Introduction: The Bible Today

The Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye (1912–91) wrote of the Bible: 'this huge, sprawling, tactless book sit[s] there inscrutably in the middle of our cultural heritage . . . frustrating all our efforts to walk around it'.[1] In a secular age, some might think it surprising how much interest there still is in the Bible, as the celebrations for the fourth centenary of the King James Version (KJV), sometimes known as the Authorized Version (AV), in 2011 showed clearly; even those who do not believe in Christianity continue to be fascinated by its presence. For believers, the Bible is often seen as inspired by God and having a high level of authority in matters of belief and practice. For non-believers, it is a central document of western culture: it continues to interest many readers as a collection of major literary works. The history of these works, and of how they have been disseminated and interpreted, is a central part of the history of western literature.

This book tells the story of the Bible from its remote beginnings in folklore and myth to its reception and interpretation in the present day. It describes the Bible's genesis, transmission and dissemination, and shows how it has been read and used from antiquity to the present, both in its original languages and in translation. Among other things, this will, I hope, dispel the image of the Bible as a sacred monolith between two black-leather covers, recapture the sense of it as the product of a long and intriguing process, and illustrate the extraordinary variety of ways in which it has been read over the centuries. Centrally, it also illustrates the difficulty in moving from the Bible to religious faith: neither of the two religions, Judaism and Christianity, that claim biblical books as their foundation can be read off from the Bible. Indeed, the Bible contains many elements that are problematic for Jewish and Christian belief. These include not only widely known morally objectionable

features, such as God's destruction of innocent people in the stories of the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land, but also the variety of genres (narrative, prophecy, poetry), many of them not conducive to doctrinal definitions, and the setting in ancient cultures many of whose features we do not share. At the same time I aim to show that the Bible is an important source of religious insight, provided it is read in its original context and against the conditions prevailing when it was written.

The history will necessarily include a great deal of pre-history, as I explain how biblical books were composed, since few if any are the result of simple composition by one author: most are highly composite, and some even depend on others, so that there is a process of reception of older books going on in younger ones. The Bible is thus in itself already the record of a dialogue among authors and transmitters of tradition, and contains commentary in many of its books on many others. On the grandest scale, the New Testament frequently comments on the Old, nearly all of which was already regarded as 'Holy Scripture' (I will explain the meanings of that deceptively familiar term) in the world into which the New Testament came. The extent to which the Old Testament remains authoritative for Christians – and, if it does, how then it is to be read alongside the new ideas introduced by Jesus, Paul and others – is one of the main issues in Christian theology, and always has been. The New Testament speaks of the Old Testament as 'inspired by God' (literally 'God-breathed') in 2 Timothy 3:16, and Christians have extended that idea to the books of the New Testament too. It is not clear, however, how this affects the way the Bible actually functions, or the kind of authority it exercises over believers. To call the Bible inspired implies that God had a hand in its production, but exactly how that worked in practice is seldom defined.

A further purpose is to distil the current state of biblical scholarship. The Bible has been subject to the most minute scrutiny in modern times, and there is an ocean of theories about its origins, meaning and status, in which the general reader can drown. My intention is to describe the present consensus, where there is one, to discuss reasonable options in areas of dispute, and to indicate those where we might try harder.

Alongside these descriptive tasks, the book also makes an argument: that the Bible does not 'map' directly onto religious faith and practice, whether Jewish or Christian. I will propose that though the Bible – seen as a collection of religious texts – is irreplaceable for many reasons, Christianity is not in essence a scriptural religion, focused on a book

seen as a single, holy work. Judaism, similarly, though it greatly reveres the Hebrew Bible, is also not so Bible-centred as is widely thought. Islam perhaps is the ideal type of book religion, and by comparison with it, Judaism and Christianity stand at a considerable distance from their central holy text. The Bible is very unlike a creed or a 'Confession', such as the great Protestant ones – the Confession of Augsburg for Lutherans or the Westminster Confession for some Calvinists. It is a mêlée of materials, few of which directly address the question of what is to be believed. The history of the Bible is thus the story of the *interplay* between the religion and the book – neither mapping exactly onto the other.

