

# What does the Old Testament mean?<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* When the Christian church took over the Old Testament, it did so on the understanding that some of it should be understood in non-literal ways. Origen and then Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine developed a doctrine which Augustine summarized as 'Whatever there is in the Word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as metaphorical.' And he applied this so as to reinterpret not merely passages which, when interpreted literally, seemed inconsistent with Christian doctrine or moral teaching (such as that contained in the Sermon on the Mount), but also passages which seemed inconsistent with the supposed scientific truths established by contemporary Greek science. This tradition influenced much biblical interpretation until the Reformation; and should lead us to interpret it in the light of modern science. The meaning of any text depends on its context. The Bible is a patchwork of passages from different centuries. Only the whole Bible, and so any passage understood in that context can claim full truth and full divine inspiration. Individual passages in their original contexts can claim at most some limited degree of truth and inspiration.

## I

Before we investigate whether the picture of God in the Old Testament is that of a loving God, we need to take a view about what various passages of the Old Testament mean- a matter which has been the subject of many disputes over many centuries. We can only resolve these disputes by a philosophical analysis of the rules for interpreting texts; and the first part of this paper will seek to provide a very brief such analysis.

The meaning (in the wide sense of 'the truth conditions') of a token written sentence depends on the conventions of the language in which it is written and on the context of inscription. By the

'conventions of the language' I mean the conventions which determine how the meaning of the sentence is a function of the meanings of the individual words and the way in which they are put together. The conventions which determine the meanings of the words are ones of a kind to be found in a dictionary; the conventions which determine how the way the words are put together gives a meaning to the sentence are those to be found in books setting out the grammar and syntax of the language, as for example the conventions determining which sentences predicate a property of an object, which sentences are existential or universal, or hypothetical etc.

The context of inscription includes literary, social, and cultural contexts. The literary context is the literary work of which the sentence forms a part. The social context is the context of its production - who wrote it, when, and for which audience. The cultural context is that of the common beliefs of the society in which and for which the literary work was written. The literary and social contexts show us (among other things) who is being referred to by indexical expressions and proper names (e.g. which year is the one described as 'last year', or who is the 'John' mentioned in the sentence). The cultural context shows us (among other things) which literary genres were available to the author. Literary genres include historical works (each sentence of which purports to describe what happened by means of words used in literal senses), 'historical fables' (which purport to describe what happened only in its general outlines, with many passages filling these out in a way which does not purport to be accurate), works of fiction, allegories, metaphysical fables (which purport to convey some metaphysical truth by means of a fictional story) and moral fables (which purport to convey some moral truth by means of a fictional story). When we know the literary work to which a sentence belongs, and the genres available to the author, we can often recognize the genre of the work. When we know that, we will be on the way to knowing what it is for that sentence to be true; or -since for works of many genres (e.g. allegories or metaphysical fables) individual sentences do not have a truth-value on their own, what it is for some larger unit of the literary work which contains that sentence to be true. So when we read a sentence reporting what some politician said, when we know whether the sentence belongs to a historical work or to a historical fable, we will know whether it is claiming that the politician said exactly those words or whether it is merely claiming that it (together with other sentences ascribed to the politician) is the sort of thing the politician was apt to say in his speeches. Different genres use metaphor to different degrees. The literary and social contexts are also crucial for distinguishing when words are being used in unusual and especially metaphorical senses. If an author writes something which taken

literally is quite irrelevant to the surrounding sentences and/or he clearly doesn't believe and/or doesn't believe that his readers believe it, it must be understood in an unusual sense.

So take a single sentence, 'Larry is an elephant'. Before we can understand it we need to know not merely what the dictionary meanings of the words are and how they are put together, but also the contexts. Knowledge of the cultural context tells us which genres are available. When we know the literary context, that is the literary work to which the sentence belongs, we can recognize which of these genres is that of that literary work, e.g a zoo guide, a work of children's fiction which may be also a moral or metaphysical fable, or a letter. If the sentence is a sentence of a zoo guide, we still need to know the social context, for which zoo it was written and when, before we know what the sentence is telling us. If it was written for the London zoo of 1950, it is telling that Larry, an animal in that zoo is an elephant. The truth-conditions of the sentence are then clear. If there was an animal called 'Larry' in London zoo in 1950, who was an elephant, the sentence is true; if there was such an animal but he wasn't an elephant, the sentence is false. (Whether the sentence is false or neither-true-or-false if there was no animal called 'Larry', is still a matter of philosophical dispute!) If we recognize the literary work to which the sentence belongs as a work of children's fiction, then the sentence is surely neither true nor false. If the whole work to which the sentence belongs has a clear moral or metaphysical message and so is a metaphysical or moral fable, the same applies. But we may say that the whole work is true insofar as that message is true, and false insofar as it is not. If the sentence occurs in an ordinary letter from a human mother writing about her son, then it clearly cannot be understood literally; it must be taken metaphorically. It must be ascribing to the son some feature possessed or believed to be possessed by elephants - e.g. being large and strong, with a good memory; and then it will be true or false insofar as the context makes it clear which feature is being ascribed and - if it is clear - insofar as the son has that feature.

