14:16	188
Jeroboam II	788-748	2Kings 14:16:29	193
Zechariah	748	2Kings 15:8-11	198
Shallum	747	2Kings 15:10-15	198
Menahem	747-737	2Kings 16:14-22	199
Pekahiah	736-735	2Kings 15:22-26	199
Pekah	734-730	2Kings 15:25 - 16:5	200
		[‘twenty years’ is a mistake]	
Hoshea	730-722	2Kings 15:30 - 18:10	208

Synchronising the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel

It is in their attempt to relate the year of the beginning of a king’s reign to the reign of the king in the neighbouring kingdom that inconsistencies arise. Presumably this was because of a lack of clarity in the archives that arrived south from Israel. Furthermore, while it is clear that the dates of a king’s reign were based on the New Year, one complication is that while Judah began the New Year in Spring, Israel, at least in the early years, appears to have had the New Year in Autumn. Also some texts include the period of co-regency, others do not. These two factors may help explain many of the minor inconsistencies. The mistake in 2Kings 15:27 in regard to Pekah accounts for the mistake in 16:1 in regard to Ahaz. The most obvious inconsistency is in relation to the beginning of the reign of Hoshea. 2Kings 15:30 says it was ‘in the twentieth year of Jotham’. 2Kings 17:1 says it was ‘in the twelfth year of King Ahaz.’ No doubt the Deuteronomists were aware of these inconsistencies, and were doing their best to faithfully collate different pieces of information from a very confusing period in the final years of the northern kingdom.

The Babylonian Exile

What manuscripts did the fleeing exiles take with them into exile? There were some prophetic scrolls as well as writings of the Deuteronomistic School. There were fragments, and perhaps more than fragments, of patriarchal stories from the north and from Judah. There were individual texts covering aspects of social organisation from Samaria and Jerusalem. The priests would have put in writing some regulations covering key aspects of the cult, perhaps from Shiloh or other local sanctuaries, and also from the Jerusalem temple. There were individual stories about Moses and about the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, as well as struggles the different tribal groups had in Canaan and in Transjordan.

There would have been records from Samaria and Jerusalem of battles and treaties. But if we think in terms of a continuous organised account that includes primeval history, the patriarchal narratives, the epic of the Exodus, the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, the sojourn of Israel in the wilderness, and the conquest of Canaan, the evidence available favours the conclusion that at the beginning of the exile (early sixth century BC) no such document yet existed. This leads to a most significant conclusion. The Torah as we have it was composed against the background of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the end of the monarchy, and the exile in Babylon. We should expect to find these calamitous events casting a huge shadow over the text of Deuteronomy, and also over the account of the beginning of the monarchy that was composed by the Deuteronomists, and revised during the exile.

The Books of Kings are part of a continuous narrative that begins with Joshua and the establishment of the people of Israel in Canaan (c.1200BC) and concludes with the fall of Jerusalem (587BC). In the Hebrew Bible the whole narrative is referred to as 'The Former Prophets'. Though based on legends handed down from one generation to the next, and, for the period of the kings, also on court records (see, for example, 1 Kings 15:7 and 16:20), the aim of this narrative, as has already been stated, is not to provide an accurate record of what the human protagonists did or failed to do. Rather, the aim is to offer an interpretive commentary, focusing on the presence and action of YHWH in the history of Israel.

Everything the editors of the exilic edition of the Books of Kings write is composed against the background of the terrible events of 587BC when they lost their land, their temple and their king. Their focus is on the Torah. Their judgment is that the fall of Jerusalem was God's punishment for a long history of failure to be faithful to the covenant, especially on the part of the rulers (with the notable exceptions of David, Hezekiah and Josiah). The way the kings are portrayed may in some way resemble the historical figures who bore their names, for legends tend to have a basis in historical memory, but they are portrayed in the often gripping stories of the Deuteronomists so as to represent the qualities that are expected of leaders, and the character flaws that aroused YHWH's anger and led, finally, to the catastrophe of 587. The Deuteronomists in exile saw the monarchy as the main culprit for the loss of the Promised Land. YHWH's abandoning of his people as seen in the loss of Jerusalem and the temple provided the key questions that the authors were desperate to answer as they pored over the court records of Israel and Judah.

