Perspectives

explorations in theology and practice

A Historico-Narrative approach to Scripture

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A Historico-Narrative Approach to Scripture

In writing this article I am not suggesting that ‘a historical narrative’ approach is a unique way that I have developed, for others have not only started down that path but have advanced such an approach beyond what I will write here; neither do I wish to suggest that those with a different approach to mine, on such issues as inerrancy (for example), do not give weight to the obvious narrative element in Scripture nor to historical contexts. However, I propose that in setting the joint elements of history and narrative at the centre we will be able to give serious consideration to the human involvement in the writing of the texts. The Bible, just as with the creation of humanity or with the Incarnation, is **both** a divine and a human book.

We have, in Scripture, books that are inspired and with an inspiration beyond that of a common meaning of ‘inspired by’ such as when someone says, ‘I was inspired to write when I heard of Nelson Mandela’s journey to freedom’. Such a writing would be inspired, or rather the author would be inspired in that example to write and we would probably pick up the ‘inspiration’ as we read such a work. Scripture, though, is beyond such a level of inspiration, for it is ‘God-breathed’. There is something of God within the very pages and texts, and such a term reminds us of the breath of God into humanity as described in the origins of creation. When humanity and divine Presence dwell together there are challenges. In Adamic humanity the revelation of God that was at some level present

(humanity created in the image and likeness of God) is tarnished to the extent that we definitely cannot say 'humanity' with a very loud voice and think we have announced the presence of God! With Jesus, the truly human one, we can however say 'Jesus' and in so doing announce the arrival of God.

The above two examples of human and divine in juxtaposition might give us some means of approaching Scripture. It is both the work of human writers ***and*** of divine inspiration. If we suggest that Scripture is like Adamic humanity we would rightly be insecure about what to trust, and so we have to lean toward a comparison to the life of Jesus and the breath of God coming on him, yet even in the life of Jesus we read that he became perfect (or better 'mature'):

> Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb. 5:8,9).

How the divine and human natures of Christ aligned is a discussion in itself, but in simple terms we can say that Jesus revealed the nature of God; he was a trustworthy and accurate reflection of God, being the 'the exact imprint of God's very being' (Heb. 1:3). Yet we have to take seriously the growth of understanding in Jesus, the young Jesus might have shared more in common with his cultural understanding than the mature Jesus. There was growth and that would have included growth of understanding. In coming to Scripture we will see the same element of growth of understanding.

> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor (Lk. 2:52).

A secure way of locating the Scriptures is to suggest that **Jesus is**

truly the revelation of God and that the Scriptures bear witness to the revelation that is in Jesus. Jesus is the word of God, and the Scriptures can also bear that title in a **derived** fashion, being the word of God that testifies to Jesus. Through differentiating Jesus as revelation from the Scriptures as witness to that revelation we avoid the danger of insisting that we have in written form words from heaven that are timeless, in the sense of unrooted from historical context, and we also allow for human perspectives to be present in the text we might be reading.

Establishing a basis of how we read and interpret the Bible is important. In many theologies a doctrine of Scripture comes very early on, and understandably so, in order to establish the authority for the theology. However, some categories seem to be imposed on the Bible rather than letting the Bible be a set of texts that can simply be engaged with. Presuppositions can dictate what the final result will be, determining our reading and perhaps limiting what we understand.

In many schools of theology terms such as ‘inspiration’, ‘infallibility’ and ‘inerrancy’ are applied to Scripture and this often seems motivated by the concern that without strict boundaries we can end up with different (and even deviant) interpretations, with decisions as to how we read the text being made on nothing more than ‘I like these texts’, and ‘I don’t like those ones’.

Danger indeed!

Yet so much of God’s activity is not protected. the post-resurrected Jesus spent days with the disciples teaching them about ‘the kingdom of God’:

> After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3).

He clearly did not cover all the bases on this important subject in a way that ensured that they would have all the answers before the issues appeared. He did not leave them a set of notes that they could later refer to. A major element those disciples had to work out that he could easily have included as part of the forty day 'course' on the kingdom of God would be how the Jewish Law related to future Gentile converts (Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council illustrates that they did not have any referent point where they could appeal to what Jesus had taught them on the issue). We have to conclude that either he did not do a very good job(!!) or he deliberately left it so that they had to work things out. I conclude the latter! Work it out - that is the nature of the book we have and the faith we adhere to.

Inerrancy...

For some this has to be defended at all costs, so the argument goes, otherwise if there is an error within one part how can we trust it with parts that speak of our salvation? The argument seems to have substance, yet there is no internal defence for inerrancy. Here are a couple of statements defending inerrancy. First, from the very famous landmark 'Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy' (formulated by more than 200 evangelical leaders at a conference convened by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and held in Chicago in October 1978).

The conference produced 19 statements on inerrancy. Point 12 reads:

> Article XII. WE AFFIRM that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. WE DENY that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood (The CHICAGO STATEMENTS on INERRANCY and HERMENEUTICS).

It was certainly not been without its critics, both quotes below coming from the Wikipedia article on the Chicago conference:

Old Testament theologian Peter Enns was greatly critical of the statement saying,

> Much of what burdens CSBI can be summed up as failing to reflect adequately on the nature of inspiration. The irony is clear. In their efforts to protect biblical authority, the framers define inspiration in a way that does not account well for how the Bible actually behaves.