## II

The Bible is a big book, composed of many smaller books, most of them woven together out of yet smaller strands of writing, themselves being formed of smaller units, each with a different literary context (belonging to a different literary work), a different social context ( a different author or compiler) and a different cultural context (different presuppositions and different kinds of available

genres) at each stage of its inscription. Many sentences will therefore have several different meanings, arising from the fact that the sentence belongs to a several different units, the smallest unit being a part of a larger unit which belongs to a yet larger unit and so on. Such a sentence will therefore have one meaning as a sentence of a small unit, a different meaning as a member of a larger unit, and a further different meaning as a sentence of a yet larger unit. (I shall for the present make the assumption that the 'author' or compiler of each unit is the human author or compiler who would be picked out as such by ordinary historical investigation.)

So let us begin by going back to the smallest units, the bits of poetry and story and oracle from various sources from which the books of the Bible were put together, the units which do not contain any smaller units which had any life of their own in speech or writing; and consider a biblical sentence as belonging to such a literary context. To determine what the unit (and so the individual sentence) means, the biblical scholar must locate the original social and cultural contexts of its production. Detection of the relevant contexts is not an easy task, and some of the conclusions of biblical scholars about context are speculative. But discovering the contexts is in principle a soluble task and, in so far as they can solve it, biblical scholars can tell us the meaning of the sentence as originally written (or spoken). For example, Isaiah 7:14 (in the Hebrew) says 'A young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel'. ('Immanuel' means 'God with us'.) The original literary context is clearly that of Isaiah 7: 7-17. The social context seems to be that of a speech of Isaiah to King Ahaz, which the cultural context shows to be a prophecy. So the sentence says that the Queen (or perhaps Isaiah's wife) will bear a son who will be regarded as symbolising God's presence with his oppressed people. So understood the sentence may well be true. In Daniel 12:1-2 an angel predicts an end to the world after the death of a king whose anti-Jewish activities are described in the second half of chapter 11. Historical scholarship shows fairly convincingly that this chapter was written by an unknown writer in the second century A.D. and that 'the king' described in Chapter 11 was the writer's contemporary the Seleucid King Antiochus IV. Knowledge of this cultural context shows this verse also to be a prophecy. So in this case the sentence is false. There are however many units of the Old Testament for which we do not know nearly enough about the cultural context to know to which genre the unit belongs. A crucial example is Genesis 1-2:4a. Was this intended as literal history - 'days' meaning days? In my amateur view probably not; it is what I call a metaphysical fable describing in a poetic way the dependence of all things on God.

The units were put together by compilers with the aid of connecting verses into larger units such as the J, E, D and P sources

of the Pentateuch, and these were put together into the 'Books' of the Hebrew Bible. And then the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek as the Septuagint; and this (or similar translations) were used by many Jews as their Bible. And finally the Hebrew Bible was incorporated into the Christian Bible as its 'Old Testament'. Sewing units together gives them a new literary context, and also a new social and cultural context -that of the compiler; and so - sometimes - a very different meaning.

The most familiar modern secular example of this is where one author puts a number of his previously published papers together into one volume, and adds a preface explaining that while he republishes the papers in the form in which they were originally published, he now wishes some of them to be understood with certain qualifications; or, more radically, that he does not now agree with the argument of some of the earlier papers but republishes them in order to show what is wrong with them. In such a context the author is not expressing the views contained in the papers, but rather quoting them; and the meaning of the whole is what the author says it is in the preface, with the qualifications which he makes there - even if that was not the meaning of the papers as originally published. For an example of a preface by someone other than the original author which changed the meaning of the book, consider Osiander's preface to Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus*, saying that this detailed work, which seemed to claim that the Earth revolved annually around the sun, was meant by the author to mean only that the assumption that the Earth revolves around the sun is useful for making detailed calculations of astronomical phenomena. The meaning of the work with the preface was now very different from its meaning without it. On a smaller scale the addition of a footnote may correct something in the text, saying that it is to be understood in some unusual way.

A biblical example where the addition of certain verses changes the whole message of the book, is Ecclesiastes, where the addition of verses at the end (12: 13-14), purporting to summarize its message, really gives it a radically new message. A sceptical book becomes a God-centred book. Footnotes are not a device known to ancient writers. Their substitute for a correcting or amplifying footnote is a verse correcting the previous verse, or a connecting verse saying that the next paragraph fills out the previous one. Daniel 12:12 seems to be a verse correcting the previous verse in respect to the number of days until the 'end'. Genesis 2: 4a, has the function, according to B.S. Childs,<sup>2</sup> of explaining that the narrative of Genesis 2, which in various ways contradicts that of Genesis 1 (one example is that plants seem to be created before man in Genesis 1, but after man in Genesis 2-see Gen. 2: 5,7, and 9), is to be read as a detailed filling out of Genesis 1 in some respects.