There are versions of Christianity that claim to be simply 'biblical' (no versions of Judaism do so), but the reality is that the structures and content of Christian belief, even among Christians who believe their faith to be wholly grounded in the Bible, are organized and articulated differently from the contents of the Bible. This can be seen most clearly in Christian fundamentalism, which idolizes the Bible yet largely misunderstands it.[2] Fundamentalists venerate a Bible that does not really exist, a perfect text that perfectly reflects what they believe. The description of the Bible (warts and all) which follows will necessarily make disconcerting reading for those who idealize it, but I will also show that it is not and cannot be the whole foundation of either Judaism or Christianity. I will thus also make the case for the kind of critical study that modern biblical scholars practise, which addresses the Bible without an assumption that whatever it says is to be regarded as authoritatively true.[3]

In truth, there are no versions of either Christianity or Judaism that correspond point for point to the contents of the Bible, which is often not what it has been made into and read as. In Christianity, for example, there are absolutely central doctrines, such as that of the Trinity, that are almost entirely absent from the New Testament; conversely, there are central ideas in the New Testament, such as St Paul's theory of 'salvation by grace through faith', that at least until the Reformation were never part of official orthodoxy at all, and even now are not in the creeds. Similarly, the elaboration of religious custom and tradition in Orthodox Judaism goes far beyond anything the Hebrew Bible itself implies: for example, the prohibition of eating meat and dairy at the same meal, with all its implications for the design of kitchens to avoid the two ever coming into accidental contact, is linked to Exodus 23:19 ('You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk'), but exceeds

anything that text in itself requires, as is generally acknowledged in Judaism.*

The Bible is centrally important to both Judaism and Christianity, but not as a holy text out of which entire religious systems can somehow be read. Its contents illuminate the origins of Christianity and Judaism, and provide spiritual classics on which both faiths can draw; but they do not constrain subsequent generations in the way that a written constitution would. They are simply not that kind of thing. They are a repository of writings, both shaping and shaped by the two religions at various stages in their development, to which later generations of believers are committed to responding in positive, but also critical, ways. To attribute religious authority to such a document stretches the word 'authority' to its limits, and can only be sustained by devising special ways of interpreting this book that differ from those in which others are interpreted.

To have as its holy text a mixture of works of many genres – predominantly narratives, aphorisms, poems and letters – introduces great complexity into Christianity. Catholicism has recognized other sources of authority besides the Bible, but has regarded the Bible as possessing a certain ultimacy; Protestants have developed theories according to which everything that matters to the religion is somehow present in the Bible, and some have even argued that nothing may be done or believed that the Bible does not explicitly sanction. This, I believe, is an abuse of these texts, which are deeply important for the Christian faith but cannot possibly bear the weight that is sometimes loaded upon them. Judaism has a more subtle approach to the Bible: while venerating it just as much as many Christians do, it does not claim that everything in the religion as actually practised is biblically derived, and recognizes development in new directions. Judaism thus has a holy book, and a set of religious beliefs and practices, but the two are known not to correlate exactly, despite being perceived as congruent; and this may be a better model for understanding Christianity too than the common Protestant perception of doctrine and practice as straightforwardly derived from the Bible. Because it allows a space between the Bible and the religion, this would in principle make it possible for the Bible to be heard on its own terms, and for religious faith to develop without being

* Quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Anglicized unless otherwise indicated. This has become the standard for academic quotation; other versions are discussed in Chapter 18.

totally constrained by it. The relationship between the two needs constant negotiation.

THE CULTURAL BIBLE

The Bible has two kinds of presence in the modern world. First, in western societies, it survives as a trace or ghost at the edges of both popular and literate culture, known in fragments as the source of quotations and allusions. Journalists can still assume that their readers will recognize the meaning of a 'David and Goliath' contest, or pick up references to the love of money as the root of all evil – though they may not know where the allusions come from, often thinking that some are from Shakespeare. Many people would recognize, for example, the following quotations:

Am I my brother's keeper? (Genesis 4:9)
Man does not live by bread alone (Deuteronomy 8:3)
The skin of my teeth (Job 19:20)
Three score years and ten (Psalm 90:10)
There is no peace for the wicked (Isaiah 48:22)
The salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13)
Pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6)
No room in the inn (Luke 2:7)
The powers that be (Romans 13:1)
A labour of love (1 Thessalonians 1:3)