Likewise Roger Olson recognised the political elements of the statements:

> In all such efforts, projects, there is a perceived 'enemy' to be excluded.
>
> When I look at the Chicago Statement on inerrancy and its signatories I believe it is more a political (in the broad sense) statement than a clear, precise, statement of perfect agreement among the signatories. In other words, what was

> really going on there... was driven by a shared concern to establish and patrol ‘evangelical boundaries’.

Another (more recent and currently very active) movement is known as ‘The Gospel Coalition’. Their statement of faith is predictable and on Scripture I pull this excerpt out that clearly affirms inerrancy:

> Moreover, this God is a speaking God who by his Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in human words: we believe that God has inspired the words preserved in the Scriptures, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, which are both record and means of his saving work in the world. These writings alone constitute the verbally inspired Word of God, which is utterly authoritative and without error in the original writings, complete in its revelation of his will for salvation, sufficient for all that God requires us to believe and do, and final in its authority over every domain of knowledge to which it speaks (The Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture - The Gospel Coalition).

‘Without error in the original writings’ is a common appeal. It can act as an opt out clause, for we do not have the original documents. Yet what we do have is, by consensus opinion, highly reliable and close to the originals. The variations among the texts are minimal. There are those who would nuance inerrancy well, but..!!

What would qualify as ‘without error’? Paul’s affirmation that the saying that ‘all Cretans are liars’ as a trustworthy statement (Titus 1:12,13)? I hope not! Would we affirm Jesus’ statement that ‘the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds’?

If we are to suggest that we have before us a book that is also to

inform us in the realm of science and history, I fear we will run quickly into trouble. It seems that we often have ancient world views that come through that remain unchallenged; what is 'corrected' are views of God, and dare I say it even the understanding of God evolves as the writings develop. We find very strong revelation about God in Genesis 1, but the ultimate revelation of God comes in the Person of Jesus, and that fullness of the revelation of God is not present at the same level throughout every book. The human / ancient cultural perspective is stronger in some texts than others, and in all texts we have to go beyond the text to the One the text is bearing witness to.

We also should give the ancient writers more credit than we tend to do. Assuming that there is a final re-working of many of the sacred scrolls in Babylon during the Exilic period, we should not assume that they were unaware that there were some serious tensions between texts (for example between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2). Stories and myths do not have to tie up in every detail and we have no reason to try and artificially harmonise them, for in the process we could lose the power of the truths being communicated. There might even be something important that comes through in the very discrepancies. Indeed to use the term 'discrepancies' is to impose an expectation on the text. If they (Genesis 1 and 2) are texts that describe the science of creation we can quickly say that they do not harmonise, but if they are creation stories (we can even use the term 'myth') then we gather theological truths that complement and build on each other.

I see no reason to affirm inerrancy, and so I do not look to close all the gaps and cause all discrepancies that appear in the text to disappear. I expect conflict, indeed I expect disagreement. There is

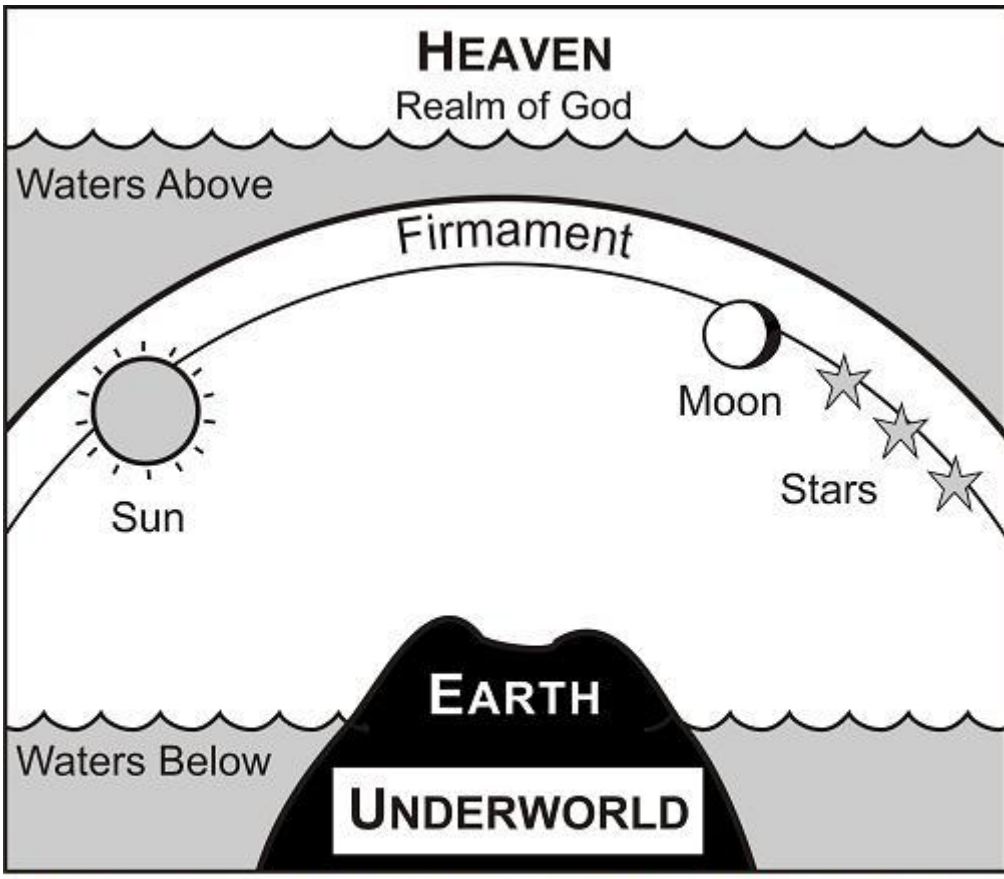
'intra-canonical dialogue' taking place, and we are invited into that dialogue.