### III

So what is the context in terms of which Christians should understand a sentence of the Bible? Christians see the Bible as having unique authority because they hold that the biblical books were 'inspired' by God the Holy Spirit, inspired in the sense that God breathed into the human author or authors what they should write. God was therefore the 'ultimate author' of the Bible. Christians have never wished to deny that these books were written by human authors, as is evident by the fact that so often there are references to 'I' who did certain things, which can only be construed as a reference to such an author, and by the discrepancies of style of different books. But the Church taught that the main message of the text came from God and was true, and contained 'revelation without error'<sup>3</sup> about God's nature, actions, and intentions, and human obligations towards him. That was the genre of the Bible and it is that status which made it 'the deposit of faith' (or at least the main part of it<sup>4</sup>) from which Christian doctrine may be derived. I cannot see that the content of those books by itself provides adequate justification for that view. Certainly the Bible contains many deep truths, but so do many other great religious and secular works. This high view of the Bible can only be adequately justified on the grounds that the Church founded by Jesus whose divine authority was authenticated by his life, death, and Resurrection, recognised it as having such a unique authority. The Church determined which books formed the Bible, and it only reached a more or less final view about this after four centuries of debate about it.

So, the Church was claiming, the social context was of books ultimately authored by God (working through the idiosyncrasies of style and culturally conditioned beliefs of its human authors), and - since the revelation was intended (the Church taught) for all humans - all humanity was their intended audience. 'Holy Scripture', wrote Gregory the Great, is a letter of God Almighty to his creature'<sup>5</sup>. Hence all the books together formed the literary context for the interpretation of a given sentence. The cultural context in which these books came to have their final form was that of the Church of many centuries, and in particular of the first five centuries during which in determining which books formed part of the Bible it developed a view which followed from its understanding of the social and literary contexts of biblical books about how they should be interpreted. My inquiry for the rest of this paper into the meaning of the Old Testament will be an inquiry into what is its meaning if it has the contexts which the Church declared it to have in ascribing to it its unique authority. Under any other understanding of the contexts of biblical books, although they have much historical interest, they have no au-

thority for Christians. It because the Church's view about the contexts of the first part of the Christian Bible depends on its view that it is the first part of a two-part literary work that I have entitled my paper 'What does the Old Testament mean?' rather than 'What does the Hebrew Bible mean?'

As with all texts, biblical passages should be understood in their most natural literal sense if that is possible given its contexts. But it follows however from the social context of the biblical books (as we are now understanding this) that we cannot understand the sentence in such a sense if doing so would involve ascribing to God a belief which on other grounds we believe that he does not have. Biblical sentences should be understood in the light of God's beliefs, as revealed in other biblical sentences (which form the literary context) and the central beliefs of the Church about what Christ had taught which it held before most of the New Testament had been given its canonical status.

God has true beliefs about Christian doctrine. So, when a sentence understood literally contradicts what we know from other sources about Christian doctrine it must be understood in some other sense. The early Christian theologians, the Fathers as they are called, were well aware that there are many biblical passages which when understood in their most natural literal sense are ambiguous or inconsistent with what they believed to be established Christian doctrine, or simply irrelevant to it. It was for that reason that in the late second century AD Marcion, a priest in Rome, advocated that the Old Testament should not be regarded as Christian Scripture. The orthodox reassertion of the canonical status of the Old Testament was led by Irenaeus, but he stressed the temporary and metaphorical nature of certain parts of it. The key to understanding Scripture was to understand it in a way consistent with Christian doctrine. 'Every word' of Scripture 'shall seem consistent' to someone, wrote Irenaeus, 'if he for his part diligently read the Scriptures, in company with those who are presbyters in the Church, among whom is the apostolic doctrine'<sup>6</sup>. That view was the more or less unanimous view of the Fathers. The famous rule of Vincent of Lerins that the faith was what was believed 'always, everywhere and by everyone'<sup>7</sup> was given by him in answer to the question how Scripture should be interpreted. So diverse were the interpretations of Scripture that his rule was meant as a guide as to which interpretation should be adopted. Scripture consists of what is approved as such by the universal Church, he wrote elsewhere, and it should be interpreted in accordance with 'Catholic Teaching'<sup>8</sup>.