The Babylonian Exile (597-538BC) demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701BC – despite all this, the Babylonian army had razed YHWH's city to the ground. Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, the king was no longer on the throne.

Despite their belief that the temple was the house of YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic success.

In Babylon, they found themselves living in what was, in many ways, a superior culture, but not religiously. The concept of monotheism (there is only one God), as distinct from monolatry (among the gods only YHWH is to be worshipped) began to emerge (see Isaiah 44:6-23; 45:18-25; Deuteronomy 4:35, 39), as well as a sense of their missionary vocation (see Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:6). Instead of identifying themselves in relation to the Davidic dynasty, they began to see themselves as a community defined by worship. In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray. This was the beginning of the institution of the synagogue, which has remained central to Judaism ever since.

They had to ask themselves how the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy could have happened. It was impossible for them to contemplate the possibility that their God, YHWH, was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians. So they concluded that it must have been their God who brought about the catastrophe that they were experiencing. Since God is just, the problem had to be their infidelity to their part of the covenant, and they interpreted their loss and suffering as God's punishment for their sin, as God's way of purifying them.

Where had they gone wrong? What must they do to bring about the purification without which they could not enjoy God's blessing? These are some of the questions that the Deuteronomists were asking as they compiled their story, a long story of human fidelity and infidelity played out in the presence of Israel's faithful God. Some of the characters show that obedience is possible. King Hezekiah and King Josiah are presented as models of right kingly behaviour. King Jeroboam, the first king in the northern kingdom of Israel, is the key example of how a king should not behave. The aim of the writing was to get the exiles to reflect on their own failures in order to bring about a conversion, with the hope that their faithful God would one day restore what they had lost, and find, at last, a people who had learned their lesson and were committed to doing God's will. The fundamental values of wonder, of awe, of gratitude, of listening, of obedience, of worship, of covenant love, of justice, of heeding the cry of the poor, these are the fundamental values of Israel. They identify Israel and make it special. When these values are lived, Israel is the people it is called to be with its own blessed life. When they are not lived Israel loses all meaning.

The Book of Joshua

The story begins with the Book of Joshua. The Deuteronomists drew on some old traditions, but they reworked them in an attempt to create a 'heroic past'. The Deuteronomists are telling their contemporaries that Israel had experienced many defeats, but it was not always like that. In the beginning, when the ideal leader, Joshua, faithfully listened to YHWH, YHWH gave them victory over their enemies, and it could be the same again if only Judah learned to be faithful. Joshua is the story of the emergence of Israel in the hill country of Canaan and it is based on legends that developed in the sanctuaries of Gilgal, a border sanctuary near Jericho, Shechem, another border sanctuary in the hill country, and perhaps other sanctuaries as well, that told of the campaigns and alliances that were part of the struggle against the city states that had dominated the whole region, and that continued to control the plain of Esdraelon and the coastal corridor to Egypt.

The historical emergence of Israel in Canaan in the closing years of the thirteenth century BC has been embellished by folklore and at times is formulated in the language of cultic celebration. The stories are presented in ways that reinforce the religious convictions of the Deuteronomists. There is history in the Book of Joshua, the history of the adherence to YHWH of scattered clans in the hill country of Canaan, but it is history always at the service of theology. The book of Joshua, like the works of the Torah, is before else, the story of God's self-revelation in the story of the people of Israel.