Jesus is at the centre of our faith, not a book. The book remains essential, but Jesus is the One who is central. I have not decided if the writers of Genesis 1 and 2 believed in a literal Adam and Eve. It seems Paul perhaps did, but I personally do not. It could even be that Jesus believed in a literal first couple.[1] The ***theology*** of creation is what is critical, not the science of creation. The theology will give us purpose and direction for the story, rather than deciding on the how (or dating) of creation. By indicating that my beliefs on such matters differ or that they potentially disagree with Paul (and / or Jesus) is not a statement of superiority nor of disregarding their authority. I am post Copernicus / Galileo; they were pre-the understanding that the earth revolves around the sun. I am post-Einstein and also post-Quantum Physics; although not professing to understand either, my point is that the Bible, the biblical writers and people lived in a different world to the one we inhabit. The Scriptures were not written in our era, ***nor written to us***, yet they ***remain authoritative for us***, and for all who have gone before and who will come after us.

The ancient world-view is radically different to ours:

The image below is from the article by Denis Lamoureux at: The Ancient Science in the Bible. (See also his article and summary at: https://sites.ualberta.ca/~dlamoure/wlas2.pdf.)

[1] If there was a belief in a first couple we still might not be able to decide if that belief is in a literal historical first couple, or in a theological first couple. The latter I believe in - we are all human; the former I do not believe Scripture is insisting on.



"The 3-Tier Universe" - The regional geography led ancient Near Eastern people to the reasonable conclusion that the earth was encircled by a sea. Journeys in any direction eventually led to a body of water: the Mediterranean Sea is west, Black and Caspian Seas north, Persian Gulf east, and Arabian and Red Seas south.

For the ancients there were waters above (where else did the rain come from but from above the firmament, rain being when the waters leaked through) and waters beneath. This is the explanation

as to how the flood came about:

> In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened (Genesis 7:11).

The Bible shares a world-view similar to that of the wider cultures. We should anticipate that and not assume that the biblical world-view being expressed at that point is a world-view we have to adopt. In the example of the ancient world view of 'the firmament above' we should not challenge the scientific community that they have it wrong. Indeed the ancient view does not express the 'objective facts', quite the opposite!

Scripture is 'God breathed'

> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

God-breathed. That is a wonderful claim. Humanity, in the image of God, was clay that God breathed into, and I think we can add were to be useful, useful for purpose, that purpose being the stewarding and filling the earth. Likewise Scripture is 'God-breathed' and useful, useful for purpose. That term 'useful' is so practical, useful to equip. (Another breath of God we might consider to be the breath that came into the *ekklesia*, the group of disciples that Jesus breathed into, the group that was gathered in the upper room that was filled with a wind / breath from heaven.)

Would God-breathed mean inerrant? I don't think so. It certainly sets Scripture apart, and sets it above other writings that we might consider helpful. This is why I am very happy to use the term **'authority'** when it comes to the text, and that authority being beyond the words of the text, but resident in the 'story' that is told through the texts (more on this later).

What constitutes 'Scripture'? With this question we come face to face with an issue - what books should be included in the 'canon of Scripture'? I accept the 66 books of the Protestant canon, but also have to acknowledge that not all Christian bodies are in agreement over the 'canon' of Scripture. It has certainly become a much firmer term for us (after all we bind them into a book, they had scrolls) than it was for the early Christians.

Peter uses the term 'Scripture' of at least some of what Paul wrote:

> So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures (2 Peter 3:15, 16).

Paul's letters were classed alongside 'the other Scriptures'. It is no great surprise that even for Peter the Pauline letters were not easy to understand. Many of the writers were not educated at the level of Paul. And the warning remains, the more complex the Scriptures the easier they are to be distorted!

Other books circulated, so even if we were to ask Jesus what scrolls he had been reading we might be a little surprised! The Jews did not

have a firm line delineating what books were in and which were out. We have in our possession a core set of books that are handed down to us that we work with. In the New Testament we can see how certain books are quoted or alluded to, showing that they were viewed as carrying an inherent authority. Books such as Isaiah feature heavily, and people such as the Patriarchs, David or Jeremiah are referred to. The narratives were there 'for us':

> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4).

With Scripture we enter the world of story. Ultimately a story running from creation to new creation; events such as the Exodus, the monarchy and the Exile become ever so important. As we read back into the text some grasping of those events, along with the traumatic years that are on the immediate horizon of the New Testament era (66-70AD, the Jewish wars) will help us in our reading.

A historical narrative approach to Scripture

There is nothing novel in this approach: it is simply suggesting that the texts are written into a historical context and so if we have some grasp of the context the language might be better / differently understood. And maybe the term 'written' should really be 'edited' - as much of what we have (of the Old Testament) in its final form was edited during the time of Exile in Babylon.

[The Babylonian Exile (597BC) is a very key time of re-definition within the nation. The scrolls become very important, and the weekly synagogue takes shape. They have lost other ways of defining themselves - land and Temple, so new ways arise. (We can ask if the synagogue became the model for 'church'; and if so should we draw an understanding of ekklesia that is drawn from the pre-Exilic life of Israel?)