This led to some radical interpretation of passages of the Old Testament which, taken on their own, seem inconsistent with a Christian view of the nature of God, as shown for example in the teaching

of the Sermon on the Mount. Some passages seem to endorse a view of God as vindictive, or to pronounce curses on innocent people. One small example is Psalm 137:9 which pronounces a blessing on those who smash against a rock the children of Babylonians (who had taken Jewish leaders as captives to Babylon). Other passages represent God as too much like an ordinary embodied human being of limited power and knowledge. At the beginning of the third century the highly influential theologian Origen commented on one such passage (the Genesis 2-3 story of the garden of Eden):

Who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer 'planted a paradise eastward in Eden', and set in it a visible and palpable 'tree of life' of such a sort that anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life?<sup>9</sup>

God also has true beliefs about science. Yet some biblical passages seemed to state or presuppose scientific views incompatible with what the more educated Fathers believed that learned Greeks had established. Thus Greek science held that the 'natural places' of the four 'elements' were in the form of (roughly) concentric spheres - a spherical earth in the middle of the universe covered by a sphere of water, water by air, air by fire; outside the sphere of fire lay sun, moon, and planets, and finally a solid sphere in which the stars were embedded. The 'firmament' referred to in Genesis 1:6-8 is then naturally assumed to be this solid sphere. But the Old Testament compares it to a stretched 'skin' (Psalm 104:2) or to a 'vault', the curved roof of a building (Isaiah 40:22 in a Latin version); and so to a curved covering to a flat earth, not a sphere. Greek science did not allow there to be water above the 'firmament', as claimed by Genesis 1:7. And a literal interpretation of the 'days' of creation described in Genesis 1 involved there being 'light' on the first day before the sun, the source of light was created on the fourth day! The Fathers disagreed about whether the biblical passages understood in their most natural sense or the works of learned Greeks provided the best guide to science and so to what God believed about science<sup>10</sup>. But it was generally regarded as permissible to take well agreed Greek science as the best guide to God's beliefs.

Interpretation often involved choosing one rather than another possible literal meaning (although perhaps a less natural one) of the passage. But sometimes and to varying degrees all the Fathers dealt with incompatibilities with Christian doctrine by adopting a radical metaphorical interpretation of the text. The passage which I quoted from Origen continues:

And when God is said to 'walk in the paradise in the cool of the day' and Adam to hide himself behind a tree, I do not think that anyone will doubt that these are metaphorical expressions which indicate certain mysteries by means of a story which does not correspond to actual

events.

Among biblical passages which some of the Fathers interpreted in this way were accounts of savage or other immoral conduct by Israelites, and prophecies (for example, in the Books of Isaiah or Ezekiel) that God would avenge the mistreatment of Israel by various foreign nations (Tyre, Sidon, Egypt etc) whose citizens might not seem to deserve such vengeance.

The Fathers had available to them a whole set of objects or properties commonly associated with the people, places and actions referred to in the Old Testament, which provided symbolic meanings for the words which normally designated the latter. The key to understanding the Old Testament, claimed Origen, is the New Testament teaching of the Kingdom of God as the New Jerusalem (roughly, Heaven), the Church as the New Israel, and Jesus as the new Moses or Joshua, who leads the people of the New Israel to the New Jerusalem in the way that Moses and Joshua led the people of the Old Israel to the 'promised land' of Canaan. Then all Old Testament talk about 'Jerusalem', even if sometimes it can be understood literally as referring to the earthly city of Jerusalem, must be held to have a spiritual reference to the heavenly Jerusalem. So, Origen continues, the prophecies prophesying that God would give different fates to different foreign enemies of Israel are to be understood as prophecies that God would award different fates in the after-life to different kinds of sinners, who really do have the vices ascribed by the prophecy to the inhabitants of Tyre or Egypt. And although few of the Fathers would interpret the Old Testament in quite such a radical metaphorical way as Origen, many of them gave a metaphorical interpretation to Psalm 137:9 ('Happy shall they be who take your little ones [the children of Babylon] and dash them against the rock'). Since the Jews became enslaved in Babylon, 'Babylon' comes to represent evil generally; and Jesus had compared relying on him (Jesus) to building one's house on a rock.<sup>11</sup> Psalm 137:9 was then interpreted as a blessing on those who take the offspring of evil which are our evil inclinations, and destroy them through the power of Jesus Christ.