The Book of Judges

The Book of Joshua is followed by the Book of Judges. The core of the Book of Judges is a compilation of epic stories of people who were significant in one or other of the tribal areas during the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC, from the death of Joshua to the emergence of the monarchy. These were, for the most part, difficult years during which those who espoused the religion of Yahwism had to struggle with the tension of resisting old Canaanite habits which they continued to find attractive, as well as having to fight for their survival against the city-states of the plain of Esdraelon, the Philistines in the coastal districts, and Bedouin invaders from the south and east. The stories of local 'heroes' are told to entertain, but more importantly to encourage people to continue the struggle. Folklore, rather than history, would be a better way of characterising these stories, though there is an historical background to them.

As with the stories of Moses and Joshua, these stories do not set out to give accurate information about the past. Their aim is to form people's consciousness. The stories portray the past in ways that will encourage fidelity to YHWH in the present. In this context it is interesting that the so-called 'judges' are not idealised but portrayed in all their human frailty. This is above and beyond anything else the story of YHWH's presence and action in the life of his people.

The Books of Samuel & Kings

The Book of Judges is followed by the Books of Samuel, named after the great prophet raised up by God in the second half of the eleventh century BC. Before the age of printing (15th century AD), the Hebrew Bible had only a single book named after Samuel.

It covered the story of Samuel, and the first two kings of Israel: Saul and David. In the second century BC those responsible for the Greek Version divided this material into two books: the First and Second Books of the Kingdoms. The division was basically a matter of the convenient size for a scroll. Naming both books after Samuel, as the Hebrew Bible does (even though Samuel's death occurs as early as 1Samuel 25:1), is an important reminder that the focus is on what YHWH is doing. The Second Book of Samuel covers the reign of David, who was chosen as king by YHWH and consecrated by the prophet Samuel.

The Books of Kings cover from the death of David (c. 970) to the destruction of Jerusalem (587). Composing their narrative in exile, the Deuteronomists are critical of the failure of political leadership, but they are not in principle against having a monarch so long as he is faithful to the covenant. One of the lessons of the Book of Judges is the anarchy that prevailed in the pre-monarchy period. If the exiles repent, and if God responds to their repentance by trusting them, once again, with the Promised Land, they will need leaders, but these leaders must be faithful to YHWH. With all his human faults, this is how David is portrayed in the Books of Samuel. The aim of the Deuteronomists was to inspire fidelity to the essential elements of the covenant that they believed their ancestors had entered into with God, a covenant that identified them as a people. They were convinced that only obedience would ensure blessing and so success. They treated the traditions that they inherited with the greatest reverence and care. They believed that YHWH was guiding them and they reflected on their history, searching for YHWH's will for them as a people. However, they wrote, necessarily, from their own perspective. The School that produced Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and the Books of Samuel and Kings is responsible for what has been called the Bible's first great theological synthesis.

The Torah in post-exilic Judah (Yehud)

The Deuteronomists continued their work in post-exilic Judah, as did the Priestly School who played a key role in the emergence of the Torah. They not only had the experience of the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile to ponder over, they also experienced the 'miracle' of the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia, and his edict allowing the exiles to return home to the Promised Land.: In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006) page 141 Jean Louis Ska SJ writes: 'The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community within the Persian Empire created a new situation that undoubtedly called for the revision and reinterpretation of the "data" presented by the sources and the most ancient traditions.' We are on solid ground if we think of the final work of composition of the Torah as reflecting the concerns of the post-exilic period. Determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the post-exilic authors wanted to form again the people of Israel, worshipping God faithfully in the restored temple and faithful to the covenant made with them long ago by God.

The Priestly School was responsible for the Book of Leviticus. The Books of Exodus and Numbers were the fruit of the combined work of a number of Schools, including the Priestly and Deuteronomic Schools. They saw their experience as in many ways a reliving of the experience of Moses and their ancestors, who, like them, had lived in exile and had been led across the desert to the Promised Land.