There is possibly another defining moment for the Jewish canon at the council of Jamnia (late first Century) that tightened what books were 'in' in the light of a growing number of Christian (and other) books that were circulating. It probably did not set the Jewish canon, but was part of the response that decided what was 'in' and authoritative. So the books that Jesus read would have included books not in our Old Testament.]

Taking a historical narrative approach the books are not:

- simply words from heaven dictated,
- nor are they simply a collection of wonderful timeless truths.

With a historical narrative it restrains us from taking Scriptures and putting them together to prove a point. Texts might belong to different parts of the jigsaw or even to different jigsaw puzzles.

There is **a process within Scripture**. This means we are to expect a measure of internal dialogue and disagreement. A simple example is that of the pro-monarchical stream (we read 'in those days there was no king in the land, everyone did what was right in their own eyes') and of an anti-monarchic stream (1 Sam. 8 being the central

element to this).

And to provoke us further we also read in Deuteronomy:

> When you come to the land the Lord your God is giving you and take it over and live in it and then say, “I will select a king like all the nations surrounding me,” you must select without fail a king whom the Lord your God chooses. From among your fellow citizens you must appoint a king—you may not designate a foreigner who is not one of your fellow Israelites. Moreover, he must not accumulate horses for himself or allow the people to return to Egypt to do so, for the Lord has said you must never again return that way (Deut. 17:14-16).

This text written / edited in the Exile seems to indicate that the editors did not have an issue in putting words back into Moses (and maybe even taking the liberty of putting words in God’s mouth) and the words are certainly written from a pro-house-of-David perspective. ‘A king the Lord your God chooses...’ Really? For in the Samuel text we read that in choosing a king the people are rejecting God. There is an underlying theme that runs throughout the texts that is projected back into earlier writings answering the question of ‘why did the northern tribes disappear’ - the response is they did not follow David’s house. (In the earlier books of 1 and 2 Samuel we have extra material that seems to be present in order to justify the choice of David and Solomon, that material being absent in the later writings of 1 and 2 Chronicles. By then the northern (rebellious) tribes are no longer on the scene so there need be no justification for the choice of the Davidic line.)

Internal dialogue can be seen with the three ‘wisdom books’ of Proverbs (do this and you will prosper, everything is simple); Job

(but he was a good guy and all the advisers, who come with ‘Proverbs style wisdom’, just don’t cut it... incidentally he is not a Jew yet honoured God, the book being dated around the time of Abraham); and Ecclesaiastes (not the most up-beat book; all is vanity; there is nothing new under the sun; the dead are considered better than those alive, and even better never to have been born...). The three books do not present a unified picture!! Talk about a heated argument - all the material is there with the tensions between them to stoke the fire. We can try to level it all out or if we let the texts speak for themselves, and if we do the latter we will discover that we are invited into a very rich provocation as to what we personally believe, and therefore how we will respond to issues of suffering. Scripture is useful even when it is not easy to come to conclusions.

As the narrative of Scripture develops so does the understanding of faith. The flood is God’s judgement; but would Jesus have said so? Jesus indicated that the tower that fell in Siloam was ‘one of those things that happen’ (Lk. 13:4). (Like all ancient cultures and writings the events are interpreted in the light of their faith, most ancient cultures having a flood narrative.)

> Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Luke

13:1-5.)

Perhaps Jesus would have seen the flood as judgement; perhaps he would have nuanced that view... and perhaps he would have taken a different view all-together. We cannot make definitive statements on such things, but the point remains that an interpretive understanding develops - and this certainly is of great help when we read of God's instruction to destroy totally whole peoples.

I also consider that we do not have to take certain stories as historical. The truth communicated through the medium of the stories is far more important than the historicity. Daniel, set in Babylon, but probably essentially fictitious, is used to speak into the conflict with Greece; the empires of Babylon and Greece are centuries apart but the issues of how to resist remain the same. Jonah - just too many things don't stack up historically. Nineveh was a great city, but by ancient standards. It was certainly not a 3 days journey across, measuring approx 1.5 kilometres across and some 5 kilometres north to south. It is possible that when the book refers to Nineveh and how long it would take to traverse it that the whole surrounding territory is included, but better to look for a narratival solution. The three days surely parallel the three days in the belly of the 'great fish', the 'sea monster / beast'.

(And if as I suggest Jonah is probably not historical, did Jesus in his reference to him consider he was historical? Huge questions but liberating! We do not have to settle the issue, but can look for the **meaning** that comes through the text.)

In some of these narratives the writers almost certainly knew the discrepancies. The writers are not always seeking to report a 'this happened' but are presenting us with 'read this and listen to God'.

Claims of genocide are as likely to be cultural claims of ‘our God is bigger than your god’ rather than reports of history; likewise the excessive claims to longevity that we find in the early chapters of Genesis parallel such claims in other literature from that period of time. Longevity affirmed superiority!

Narrative

Narrative runs throughout the pages of the Bible; even the first five books of the law are mainly in narrative form. Law in the sense of what is right or wrong is not the primary stream. The narrative form gives us a bigger understanding of law and we cannot go down the line of the Old Testament equates to law in contrast to the New Testament being grace. (There are many strands in Judaism, past and present, as there are in all faiths, but the consensus was that Judaism was a grace-based faith.) The contrast is that of law (as gift) and Spirit (as gift). Law as a guide to life, Spirit as guide to life, and ultimately as source in order that we might become ‘life giving’. Pentecost was the festival when Israel celebrated Moses going up on high and coming down with the gift of the law (and 3000 rebels died!); when the day of Pentecost had fully come Jesus had ascended on high and came down with the gift of the Spirit... and 3000 found life.