Origen's way of treating the Bible was adopted by Gregory of Nyssa in the next century, and also (rather more cautiously) by Augustine at the beginning of the fifth century; and it became one standard approach to the Bible. Gregory points that there is much immoral conduct apparently commended in the Old Testament: 'What benefit to virtuous living can we obtain from the prophet Hosea, or from Isaiah having intercourse with a prophetess unless something else lies beyond the mere letter?' But the 'mere letter' is only 'the apparent reprehensible sense'; a metaphorical interpretation turns it into 'something having a divine meaning'.<sup>12</sup> Augustine's basic rule

was the same as that of Origen and Gregory: 'we must show the way to find out whether a phrase is literal or figurative. And the way is certainly as follows: whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as metaphorical'.<sup>13</sup>

Among the Fathers who thought that the Bible should be understood in the light of any well established Greek science was Augustine<sup>14</sup>. Much of his commentary, *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, was designed to show that the sentences of Genesis could be understood in literal senses compatible with Greek science, even if not perhaps the most natural literal senses. For example, he argued that perhaps in speaking of the shape of the 'firmament' as a 'vault' the Psalmist (104:4) 'wished to describe that part which is over our head', which looks like a vault to us. Or he suggested maybe the 'firmament' means simply the sky, not the solid sphere postulated by Greek science, but a region of air above which water vapour is as light as air (and so forms the region of 'water above the sky'). But he also felt the need to interpret passages apparently concerned with scientific matters in metaphorical ways. He interpreted the light created on the first day as 'spiritual light', the light which gives to creatures true spiritual understanding. Even so there was the problem of how there could be days before there was a Sun, created according to Genesis on the fourth day. So, like several others of the Fathers, Augustine held that all the things described in Genesis 1 were created simultaneously (as Genesis 2:4 seems to suggest); and he developed a very idiosyncratic view that talk about the six 'days' of creation is to be interpreted as talk about stages in the knowledge of creation possessed by the angels.

The highly metaphorical way in which Origen, Gregory, and Augustine read some of the Old Testament seems quite unnatural to us. But they lived in a cultural atmosphere where large-scale allegory seemed very natural; it was a very familiar genre in terms of which it was natural to interpret any passage which you did not think could be understood literally. The Jewish philosopher Philo in 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. had already given a highly allegorical interpretation of Genesis and other Old Testament books. Several commentators of classical and later Greece even interpreted the narrative poems of Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey, which told the story of the Trojan war and of Odysseus's return to Ithaca, allegorically. Metrodorus of Lampsacus interpreted the heroes and heroines of the Iliad as items of astronomy and physics - Agamemnon as the aether, Achilles as the Sun, Helen as the earth etc, and so interpreted the Iliad as a scientific treatise.

Origen and Augustine and many others thought that much of the Old Testament had metaphorical meaning in addition to literal mean-

ing, but what I have been pointing out is that sometimes for good reason they denied that it had a literal meaning in cases where we, thinking of biblical passages as having only human authors would think that they did have literal meaning. And if they needed biblical authority for their method of interpretation, they needed to look no further than St Paul who explicitly denied that the Old Testament command 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain' should be interpreted literally. Its meaning was, he said, that congregations should provide adequate remuneration for church leaders<sup>15</sup>.

Origen, Gregory, and Augustine lived during the period in which the Church was deciding which books (including all the books of the Old Testament) belonged to the Bible and which did not; and it is doubtful whether we would have today's Bible without that Church's general recognition of the necessity of understanding it in the light of Christian doctrine and the permissibility of understanding it in the light of established science. Origen was the most influential Christian theologian subsequent to St Paul; and although after his death suspected of heresy for reasons having nothing to do with the way in which he interpreted Scripture, his influence in this latter respect was profound. Gregory of Nyssa was one of the leading bishops of the Council of Constantinople which approved the Nicene Creed including its claim that the Holy Spirit 'spoke by the prophets', and Augustine was the theologian who influenced the development of theology in the West far more than any other early theologian. This tradition of interpretation was common to much subsequent biblical interpretation both in the East and the West. A discussion of the rules of biblical interpretation widely influential in the West was the twelfth century Hugh of St Victor's *Didascalion*. 'Sacred Scripture', Hugh wrote, 'has three ways of conveying meaning-namely history, allegory, and tropology.' By 'allegory' in the narrow sense in which he uses the term in this paragraph, Hugh understands a metaphorical interpretation conveying Christian doctrine; by 'tropology' he understands a metaphorical interpretation conveying moral instruction. 'To be sure', he continues, 'all things in the divine utterance must not be wrenched to an interpretation such that each of them is held to contain history, allegory, and tropology all at once', as some had taught. There are, he asserts firmly, certain places in the divine page which cannot be read literally.<sup>16</sup> When the Church recognised the authority of the Bible, it gave us at the same time a method for interpreting it: the 'patristic method' which I have now set out. There is no justification for taking the one without the other. No other method of interpretation makes it plausible to suppose that the Bible contains 'revelation without any error'. Many conservative Protestants, especially 'Evangelicals' of recent centuries, largely rejected the patristic method, claiming instead that sincere Christians can under-

stand the Bible simply by reading it, and derive all Christian doctrine from it without any prior assumptions about the content of doctrine. But notoriously so many apparently sincere Christians have reached very different views about the meaning of so many biblical passages. More liberal Protestants have sought to interpret the Bible in the way that 'the biblical authors' intended it. But, as I illustrated in the earlier part of this paper, there is no one human biblical author of any biblical sentence- there is a different author at each stage when a sentence is incorporated into a new context; and anyway many of these contexts are simply not discoverable.