In Judah after the Exile

They wanted to tell the story of Moses, not only to recall the wonders of God's power, mercy and faithfulness, but also so that their contemporaries could identify with their ancestors. They faithfully included the material that had come down to them from Israel and Judah – how much, we do not know. They wanted to warn their contemporaries not to repeat the sins of their forebears, and to learn from the past what it means to live as God's chosen people

The post-exilic authors saw their experience also as a re-living of the experience of the patriarchs. Like the patriarchs, they had come from outside and were living in a land, promised to them but not possessed by them. In the Book of Genesis chapters 12-50 they gathered the stories available to them – how much, we do not know – and put them together in such a way as to reflect on the faithfulness of God to his promises, thus encouraging the returned exiles and the people who had stayed behind to continue to believe in the promise and the mission given them by God. While in Babylon the exiles had come into contact with myths about the beginnings of the world and of the human race – myths like that of Atrahasis, composed in the ancient Akkadian language of the 17th century BC, and the Enuma Elish of the 12th century BC. In the Book of Genesis chapters 1-11, the post-exilic authors placed the stories of the patriarchs and Moses within the larger perspective of YHWH, the Lord of creation as well as of history. They wanted to show that they traced themselves as a people right back to the beginnings. God had chosen to reveal his true Self to the world through Israel.

What these authors wrote for their contemporaries has a value that transcends the world of Judah in the late sixth and fifth centuries. The continued use of and respect for the text is proof enough of that. However, as has been mentioned a number of times, the closer we can get to the historical context which gave rise to these writings, the more we can appreciate their precise beauty and truth. We cannot always be clear about the origin of the various pieces that they weaved into their final work. Each of these fragments or narrative cycles carries its own wealth of meaning. But we can, to some degree, discover why the post-exilic writers placed them where we now find them in the text, how they introduced them and linked them, and how they understood them in the light of their experiences during the Exile and after their return to Judah. To the extent that we can do this we can be confident that we are in touch with the inspired text, and we can be protected against reading meanings into it that are at variance with the inspired intention of those responsible for the text as we have it.

Those who were attempting to build a community in Judah that was faithful to the religion of Israel wanted to write the story of Israel in a way that was faithful to tradition and was expressed in ways that would connect with the experiences of their day. One of the stories in the Jacob Narrative captures an essential element of their experience. To enter the Promised Land Jacob had to struggle with his demons (Genesis 32:24-32). He carried the scars of that encounter for the rest of his life, but he did enter the land. So it was with those who composed the Torah. They had gone through their struggle – the exile in Babylon – and it had left them scarred, but, against all the odds, and in a way that they could think of only as miraculous, they were back in the Promised Land – 'the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them' (Deuteronomy 1:8).

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God of Israel – had proved faithful to them, and they wanted to express in written words – and so in a way that would never be forgotten – the story of God’s dealings with their people.

They had experienced a terrible disaster, but also an amazing resurrection. Faced with the need to re-establish themselves as a people in the very different circumstances of a reduced Judah ruled from Persia, it was all the more important to assert that their God, YHWH, is the God who created the universe and the nations. If Judah was under Persian control, that must be God’s will and so it must have a good purpose. Their return was itself a proof of the power and fidelity of YHWH to the promises made to their ancestors. The people must continue to put their faith in this God and to trust that they were still God’s chosen people. Hence the insistence of the text that it is YHWH who created the earth.

Hence the insistence of the text that the God who revealed Himself to Moses, the God of Israel, is the God of the patriarchs – the same God who brought them back to their land. The best way to read the Torah is to put ourselves among the returned exiles and hear it as they would have heard it, keeping in mind that the texts witness to different ways of understanding that history. We, too, need to hold in tension the material from the Priestly School, the Deuteronomic School, and the other ‘Schools’, as they searched for the right way to be faithful to YHWH’s choice and mission.