Narrative is of course right at the surface in the Gospels, and read from a narrative point of view they present their story. For example, Mark is in a hurry to get the story out, with his constant ‘and then’, so time is compressed; Matthew is full of ‘fulfilments’ of Scripture with the whole book placed between ‘the GENESIS of Jesus Christ’ to the final strong and deliberate echo of Cyrus claim (in the final book of the ‘writings’ so effectively the final book of the Hebrew Bible) and

the great commission, not now to build a temple in Jerusalem but to disciple all nations... has to mean a temple in the whole earth. Of Cyrus we read:

> This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:
> " 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the Lord their God be with them.' " (2 Chronicles 36:23).

The parallels (and contrasting fulfilment) are clear: 'all authority', 'go'; a temple but the location and the material are in complete contrast. No longer a temple in Jerusalem, and not a temple built with one physical stone upon another.

We can see narrative at work in John with such elements as Nicodemus (Jn. 3) coming at the middle of the night, under the cover of darkness; the teacher in Israel but without sight, and in need of being 'born again'. The next encounter that John presents is with the woman at the well in Samaria (Jn. 4), the encounter taking place at the direct opposite hour, the midday sun. She 'sees' and proclaims. A learned male Jew with all the scrolls; a Samaritan woman whose Scriptures were limited to the first five books of Moses. The contrasts are great and given that Jesus tells one specific person that they need to be 'born again' should caution us about making that the one and only paradigm to understand the door one comes through to encounter Christ.

Narratives are also present that pull on previous stories. Adam has responsibility for the animals... Israel is also Adam, the nations are the animals, some are unclean(!) and some are wild beasts (hence

the dominating empires are presented as beasts throughout Scripture). Adam and Noah - two ‘fathers’ of the human race, both end up naked and with shame. The narrative surrounding Jesus and Barabbas (both sons of the ‘father’) recall the conflict ending in murder between Cain and Abel; Abel’s blood crying out from the ground for justice while Jesus’ blood crying out for forgiveness. Men meeting women at wells and marriage resulting / Jesus meeting the woman at the well and the talk of ‘your husband’. Parables that are beyond nice stories but stories of Israel, perhaps the older brother is representative of collective Israel, the younger brother the sinners who ‘repent’. The parables often draw on stories of the day but with a twist in the ending. The symbolic choice of twelve disciples would not have gone unnoticed, nor the sending out of the seventy / seventy-two. The storms coming to the house built on sand, with the irony that the house built on the rock (the Temple) when the storm comes will collapse. Nuances, quotes, allusions, texts playing with former texts, re-interpreting them. A living unfolding story is in our hands.

Once we then add ‘historical’ to the narrative we move away from ‘wrath’, ‘salvation’ etc. being about eternal destiny. Wrath is historical and expressed within history - Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome etc., are those who bring the wrath of God against the nation. Jesus when warning about ‘Gehenna’ is warning those in Israel to ‘repent’ from their path that will simply antagonise the Romans, otherwise hell will be experienced. In those years - a generation after Jesus it is recorded that a million Jews were killed, with some 500 per day being crucified by the walls of Jerusalem in the final days before the city fell (meanwhile inside are prophets saying ‘just trust God, this is his city, he will deliver us, remember the Exodus’). It is claimed that Gehenna (translated as ‘hell’) was the rubbish

dump outside Jerusalem situated in the valley of Hinnom where the fire never went out; in those final days inside Jerusalem they had to dispose of corpses by throwing them over the walls into the valleys outside. So a historical reading tries to understand the references in relation to the historical and geographical context. (It leaves hanging whether Jesus believed in a future hell-fire, but it would seem his warnings about Gehenna were to a historical setting and to a specific people.)

Likewise 'salvation' is very concrete and historical. God saved Israel from Egypt, and that certainly did not mean that he whisked them off to a conference where they could celebrate their ticket to another world! They were saved from Egypt's rule and that freedom meant they could now express what it was to be the people chosen by God. Hence salvation was from oppression and salvation was to be free from slavery. It was **NOT** salvation in the sense of eternal destinies; a historical reading does not lead us first to suggest it was to be saved from hell and saved for heaven.

Historical

A **historical** understanding brings us back to earth, and back to the specific era that the texts address. We should seek to avoid taking the texts from their historical contexts and (for example) apply them to our time directly or to some future scenario. There is very little about the future in Scripture. Maybe some vague stuff about the return of Jesus, but a laid out scenario about the supposed 'last days' is not to be found within the pages we have before us. The historical narrative suggests there are various horizons in view.

We can simplify the expectation among the Jews as being a hope

for a future day when God would intervene and restore Israel from all bondage; God might do this directly or through the agency of a Messiah. This leads to the concept of 'this (evil) age' and of 'an age to come' when there would be the reversal of all things and the reward for the righteous. With the word that we translate as 'eternal' simply meaning 'of the age' and by inference the age to come. We might suggest that the word means 'without end / everlasting' but it is related to quality of time rather than length of time. 'Eternal life' is life of the age to come (a quality of life) as that coming age will be different to this current age. To advance an understanding of the length of age we have to turn to an appreciation of the resurrection, not the actual word 'eternal'.

We suggest then for the Jews, contemporaneous with Jesus, that there was **a one horizon hope and expectation**. A future day of reversal, a day when their God would reign supreme, and a day when the fortunes of the righteous (Israel, though had internal arguments as to who the 'true' Israel was - all Israel?, or those who expressed their faith as outlined by one of the Jewish sects?) would be restored; a true reward for their faithfulness.