The patristic way of interpreting a biblical sentence in the light of the rest of the Bible and of God as its ultimate author does have the consequence that a sentence may not have been understood by its first or any of its human authors. The Fathers assumed that the human author of a biblical sentence (and for each sentence they usually assumed there was only one such author) normally understood its meaning; but they allowed that that might not always be the case. How could they not allow this, since purported author of the Book of Daniel claimed not to understand his own prophecies - 'I heard, but I understood not'<sup>17</sup> ? And Augustine taught that the spirit often inspires people to utter a message which they do not understand.<sup>18</sup> So the Fathers would not have been disconcerted to discover that the real author of Daniel 11 thought that he was recording a prophecy about the reign of Antiochus. They would have said that he simply didn't understand his own prophecy.

The Fathers of the Church who accepted the achievements of Greek science were not committed to the view that there was no more science to be discovered. Indeed Augustine claimed that how we should interpret a certain passage depended on what might be established in future <sup>19</sup>. So, if we are to interpret the Bible by the method of the Fathers, and if we accept (as we surely should) the view of the more enlightened of them that many of the human authors of the Bible expressed false scientific views, we must interpret it in a way compatible with modern science as well as with established Christian doctrine. And what goes for science, clearly goes for history and geography also - see for example that (to us) evidently false historical passage, Genesis 5, about long-lived patriarchs. Catholic, Orthodox, and (as far as I know) mainstream Protestant bodies have never laid down which passages are to be understood literally and which metaphorically, except in the case of those passages which incorporate Christian doctrines contained in creeds or other doctrinal definitions. For other passages we must use the patristic method.

So for example since Matthew 1:23 claims that the birth of Jesus from a virgin mother is a fulfilment of Isaiah 7:14, we too must take

Isaiah 7:14 as being a prophecy of this event (whether or not it is also to be understood in a literal sense). The Hebrew word meaning 'young woman' was translated by the Septuagint as 'virgin'; and it is this translation which Matthew uses in his statement of the prophecy. That is a reason for taking the Septuagint as of equal inspiration with the Hebrew text, which is how the Orthodox church regards it. And since Daniel 12:1-2 would be false in its timing of the end of the world if we take Daniel 11:21-45 in its original sense we must understand chapter 11 in a more metaphorical sense than did the original writer of this chapter. (And of course no Christian body (before perhaps 1600 A.D) ever understood the latter passage in what we now know to be its original sense.)

The view which I have been putting forward seems to entail the view that God inspired some passages of scripture which would have been understood at the time of their first inscription not merely in some sense which we recognize as clearly false, but as endorsing a view of God and human conduct which we recognize as clearly immoral. Would God really have inspired not merely passages which contained (as then understood) false science or history or geography, but a view of God as savage and vindictive - for example Psalm 137:9, or the affirmation attributed to God that he will punish children and grandchildren for the sins of their parents<sup>20</sup>, or the command to the Israelites when they entered Palestine to annihilate all its Canaanite inhabitants<sup>21</sup>? Even if a later generation could get a deeply religious message from all this, would this justify the apparent deception involved in such 'inspiration'?

In response I have three separate points to make. The first is that since there is no one human author of any passage, the doctrine of divine inspiration is not committed to any view about which authors of any passage were inspired - those who wrote down the original pericope, or those who incorporated it into some larger unit which would give it a different sense. The smallest unit may not have been inspired at all; the inspiration came to the compiler of some larger unit to use it in a context which would give it a different meaning from its original meaning. The Fathers who claimed that the Bible was inspired tended to believe that the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) were written by Moses, all the Psalms were written by David, and all the Wisdom literature was written by Solomon. In this belief of course they were mistaken; but my point is that they saw quite large chunks of the Bible as 'inspired'. Hence they wouldn't have understood Psalm 137:9 as 'inspired' apart from the context of the whole book of Psalms with its message that God forgives sins (Psalm 103:3) and that he will be acknowledged by Gentiles and Jews alike (Psalm 138:4). And at the very same time as Psalm 137 must actually have been written, Jeremiah wrote his letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (part of a book believed to be equally

inspired), telling them in God's name to 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'<sup>22</sup>. The Jewish exiles would not have been justified in taking Psalm 137:9 as having the simple message that it would seem to have as an isolated text.