The Isaiah School in post-exilic Judah

Among the returned exiles were members of the School of exilic prophets who were responsible for Isaiah 40-55. It is to them and those who followed them that we owe chapters 56-66 of the Isaiah scroll. These chapters focus on the internal wranglings of the community back in Jerusalem. They do not have a single author. The exhortations and criticisms come from a minority movement in Jerusalem that is discontent with the way things are working out since the erection of the Second Temple in 516, and the material seems to range from the return from exile through to the time of Ezra (c. 458).

During this period Judah was under a governor appointed from Persia. It is important to remember that from the Persian point of view, the Second Temple was an instrument of Persian control in Judah and was under the authority of the governor, not the temple priests. Those who composed Isaiah 56-66 have nothing good to say about the leadership, including the temple priesthood (see Isaiah 63:18-19; 65:5,13-16; 66:5), and they rail against the prevailing religious compromise in the cult, and the rampant injustice that is contradictory to genuine Yahwism. However they were not in a position to do anything about it apart from complaining and continuing to point out the will of YHWH as expressed in the Torah and the Prophets. They shared the fate of those responsible for Isaiah 40-55, in that they were a persecuted and shunned minority, a situation that lasted till the arrival of Ezra from Babylon in the middle of the fifth century.

Besides the continuing inspiration provided by the prophet-preachers of Isaiah 40-55, the authors of Isaiah 56-66 were strongly influenced by the post-exilic members of the Deuteronomic School. There are similarities in the homiletic style, though this may be because of the growing significance of the synagogues which provided an ambience for presenting one’s ideas in an oratorical style appropriate for such a setting.

Deuteronomic influence is seen especially in the religious concerns of the post-exilic Isaiah School, notably their stress on the necessity of fidelity to the Law.

The salvation-hopes of the prophet-preachers of the exile were not realised. Life in post-exilic Judah was defined by economic hardship (Isaiah 60:17; 62:8-9), insecurity in political life (60:10,18), ruin and devastation (61:4), and the burden of continuing shame (61:7, 62:4). The authors of Isaiah 56-66 blamed the community, who failed to keep the sabbath (Isaiah 56:2-7; 58:3); failed to observe dietary laws (Isaiah 65:4; 66:17); had a false attitude to fasting (Isaiah 58:1-5); and were involved in immorality and idolatry (Isaiah 57:3-10, 13; 65:1-7). Especially to blame were those responsible for the cult (Isaiah 57:1-13; 58:1-5; 65:1-7; 66:1-4, 17).

Ezra and Nehemiah

The first six chapters of the Book of Ezra write of the return of the exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple. The rest of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah draw largely on the memoirs of these two men.

Ezra, a scribe and a priest first visited Yehud in 458BC (see Ezra 7:7-8). The Persian government had no interest in imposing any religion on the many and varied peoples in its vast empire. Its strength, however, was its highly developed and efficient organisation. Subject peoples could follow their own laws, but the central government wanted a record of what those laws were. It was also determined to ensure that the laws of a province did not interfere with trade or taxation. It seems that Ezra was sent to Yehud as part of this policy. He brought with him a document that had been worked on in Babylon which covered basic aspects of law and cult (see Ezra 7:6, 12, 21). With input from the leaders in Yehud, there developed the basic constitution of Yehud which we know as the Torah.

Nehemiah was sent from Babylon to govern the province of Yehud. His governorship began in 445 (see Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1; 5:14) and ran till 433 (see Nehemiah 5:14; 13:6). He returned for a second term some time before 424 (the end of Artaxerxes' reign; see Nehemiah 13:6-7). There is no record of when his second term ended.

Many earlier scholars worked on the hypothesis that it was the Chronicler who edited the scrolls of Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars today tend to see the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah as being among the sources used by the Chronicler. H. G. M. Williamson, in his book, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge University Press, 1977) speaks for an increasing number of scholars, when, after comparing the style of the Books of Chronicles and the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah for over twenty pages, he concludes (page 59):

The evidence from style now available does not compel us to accept that these books are the work of a single author.