But they would be unlikely to know the exact source, and more unlikely still to know what part they play in the various books they come from. Biblical literacy, as it is sometimes called, still exists, and advertisers (among others) can draw on it. Think, for example, of how ubiquitous the image of Eve is in advertising of all sorts, and how immediately visual and verbal allusions to apples, snakes and trees are picked up by consumers.[4]

The Bible has not died out of popular culture, as secularists might have predicted, and (as mentioned) the fourth centenary of the King James (Authorized) Version did show how widely it is still a cultural reference point for many literate people, even if often for style rather than for substance (see also Chapter 18). Oxford University Press alone sells a quarter of a million Bibles in the King James Version every year.[5] It is striking how often atheists commend it, even as they dissociate themselves from its religious claims: Richard Dawkins evidently approves

of its cultural status and even exempts biblical scholars from his strictures on theology,[6] and Philip Pullman campaigns to retain the teaching of biblical stories and parables in schools, albeit alongside folk-tales and myths.[7] Pullman's own mythological system, in the trilogy *His Dark Materials*,[8] is at one level a deliberately anti-Christian reworking of the story of Adam and Eve, treating the acquisition of self-knowledge and awareness of sexuality as good rather than bad, as has sometimes been thought by Christian interpreters of the Genesis story.

The Bible still has major cultural importance in the USA, far more now than in Europe. A strong evangelical tradition in many areas of America has ensured that it remains highly significant even for people who are not religious, and for politicians to criticize or ignore the Bible is politically unwise. This does not necessarily mean that people in general *read* the Bible very much: it is an icon rather than an object of study.[9] Several states have declared a 'year of the Bible' from time to time – for example, Pennsylvania in 2012.[10] Despite the theoretical separation of Church and state in the USA, the Bible has a large public presence as a symbol of the essentially Christian basis of national life. In Britain, where attachment to the Bible is less strong, it still functions as a holy object – many people are still content to take oaths in court 'on the Bible', for example. And one can buy special Bibles in white-leather covers, to be carried by brides. The Bible remains a best-seller in most European countries, even though detailed study of it has become a minority interest as the appeal of Christianity wanes.

THE BIBLE IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

The Bible's second kind of presence in the modern world is within the faith communities of Christianity and Judaism, and here it retains a central importance. In recent decades in Judaism there has been an upswing of interest in the Bible, ushering in a new translation into English, the Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh* Translation (1985 and 1999), and the large and impressive *Jewish Study Bible*.[11] (Orthodox Jews had tended to study the Talmud rather than the Bible, despite the prestige that the Bible of course enjoys within Judaism.) Within the practice of Christianity the Bible has also experienced a great resurgence over the last sixty years or so. Since the Second Vatican Council, inaugurated by Pope John XXIII in 1962 to reform and renew the Church, Roman Catholics have been encouraged to study it, and this

has led to new Catholic translations in most European languages and a wide use of biblical study materials (commentaries and Bible-reading guides), on a scale never before seen in Catholicism. The documents of the Council have this to say about the Bible:

> Since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. Therefore 'all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind' (2 Tim. 3:16–17, Greek text).
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> However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.[12]

The twentieth century also saw a rise in Protestant churches focused explicitly on Scripture, especially Pentecostalism of various types in the 'old' west and, above all, in Latin America, South Korea and Africa. Many of these churches can be described as conservative (even fundamentalist) in their attitude to the Bible: they insist on its absolute truth, and maintain that God inspired every word of the text – not necessarily by verbal dictation, but certainly by influencing the minds of the writers so that what they produced was exactly the work God wanted the Church to have. What they call liberal biblical study – that which encourages a critical attitude to Scripture – strikes them as arid and uninspiring, even as faithless and essentially unChristian. In Britain and North America the churches that are growing tend to be those that adopt such a conservative approach to Scripture. They believe that the whole of the Christian faith can be derived from the Bible, which is seen as the only source of truth and inspiration. This produces at least five principles for reading the Bible, which more liberal Christians often endorse too, though in a watered-down version.