One future horizon for the faithful Jews but for the early church that one horizon was opened up in such a way that we have multiple horizons.

The first horizon for the early Christians became Easter, and this is termed 'his Exodus' that was accomplished in Jerusalem. In Luke's account of the transfiguration of Jesus there was a conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus about what Jesus was going to fulfil in Jerusalem. It would be an **'exodus'**, a remarkable deliverance from the oppressive powers. A greater exodus than the

one we read of in the Pentateuch, and taking place in Jerusalem we conclude this was not simply going to be a setting free of one people (Israel) from an Imperial power (Egypt) but of the human race from all hostile powers, powers that even included hostile religion.

> They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31).

This event was **NOT** anticipated, so we read of Peter's resistance to the idea of the 'son of man suffering'. Likewise, I suggest that this resistance is part of what led Judas to be involved in his act of betrayal. All those first disciples had to come to the understanding that 'first the son of man must suffer' before glory would be manifest. A future day of God's intervention, that 'one horizon' understanding had now to embrace the death of Messiah, with the implication that there would be other horizons beyond that one.

From Easter flows Pentecost etc... Then **the next horizon** is that of the **Fall of Jerusalem** - an event that repeats what had taken place before at the hands of Babylon and Greece. This is truly 'the end of the age', indeed one could even suggest it was 'the end of the world' to those Jews of that era. There was no expectation in Judaism for 'the (literal) end of the world', but for there to be the 'end of the world order as we have it'; the end of corruption, and especially the end of the oppression of Israel by all those foreign powers. When that day came Israel would truly be 'the head and not the tail' and the God of Israel would be acknowledged as the one and only true God. Such a day was expressed as being a day when the 'sun will be darkened and the moon will turn to blood'. Never to be understood literally, but using common language of the era that we find within the genre of 'apocalyptic'. (Not exactly the same, but we use terms such as

‘frightened the life out of me’ but by using such a phrase we do not want to suggest they had better bury us before we decompose; we are using exaggerated language to communicate the level of fright. Perhaps a better example is something along the lines of, ‘the coming down of the Berlin Wall was an earth shattering event’. By saying that, we do not mean that some physical earthquake brought it down, but the event had an incredible effect on the world as we knew it; perhaps an effect even greater than that of an earthquake, hence the language is not inappropriate (thanks to N.T. Wright for the last example). Apocalyptic language is investing the historical event with meaning and pulling on something to do that. The ‘end’ will be world changing, for it truly is the end of an era.

There is a generational period, between those two horizons, between the death of Jesus and the fall of Jerusalem, when Jews were entreated to express faith in Jesus, for ‘there is no other name under heaven by which people can be saved’ (Acts 4:12, spoken to Jews - the name of ‘Abraham’ nor any of the other patriarchs will not be sufficient for them!); that generation was a crooked generation and the urgency of the day was that they remove themselves from the ways of their generation and are ‘saved’ (Acts 2:40; 3:23) - all this is language that is reminiscent of the generation leaving Egypt on their journey to freedom. An Exodus was taking place so the way to salvation was to join with the people who were moving away from the oppressive powers.

Terms such as ‘repent’ are not simply to do with ‘repent of your sins and have a spiritual experience’; the Jewish aristocrat and historian Josephus, who was born a few years after the crucifixion of Jesus was sent to Galilee in 66AD as a young army commander, to sort out rebel movements in Galilee. His task, as he describes it in his

autobiography, was to persuade the hot-headed Galileans to stop their mad rush into revolt against Rome, and to trust him and the other Jerusalem aristocrats to work out a better way. He records that he urged a young man, one of the main leaders pushing for armed resistance (ironically named ‘Jesus’) to ‘repent and believe in me’. He was not calling for a ‘spiritual’ repentance of sins toward God, but appealing to the young man to not go down the path of armed resistance, but to believe / trust in Josephus’ approach to the problem. Of course Josephus had vested interest in not stirring up the conflict for he was doing very well and did not want to upset the Romans. The ‘repent’ language is ‘political’, it is of a societal direction. (Likewise John the Baptist’s language to the Pharisees: ‘who warned you to flee the wrath to come?’ is focused on a political / societal direction.)

Salvation was on offer to that generation, but we must not immediately make it about a ticket to heaven, but a call to be part of a movement that was centred on Jesus, founded not on Israel and 12 sons / tribes but on Jesus and 12 chosen disciples. The salvation would mean salvation **from** the forthcoming wrath that would be experienced with the brutal siege of Jerusalem. It would lead to freedom from the Imperial powers; freedom to be the people of God. The salvation is historical; we can look beyond the pages of the Gospel writers to, for example, Paul to get an even bigger picture of salvation from the powers of darkness, but we should not jump too quickly to that bigger picture as we will lose the historical scenario and fail to understand that Paul too understands salvation as being political. The faith is a societal revolution (the kingdom of God).

This generational period is important. The signs in Matthew 24 (Lk. 21, Mk. 13) are generational so when we read, ‘And this gospel of

the kingdom will be preached in the whole world (*oikoumene* - inhabited world, a common term for the Roman world) as a testimony to all nations (*ta ethne* - common term for the Gentiles), and then the end will come' (Matt. 24:10) we should read it as generational: between that first Easter and the fall of Jerusalem. Parallel to the drive within the Jewish world ('save yourselves from this crooked generation') there was likewise a push within the Roman world. Paul, driven by this passion to 'get to Spain', was calling for those under Rome's oppression to come to repentance, forsaking all other idols and trusting the God of Israel for a future that could only mean the total transformation of the society that they lived within. His desire to get to Spain was to get to the Western end of the Empire: 'the ends of the earth'.