I work on the hypothesis that those who edited the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah and put them in context were working many decades before the Chronicler.

The Chronicler

‘Chronicles’ is a translation of the Hebrew title דִּבְרֵי הַיָּמִים [dibrē hayyāmīm; see 1Chronicles 27:24 and Nehemiah 12:23]. This is a phrase that is found 32 times in the Books of Kings (see also Esther 10:2; 6:1). In the Hebrew Bible the two books of Chronicles are listed at the end of the Writings. They cover the ‘history’ of Israel from the reign of David (c.1000BC) to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587BC.

As to the date of the text of Chronicles as we now have it, Gary N. Knoppers (*1Chronicles*, Anchor Bible Series 2004, page 116) joins a number of modern scholars who opt for sometime in the late fourth century or early third century BC. Much of the Chronicler’s work is a re-presentation (often copied word for word) of the ‘history’ as found in the Books of Samuel and Kings. To discover his particular perspective it is necessary to examine what he chooses to omit and to add.

From his omissions it becomes clear that he wants to present King David as the ideal king. He does not speak of Samuel or Saul (except to record Saul’s death in order to introduce David). He omits references to David’s sins, except for the census which cast a shadow over David’s dynasty (see 1Chronicles 21). He omits any reference to Absalom, Amnon and Adonijah, and has the throne passing peacefully from David to Solomon. Though he recognises a remnant of the true Israel in the areas occupied by the northern tribes, and though he hopes for a restoration of the whole of Israel (see 2Chronicles 31 and 34:33), his focus is on Judah and neighbouring Benjamin, and on the ‘house of David’. He speaks of the people of Judah as ‘Israel’ (see 2Chronicles 10:17, 11:3, 12:1, 6). He does the same for the people of the Northern kingdom (see 2Chronicles 10:16, 18-19; 11:13). Note his telling comment: ‘Israel has remained in rebellion against the house of David until today’ (2Chronicles 10:19). The criticism of having ‘abandoned YHWH’ is levelled alike against people in the northern kingdom (see 2Chronicles 13:11) and people in Judah (2Chronicles 28:6). He repeats the criticisms levelled by the Deuteronomists against many of the kings of Judah. This helps to demonstrate that Judah is sustained, not by human merit, but by God’s fidelity to his covenant with David (see 2Samuel 7:11-16; 1Chronicles 17:11-14; 2Chronicles 21:7).

After the exile, Judah was ruled by a governor appointed from Persia. The people of Judah no longer saw themselves as a political kingdom, but as a worshipping community. The high priest (see the comment on 1Chronicles 27:5, page 208) was the key figure in the internal life of Judah, and the temple became the centre of Jewish commercial and social life, as well as the centre for cult. Like the Deuteronomists the Chronicler still hopes for a restoration of the Davidic dynasty. He quotes 2Samuel 7:3 where God promises he will establish the throne of David’s son forever (see 1Chronicles 17:12) and he continues the Davidic genealogy beyond Zerubbabel in 1Chronicles 3. However, with no signs of an imminent restoration, the Chronicler places his hopes in the cult as it had been reformed and consolidated in the middle of the fifth century under Ezra and Nehemiah.

In what he adds to the Deuteronomists’ account it is clear that he wants to provide a tradition which traces the cult of his day back to David. He sets out also to provide proper credentials for those exercising various ministries in the temple, especially the Levites.

Reading ancient texts

He sees the renewed cult, centred in the temple, as fulfilling God's will, and as providing an inspiration and a guide to Jewish communities throughout the world. This last point is important for the Chronicler. At a time when pressure was being exerted to resist syncretism and assimilation by promoting an exclusive view of Israel, the Chronicler tried to redress the balance. Worshipping God in a way that was faithful to the prescriptions of the cult was essential, but Judah must not exclude those who had a rightful claim to participate. In his presentation of the 'history' of Judah he set out to demonstrate that a faithful nucleus does not exclude others, and that all the children of Israel will be welcomed into the community should they choose to return.