First, it is claimed, we should read the Bible in the expectation that what we find there will be *true*. For some Christians the truth that is sought is literal and historical, so that whatever the biblical text affirms is taken to be factually accurate. But even many who do not subscribe

to this would agree that the Bible is to be read as true rather than as false. The truth it contains may sometimes be poetic or symbolic rather than factual, and this is particularly the case for more liberal Christians, but it is not an option to suggest that anything in the Bible is an expression of error. Even if the author of Genesis 1–2 did not accurately express the length of time it took God to create the universe, it is still unacceptable to say that he was therefore simply mistaken about the events he describes: there is bound to be some level at which what he wrote is true. For some biblical conservatives, it is important to believe that the chronology of the Old Testament, in which creation happened only some 6,000 years ago, is true – they are 'young earth' creationists. This has produced, mainly in the USA, the phenomenon of biblical theme parks, in which Adam and Eve walk among dinosaurs: the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, is a good example.[13]

Secondly, Scripture is to be read as *relevant*. Even where Paul is discussing an issue that arose in the early Church but does not arise in the same form today (e.g. whether Christians are free to eat meat that has been sacrificed to false gods, as in Romans 14 or 1 Corinthians 8 and 10), this does not mean that the text in question has nothing to say to us. It is our task, as readers of Scripture, to discern what God is saying to us through the inclusion of such passages in the Bible. Because the Bible is canonical, that is, authoritative, it does not have passages that were once relevant but are so no longer: all that is written is there for *our* instruction:

> 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.
>
> (Romans 15:4)

> These things . . . were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.
>
> (1 Corinthians 10:11)

It is therefore not an option, when faced with a puzzling or difficult text, to conclude that it simply has nothing to say to us today. The fact that it was included in the Scriptures means that it is eternally relevant to the Christian believer.

The principle of relevance seems to be built into the idea of Scripture in most, perhaps all, religions that have a sacred book.[14] The early Christians believed in an even stronger version of the relevance of Scripture:

that everything was relevant in the very direct sense that their own life and times were actually predicted in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. It was indeed they 'on whom the ends of the ages ha[d] come'. God had inspired the scriptural writers to foretell coming events. Many conservative Christians still hold that to be true, believing that scriptural texts refer to the current world order, which its authors (or God speaking through them) foresaw in detail.

This can be seen particularly in the phenomenon of 'Christian Zionism', in which evangelical Christians support the state of Israel on the grounds that the return of Jews to the Holy Land is one of the precursors of the end-time prophesied in the Bible. (At the same time they often try to convert Jews to Christianity, a combination which Jews who welcome Christian support for Israel often do not understand.)[15] The events will begin with the 'rapture', the snatching from the earth of true believers to be kept safe with Jesus (along with the righteous dead, who will have been resurrected) during the tribulations that are to come on the earth, before Jesus returns to reign. The basis for this is 1 Thessalonians 4:17:

> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them [the dead] to meet the Lord in the air.[16]

There are many 'prophecy novels' on the market that deal with these themes. The most famous and influential are the eighteen or so in the 'Left Behind' series.[17] The first, called simply *Left Behind*, envisages the rapture as happening all over the world at a single moment. Aeroplanes drop from the sky as their pilots are 'raptured', cars crash and there is immense suffering, but there are also conversions to Christian faith by those who recognize what is happening. The plot is tied up with other themes of modern American thought: the threat of Russia, the undesirability of pan-global organizations such as the United Nations, the need to keep American culture pure and pristine, safe from demonic influences such as the European Union. Naturally, by no means all Christian Americans who support Israel do so because they believe in this scenario, but a substantial number do. Pre-millennialism, as the system of thought is known technically, is a widespread evangelical strain in Anglophone Christianity.

More liberal Christians are more likely to see the relevance of the Bible as enduring – a matter of its having important things to say in any age, rather than as predicting the exact circumstances of the present day. Very many Christians attend Bible-study groups, at which participants

read closely and try to discover what God is teaching them through the passage in question. 'Nothing' is not an acceptable answer.

Thirdly, everything in the Bible is *important* and *profound*. There is no triviality in Scripture, nothing that should be read as superficial or insignificant – in a way this is close to the previous point, about its relevance. The Bible is a book of divine wisdom, and it does not contain any unimportant texts. This can be difficult, because many people are likely to feel that some parts of Scripture are more important than others. Most Protestants make much more of the Letter to the Romans than they do of 2 John or Jude, especially since it was Romans, with its doctrine of 'justification by faith', that lay at the root of much of the Reformation in the sixteenth century (see Chapter 16). But strictly speaking, a conservative Bible reader will maintain, there is no hierarchy within Scripture: everything is inspired by God and therefore everything is important. Lutherans sometimes speak of a 'canon within the canon', a central core of really important texts inside a penumbra of less significant ones. But the majority of other Protestants, and of Catholics too, have not adopted this way of thinking.