My second point is that, as some of the Fathers recognised, there is a 'principle of accommodation'. Novatian wrote with respect to attribution to God of bodily emotion: 'The prophet was speaking about God at that point in symbolic language, fitted to that state of belief, not as God was but as the people were able to understand'<sup>23</sup>. And this principle may be applied to moral instruction as well. There are certain moral truths which a primitive people are too primitive to grasp, or at any rate to continue to hold. One of these truths may be that, while individuals may well suffer in consequence of the sins of their parents (since God gives to parents responsibility for their children, and wrongdoing by parents often has bad consequences for the children), the children have no guilt for the sins of their parents. Maybe this subtle distinction was beyond the capacities of the first recipients of Exodus chapter 20, with its attribution to God of the intention to 'punish' children for the sins of their parents and grandparents. But later parts of the Old Testament emphasised very firmly that children are not guilty for the sins of their parents.<sup>24</sup> Jesus too recognised that Moses, speaking on God's behalf, was limited in how strong a message he could give to ancient Israel. Jesus prohibited all divorce (with one possible exception), whereas - the Pharisees pointed out - 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce [his wife]'. Jesus responded that Moses only wrote this commandment because of their 'hardness of heart'<sup>25</sup>. And that the Jewish Law was a temporary law issued by God because of human inability to keep a greater law was a major theme of St Paul in the *Letter to the Galatians*<sup>26</sup>, and developed by Irenaeus<sup>27</sup>.

But, if primitive people could not learn many moral truths, why did God make primitive people? It is a good that students should have the opportunity to work out the answers to questions for themselves. That involves them having the choice between struggling to work out the answer and not bothering to think about it; and it involves some students having the opportunity to help others to find the answer, even if in the end they still need and get quite a bit of help from their teacher. Analogously, it is good for whole peoples to have the opportunity to work things out for themselves, even if they need and get quite a bit of help from God in due course. So while the inspiration would have been only very limited, and we cannot ascribe the status of 'revelation without error' to the way the text was originally understood, I find it plausible to suppose that God inspired the writing of biblical books some parts of which, as originally understood, have an inadequate morality, which were capable of being un-

derstood as time progressed in a far deeper way.

My third point is to suggest that while quite a lot of the things God is said in the Old Testament to have done would have been very wrong for anyone other than God to do, and many of the things which God is said to have commanded would have been very wrong for anyone else to do unless commanded by God, many of these are ones which God has the right to do and command and which he has good reason to do and command. I will be very brief in making this point, because whether God has the right and good reason to do and command various actions is a major concern of a number of other papers at this conference. I will concern myself only with God's right to command actions; and I will illustrate my view by considering the contention of various Old Testament books that God had commanded the Israelites, when they entered Canaan, to kill all the Canaanites. While there are surely necessary truths independent of the will of God (such as the obligation not to lie and the obligation to keep promises, except perhaps under exceptional circumstances), one of these necessary truths is that people have a duty (within limits) to please their benefactors. God is our supreme benefactor. Pleasing a benefactor involves obeying his commands<sup>28</sup>. If God is our creator, our life comes as a temporary gift from him; and he can take it back when he chooses. If A has the right to take something back from B, A has the right to allow someone else to take it back for him. And if A is God, he has the right to command someone else on his behalf to end a life. God therefore has the right to order the Israelites to kill the Canaanites. God's reason for issuing this command, according to the Old Testament, was to preserve the young monotheistic religion of Israel from lethal spiritual infection by the polytheism of the Canaanites<sup>29</sup>, a religion which included child sacrifice<sup>30</sup> and cultic prostitution<sup>31</sup>. Such spiritual infection was without doubt a very real danger. When monotheism had become more deeply rooted in Israel, such an extreme measure was not, according to the Old Testament, required again. It was a defensive measure necessary to preserve the identity of the people of Israel. While the Israelites would not have had the right to take this extreme measure without the explicit command of God, he had the right to issue that command. God surely also had a reason for using the Israelites rather than natural processes such as disease, to kill the Canaanites, which was to bring home to the Israelites the enormous importance of worshipping and teaching their children to worship the God who had revealed himself to them, and no other god. Even today and without a divine command many people would think it justified to kill people who had an infectious lethal disease and refused to be kept isolated from the rest of the population. Those who think that an infection which leads to spiritual death is as bad an evil as one which leads to natural death will think that there are reasons (though not of course

adequate reasons) for the Israelites to kill the Canaanites even without a divine command. I give this as an illustration that deeper reflection on God's right to command actions, and the reasons he might have for doing so may lead us to recognize more inspiration by God of the early Israelites than we are at first sight inclined to recognize.

Bearing these three points in mind, I revert to my main contention, that to determine what the Bible and so the Old Testament means when it is regarded as God's revelation to all humanity involves interpreting it in the light of a prior understanding of Christian doctrine and true scientific (historical and geographical) theories. And that may give it a sense a long way away from its sense if interpreted as the work of some human author or authors, and makes it plausible to hold that it is a divinely authored and inspired text.