Factors to remember in reading ancient texts

Ska highlights factors that we, as modern readers, need to be aware of as we read the text (pages 165-183). I will note three of them here. The first is that, for the authors of the Torah and for those for whom they wrote, the value of anything is directly related to its age: the more ancient, the more value. This is not something that we moderns see as obvious. For the ancients it was of primary importance. This is why genealogies are so important. They establish the antiquity of a family or an institution. This is why they begin their legislation so often with: 'YHWH said'. They want the readers to reflect on the origins of their faith and to read the text as expressing insight into the essence of the revelation that brought them into being in the beginning. Much of the Torah is an imaginary reconstruction of the Wilderness Period, for the authors wanted their contemporaries to relate their experiences with that of the first generation of Israelites. The monarchy had failed, but the religion of Israel went back well before the monarchy. The temple had been destroyed, but the cult went back well before the temple. Assyria, Babylon and Persia had proved more powerful militarily than Israel, but it was YHWH, the God of Israel, who created the universe and the nations – all of them.

A major problem facing the returning exiles is that those who had not gone into exile resented their return. The returning exiles wanted to reclaim their land – land that others had occupied in their absence thinking that they would never come back. The returning exiles identified closely with Moses and the people who had escaped from Egypt. Those who had stayed in the land identified with Abraham. A key reason for composing the Pentateuch was to form a united people. It was imperative that both groups come to see that the God who revealed Himself to Moses is the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Exodus 3:6).

Linked to this respect for what is ancient is the essentially conservative stance of the authors. For them ancient laws and customs could not be eliminated even when circumstances required their updating. Whatever may have happened in earlier times, the leaders of post-exilic Judah were anxious to be completely faithful to God's will, so they were meticulously careful not to attempt to harmonise the material that they inherited, even though some of it no longer applied to their changed circumstances. After all, such was their faith in God's presence and action among them that they considered their laws and customs to have a divine origin: a faith expressed in the words 'YHWH said'.

A third and related factor was their desire to demonstrate that the ancient traditions had an ongoing value for their contemporaries. They preserved the ancient material, not as museum pieces, but because they saw it as a revelation from God and they trusted that it could still guide them. We will see how they attempted to point this out in the way they told the stories and in the way they commented on the text. They did not want their contemporaries to get caught up in nostalgia for the past. It was important that they live now in a way that was faithful to God and that would avoid the mistakes of the past for which they had paid such a high price. It follows from this that, though we have some uncertainty as to how much written material the authors of the text received from earlier generations of writers, we should be confident that the post-exilic authors has a vision of Israel/Judah that transcended their own experience and their own time.

Defective concepts of God

We began this Introduction by pointing out that beauty and truth are always precise, delineated, defined. We then examined what we mean when we claim that the Bible is inspired. Now, in the light of what we have written about the necessarily limited views of those inspired by God to compose these texts, we should look at some of the main limitations of understanding that pervade the literature we are about to study, both in regard to their way of conceiving God, and in their way of understanding the appropriate human response to God's revelation. I am encouraged to do this by the words of Karl Rahner: 'Theology can create openings for adventures of the mind and heart, if we have but the courage to embark upon them, and both the courage and the humility to retrace our steps as soon as we become aware of having erred' (*Inspiration in the Bible*, page 7).

There are as many concepts of God as there are minds that conceive, for God cannot be observed directly, put to the test, and made subject to human comprehension and definition. Many concepts of God are clearly erroneous: the so-called 'god' who controls the world from outside; the so-called 'god' who is exalted at the expense of humanity; the so-called 'god' who upholds vested interests, who justifies the successful, who supports apartheid, patriarchy, hypocritical piety, immature dependency and infantile illusions. 'God' can be a projection of our fears: another word for fate, the stars, demons. 'God' can be a projection of our needs for self-indulgence, prestige, or power. 'God' can be a support for our insecurity, anchoring a meaningless life in submission to a power-object.