Perhaps no one of that first generation had sight beyond the generation that followed Easter / Pentecost. Maybe they had no expectation beyond AD70 - with probably all the writings completed before that date, with the likely exception of Revelation (at least in its final form). A generation was the major focus of the New Testament and takes us from the first through to the second horizon.

[The imagery of 'the Son of man coming in the clouds' should not be taken out of its context and transposed into some expectation of Jesus in the sky appearing; it is a historical reference to the intervention of God in ***history*** *to give judgement over the Imperial powers - the beasts - and to declare the vindication of 'one like the son of man' (Dan. 7). Jesus promised that those alive at his trial would see that sign. The Fall of Jerusalem is the convincing demonstration of that - all taking place within a generation of his statements.]*

The book of Revelation moves beyond Jerusalem to the fall of the Imperial power of Rome. This being (my perspective) **the next horizon**. And not simply Rome as historical Rome, but Rome as Babylon, as Imperial spirit. Does that horizon also coincide with the *parousia* of Jesus? Or is the *parousia* a horizon beyond that... and what does the *parousia* mean, it being yet another imperial term? Those latter questions are not as easy to answer as might first appear; but regardless of how we answer them we are left clearly with the same prayer as those early disciples were given - the prayer that God's 'kingdom come on earth'; we are left with the same passion to be grasped as Paul exhibited, that of working, praying and relating in a way that we hope there will be those who discover and believe that the God of Israel has acted in Jesus for the transforming of this world, so that the kingdoms within it become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ.

A historical narrative approach even allows us to question, for example, if God ever promised a 'Promised Land'. It seems Paul did not think so!!!

What was promised Abraham is set against the contrasting background of Genesis 11 (we read those chapters as an unfolding narrative). There the nations come together to ascend to heaven. They all gather in one place, they gather with purpose, the ultimate expression of what it means to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, to be totally 'sovereign', to determine their own destiny - together with the inevitable divides of class, economics and gender. The result is an unfinished 'project' and they are scattered. Genesis 12 presents Abraham as the source of blessing for the nations. The 'seed' of Abraham being the blessing for the nations (the nations who have been scattered post-Babel).

Seed! Intended to be all gathered in one place or scattered / sown in the soil of the world?

Where Abraham could walk and what he could see - that defined the boundaries of what was promised to him. Were those boundaries to be limited or unlimited? Inevitably for him there were boundaries, but this promise was not simply to him but to all his seed, and if so where they can walk and what they can see is that not the 'promised land'? This I consider is why Paul moves beyond a concept of a 'promised land' to that of 'the world' being the promise of God to Abraham, and to his seed (Jesus) and to all who are descendants of Abraham.

> For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:13).

When in Exile (for sin) Jeremiah, who was never pro-Temple and pro-Jerusalem as being elements in giving identity and certainly not as things to pull on for safety, encouraged them to buy land, dig in and settle. Was that temporary advice until they could go back to the land... or was he seeing something beyond? Jeremiah as a person saw a return, but if we read the Scriptures in a historical narrative fashion we might suggest that in Jeremiah there is a narrative that we can follow, and as suggested above I think Paul's statement in Rom. 4 that Abraham was promised the world will take us all the way. Add to that Stephen's provocative speech (Acts 7) that every manifestation of God was outside the land, and with his final 'so God never wanted a Temple' (complete with stoning being the result), we have some material that I consider pushes us somewhere **beyond the text**... ***but not beyond the story***.

Narrative gives us Scripture as an unfinished story. Stretching from creation to new creation; from divided and separated homes - heaven and earth - to a unified home for both participants (God and human). Scripture is a complete canon but it is an unfinished story; hence narrative encourages us not to be simply repetitive but expansive and explorative... to follow the instruction to 'eat of **all** these trees... but not that one'.

The text (historical) gives way to the story (narrative). The text is historical and at times temporary; the story continues and is marked by eternity. The story sits between creation and new creation. The text runs out after a generation following Jesus, with some hints beyond, but calling for an involvement that requires immersion in the story and an expression of that story in the place wherever 'he put the Adam ('from the earth being') he had formed'; not now in a garden but in a place that will produce fruit amidst thorns and thistles. To work with the God who turns the cursed place into the promised land.

More than the original intended meaning of the author

In suggesting a historical-narrative reading of the text I am not simply repeating the well-worn instruction concerning the 'original intended meaning of the writer', but I am also pulling on the original concrete historical context of the writer. Jewish (and so also Christian) faith is rooted in how to be the people of God in this world.

I am also not suggesting that we have to become experts in understanding every aspect of any historical context. Peter freely confessed that Paul's letters were difficult (agreed!); numbers of the early writers were not from a learned background, they use simple,

and at times, grammatically wrong Greek. The goal is not understanding the text, but living faithfully in the story.

I wish to affirm that the Scriptures need to be released to speak. That involves hearing. We can insist on the original intent, the original history and still miss hearing God. It was reported to me (disapprovingly) by a seasoned teacher of the Bible that they had heard someone teach that when Jesus laid hands twice on the blind man the first healing was complete (physically). The second was to bring inner healing. Probably this was not the meaning that the writer gave to the incident. But the novel interpretation was certainly biblical! If we are only healed physically we might recover physical sight but only to the level of seeing people as 'trees'; if healed internally our sight will truly change.