## NOTES

1. This paper is based on material contained in my book *Revelation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Clarendon Press, 2007), especially in Part I and in chapter 10, some of which is also to be found in chapter 11 of my short book *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
2. See B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.(SCM Press, 1983), p.150.
3. A phrase used in the chapter of the decrees of the First Vatican Council. See (ed.) N.P. Tanner *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Sheed and Ward, 1990, p. 806. Vatican I's claim clearly follows from the doctrines of divine inspiration (in the stated sense) and authorship, and would have been accepted by all the Fathers. The Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) referred to the Bible ('Scripture') as 'inspired by God', as did many subsequent documents recognized as authoritative by both Catholic and Orthodox churches. Although God is not described as the 'author' of Scripture by any Council before the Council of Florence (A.D.1442), God's authorship of them was the unquestioned view from early times. (See for example Origen's *Philocalia* 2.4)
4. Some Orthodox and Catholic councils and theologians have taught that the 'deposit' from which doctrine may be derived included also 'unwritten traditions.' See my *Revelation*, pp. 188-9.
5. *Epistolae* 4.31.
6. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.32.1.
7. *Commonitorium* 1.2
8. *Commonitorium* 1.27
9. *On First Principles* 4.3
10. Among the Fathers who denied that the earth is a sphere was Justin Martyr

(*Questions and Responses to the Orthodox* 130) who cites Isaiah 40:22 as evidence for the earth's flatness, in addition to the apparent absurdity of there being plants and people in the Antipodes who are upside down. Augustine (*On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, trans J.H.Taylor, Newman Press, New York, 1982, Book 2 ch9) argued that if it is proved (that is, by normal secular reasoning) that the earth is spherical (as he seems think it is) then we should interpret the biblical passage accordingly. For Augustine's own positive view on the possible meanings of Psalm 104:2 see later in this paper. For a list of Fathers who took opposite positions on the flat earth controversy see the editor's note in *Patrologia Latina* 6.427.

11. Matthew 7.24
12. *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Prologue
13. *On Christian Doctrine* 9.10.14
14. Augustine writes with regard to such disputes about the 'literal interpretation' of Genesis that 'it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense' about scientific matters (*On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, Book 1 ch19).
15. I Corinthians 9:9-10.
16. *Didascalion* 5.2 and 6.4
17. Daniel 12:8
18. *On Divine Questions* 2.11 14.
19. In considering whether there could have been days before the creation of the Sun on the fourth day, Augustine wrote that 'there will be nothing in such a supposition contrary to the faith until unerring truth gives a lie to it. And if that should happen, this teaching never was in Holy Scripture but was an opinion proposed by man in his ignorance'. (*On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, 1.19) So how we ought to interpret Scripture depends on what science will discover.
20. Exodus 20:6.
21. Deuteronomy 7:2.
22. Jeremiah 29:7.
23. *De Trinitate* 6. This principle can be found in Philo, and was advocated by Clement of Alexandria. Clement wrote that when God is spoken of in the Bible as though he experienced human passions, we must not think of him as having feelings like ours, since 'In as far as it was possible for us to hear, burdened as we were with flesh, so did the prophets speak to us, as the Lord accommodated himself to human weakness for our salvation' (*Paedagogus* 1.9.88, PG 8.356) It was developed and used frequently by Origen who compares God talking to us to a parent using baby-talk to talk to a child of two. See R.P.C.Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, SCM Press, 1959, pp.224-31. For later Fathers see R.P.C.Hanson, 'The Bible in the Early Church' in (ed) P.R.Ackroyd and C.F.Evans, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol 1. (Cambridge University Press, 1970). Aquinas invokes this principle on seven separate occasions in *Summa Theologiae* 1a 65-74 when discussing the description of creation in Genesis 1. He puts the point in terms of 'Moses was speaking to an ignorant people', meaning a people ignorant of the discoveries of Greek science.
24. Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2.

25. Mark 10:2-9. Matthew 5:31-32 claims that Jesus permitted divorce on grounds of *porneia*, often translated 'unchastity'. Mark mentions no such exception.
26. Chapter 4 *passim*.
27. Irenaeus calls the Old Testament laws 'the laws of bondage' which were cancelled by Christ's 'new covenant of liberty'. See his *Adversus Haereses* 4.16.5.
28. For a fuller length defence of the claims of the last three sentences see, for example, my paper 'What difference does God make to morality?' in (ed) R.K.Garcia, *Is Goodness Without God good Enough?*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.
29. Deuteronomy 20:17-18. It may be urged that this reason for killing the Canaanites was not the actual reason why the original Israelite invaders killed the Canaanites. Perhaps not, but they would have thought that they had God's authority for their actions. In any case my concern in this paper is not with their reasons, but with the morality of the claim in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Old Testament that God commanded the killing. And I am arguing that God had the right to command this, and that his reason for commanding this, as reported in Deuteronomy, is a moral one.
30. Deuteronomy 12:31.
31. I Kings 14:24.