We should not expect the authors of the Pentateuch to be completely free from some of these erroneous ways of thinking. As we emphasised when we looked at inspiration, if God is going to inspire someone to communicate a truth, God is going to have to inspire a limited human being. There are no unlimited human beings to inspire! We do not have to assume that the authors of the texts we are going to study knew everything about everything, and, if we are going to appreciate the truth that they were inspired to write, we need to be aware of where their thinking was limited. Three key areas stand out.

Monotheism

In the texts we are studying, YHWH as conceived is a very Israelite God. Only one God was to be worshipped, YHWH, not the gods of foreign nations, or the gods of Canaan. True, in the post-exilic period, the idea of monotheism was in the air, but how thorough was it? Genuine monotheism includes the amazing insight that the mysterious divine presence with whom we experience a profound communion is the one 'God' present and revealed in different ways in different cultures.

Enemies of Israel are enemies of God

A second assumption found throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the enemies of Israel are also the enemies of God: 'Have no dread or fear of them. YHWH your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you'(Deuteronomy 1:29-30; also 3:22; 20:4); 'I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes'(Exodus 23:22; see Numbers 31). A more universalist view is endorsed by Jesus: 'You have heard that it was said: you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous'(Matthew 5:43-45).

A God who controls the world

A third assumption is that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment. This way of looking at things permeates the texts we are studying. The basis for this misunderstanding is their way of thinking of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the authors think of God as 'Almighty', declaring their faith that there are no limits to God's power, they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits, not God's exercise of control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews'(1Corinthians 1:23).

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he did not punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control. Throughout the texts we are studying there is a clear assumption that God is the one ultimately deciding what happens.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: ‘Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end’ (1 Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, – by loving. When creation is open to God’s action, beautiful, ‘miraculous’ things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is free and not determined. We experience this.

When we open ourselves to welcome God’s providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God’s gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. Many of the texts we will be reading state this, and state it beautifully, but they are not consistent, and the way the authors understand God’s relationship with the world is quite different from the way we have seen it through the life and teaching of Jesus. We do not assume that Jerusalem was destroyed because of human sin. However, it is clear that the Deuteronomists thought this way. Jesus’ contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong. We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We do not – or at least we should not – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. He was crucified by people who chose to resist God’s will. What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The authors of the texts we are about to read understood miracles as divine intervention, rather than as examples of what happens when we human beings open ourselves to God’s constant loving action in our lives and in our world. To use Jesus’ image, the sun and the rain are constant and are offered to everyone. ‘Miracles’ are what happens when we open ourselves to the ‘sun’ and the ‘rain’ – when we welcome God’s action and allow God’s grace to bear fruit in our lives.

The understanding present in the texts we are about to read is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others to do the same. If we were to do this, think of the ‘miracles’ that would happen in this world: miracles that only love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God’s love is all-powerful. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: ‘Not my will but yours be done’ (Mark 14:36).

In the course of history these texts have inspired people from every culture. Their meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them. We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find. But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the meaning of the words used – the meaning then, not now – and the literary forms, and the way the editors chose to link their sources.

The work of the Deuteronomists invites us to continue the process of interpretation. As they sat with the exiles in Babylon, dreaming of crossing the Jordan once again to return to the land promised them by YHWH, they asked themselves: How should they live to merit such a gift? How avoid the errors of their ancestors? What is the essence of being in a covenant with YHWH.

I hope that something of a response to this question will emerge for you who choose to reflect with me on the stories of the monarchs of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah as re-told by the Deuteronomists and the Chronicler. It has been my pleasure and privilege to be guided by the scholars who have devoted their time and talent to guiding me. Let us listen together to words that, under God's inspiration, were composed by scribes who were determined to be faithful, whatever the cost, to the faith they had inherited.