We must not be afraid to read and in so doing we might well go beyond the text. **Indeed I suggest we have to go beyond the text, but cannot start a different story**. However, if we are to eat of all the trees we should indeed expect a diversity of paths. We see that in the New Testament. There was only one Gospel; yet there were two apostles: one to the Jews (Peter) the other to the Gentiles (Paul). One Gospel that when applied included obedience to the law; the other that said a reconstruction of the law would be the mark of being a transgressor (Gal. 2:18 'If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker'). Everything was shaped from the future and that path to be followed always has had the word 'freedom' engraved on it.

It is possible that at the gates of Damascus Paul encountered the 'solution' but did not know what the problem(s) were now in the light of discovering the solution (Jesus). If Jesus was God's solution to

the problem of the world everything needed a re-think. Previously the problem was clear, and Israel, a true Israel was the solution. Law-abiding Israel. So great was the revolution in Paul that he could state (as quoted in the previous paragraph) that if he were to try and re-institute the law he would become a lawbreaker! Blind for three days, nurturing his understanding for years in the desert, forging a new way as he travelled, interacting with the Scriptures, others who had faith in Jesus, and with the surrounding culture he carried out his mission and wrote his letters. Little wonder his theology is dense. He seems to start from the 'end' and re-visualise the whole that goes before the end in the light of that. For us to read Scripture that way we would need to be ready for some radical re-reads!

Unfinished story

A very useful way to approach Scripture is to use the analogy of a play, one that comes to us in five acts. **Act 1** being the creation stories. Those stories answering 'how did this begin?', but not answering the 'science' of the beginning, but the story beginning. A God, the God who acts with purpose, care and deep humbling partnership with humanity. A **second act** that is tragic, where we encounter all that has gone wrong (and for this reason I consider that the term 'fall' is inadequate but we need to consider 'falls', right through to Genesis chapter 11, thus human society and interactions are fallen). Living now outside of Eden is the setting for humanity. **Act 3** is the journey of Abraham and descendants. Called to do what Adam failed, but we gain incredible sight on what could be, of what a society that was free from Egypt's imperial rule would look like. Forward momentum, debates as to what is truly forward (Solomon - great king or enslaver of a whole people, for example is a provocative debate within Scripture); a people resistant to God,

exile… the act continues right up the Jordan river and the work of John the baptising prophet. Act 3 ends with everything hanging in the balance; can there be a restoration of Israel, and if so who will that consist of? A divide is certainly coming, and then we encounter Jesus with the division that we see beginning with John becomes fixed. From the Jordan river the reenactment with baptism indicates a new (and yet ancient) journey is beginning. **Act 4**, the life and work of Jesus… and the death of the one who will bring hope of getting the story back in a shape that could bring the possible conclusion to Act 1. A tragic ending.

Act 5 opens with an empty tomb. Resurrection, reminding us of the hope that one day the righteous would be resurrected. The claim was not that Jesus was alive, but that God had raised bodily the author of life. The Spirit outpoured. The understanding now would be that God was never absent, and that now with hindsight we can see that God had also journeyed with Adam out of the garden; that God had been in Babylon with them. Hope restored. A Gospel to proclaim to everyone, regardless of ethnicity. And an end - but what will the end truly be? Maybe some hints - a visible Presence of Jesus. But before then whole sections of that final fifth act are unwritten. Acts 28:31 ends with a description of the proclamation continuing 'unhindered'. And the proclamation must continue until there is an end.

If we approach the Scriptures not as a set of texts to be put together to prove we are right but as a narrative set in continually changing historical contexts, we will have to wrestle with what it means for us to be faithful to the story. We can neither depart from the direction of the story so that we end up perverting what has gone before, nor can we simply repeat what has gone before. We live within the story,

but our part within it has not been written. We live in the unfinished story section.

Patriarchal… but eschatological

Once we move away from ‘every text is a word from God’, in the sense of insisting that what we read is the voice of God, we can approach the text with a dynamism not a literalism. The Bible is a patriarchally-biased book; the various cultures it was written in were patriarchal and this is reflected in what we today have before us.

We read from our culture and are often shocked, however in reality we should and must critique the texts not from our culture but from the future that will manifest. We, of course, read Old Testament texts through a Jesus-lens; we read challenging texts in Paul as contingent on the situation they were written to, so do not have to propose that they are universally applicable to all situations in all eras; but beyond that we read every text through the lens that with the coming of Christ there is already ‘new creation’. That new creation is not fully manifest and so we will respect cultures and acknowledge that we continue to live within creation with the various distinctions within it (gender, biological sex etc.), but we have to push the obliterations of such distinctions as far as possible. Such an eschatological reading of Scripture is simply to acknowledge that narrative is continuing and hopefully advancing. We are not bound by the text; we can critique the text. That eschatological reading critiques such issues as patriarchy and the challenging ethnic cleansing commands that are within our ‘holy book’.

A narrative approach does not cease with the closing pages of the Bible; it continues beyond that. A historical approach gives credence

that the future is already here.

Yes, reading the Bible is a challenge. Obeying the texts, though, is superseded by seeking to live with integrity under the authority of the story being told; that story being of the God of creation entering into partnership with humanity in order to bring the story (and hence creation) to a fitting conclusion, to the point where God and humanity dwell together.