Fourthly, Scripture is *self-consistent*. The Christian reader, it is believed, must not play one part of the Bible off against another. If there appear to be contradictions between two texts, more careful reading is required so as to show that they really cohere. A classic case of this would be the apparent discord in the New Testament between Paul and James over the question of good works, that is, actions that are meritorious. On the face of it Paul seems to deny that human beings are made righteous by good works (see Romans 3:21–4:12), whereas James affirms that good works are essential – indeed, that 'faith' apart from good works is empty and false (see James 2:14). There have been Christians who argued that this difference is irreconcilable: Martin Luther (1483–1546) proposed to exclude James from the core of the Bible because it contradicts Paul. But for conservative Christians this is not an option. They work to find ways of showing that Paul and James are not really at odds, but teach messages which, though different in emphasis, are ultimately compatible. In a way, the self-consistency of Scripture is already implied by saying that it is true, since two messages that are incompatible with each other cannot both be true. Because Scripture thus speaks with a single voice, obscure passages can always be elucidated from more transparent ones.

The self-consistency of Scripture seems to be a feature of all religions that have a holy text.[18] Certainly Judaism often works with an assumption

that the Bible will cohere, and there are a number of discussions in rabbinic literature designed to show that apparent discrepancies are really reconcilable. In the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 13b), we read of the exploits of Hananiah the son of Hezekiah, who used up 300 barrels of oil to keep his lamp burning by night while he reconciled apparent discrepancies between the book of Ezekiel and the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible, Genesis–Deuteronomy). But Judaism also recognizes that texts of the Bible may sometimes be in dialogue with each other and that something positive may emerge from a kind of creative tension, whereas in Christianity this has not been a common view. Christians tend to think that all the holy texts must ultimately speak with the same voice. This belief lies behind harmonies of the Gospels, where a coherent account is believed to underlie the self-evidently different accounts in the different Gospels. There is a long tradition of this kind of work, going back into the earliest Christian centuries. Some Christians may think, as Augustine did,[19] that minor discrepancies among the Gospels do not really matter, since there is unanimity on the major issues of the truth of their message;[20] but more conservative readers would regard that as the beginning of a dangerous slippery slope that might end in general scepticism about the truth of the Bible.

Fifthly, Scripture is meant to be read as congruent with the content of Christian faith, with what the early Christians called 'the rule of faith' (see Chapter 13). This means something like a basic creed, or summary of what is to be believed. Some modern proponents of what is called a theological reading of the Bible thus say that our reading should be 'ruled', using this term in a technical sense to refer to its being controlled by the rule of faith.[21] Any interpretation of a biblical passage that makes it seem at odds with what Christians believe must be a misinterpretation. There are Jewish parallels to this idea, though the matter is not so much discussed in Judaism. But in both religions it is not acceptable to read the Bible as contradicting the basic tenets of the faith – especially as, in many forms of Christianity at least, what is to be believed is taken to be derived from the Bible in the first place. However exactly the relation of the faith to the Bible is conceived – and we shall see that this is a highly complex issue – they are assumed to be mutually supportive, not at odds.

Thus, to return to the Letter of James, if the theory of justification by faith alone really is central to Christian faith, then James must be read as supporting it, despite appearances. It must be saying, not literally that faith is dead without good works, but that the reality of faith can only be seen in the good works that people of faith perform: without good

works their faith is not real but only apparent. (This may be a correct interpretation of James: my point here is simply that a commitment to the congruence of the Bible with Christian teaching more or less obliges one to adopt it.) Reconciling the Bible with the traditions of faith is a major undertaking, though those who do it would say that there is really nothing to reconcile, since the two are perfectly at one, but that it is sometimes necessary to show that this is the case because of doubts or worries that some believers experience. One of my purposes in this book is to demonstrate that there really are irreconcilables: that the faiths that appeal to the Bible are not totally congruent with it, though they are clearly closely related. In more conservative Christian and Jewish circles this would not be readily accepted, though there are both Jews and Christians who are more open to the idea that religion and holy text diverge. Some, indeed, do not pay much attention to the Bible at all. But the terms of debate tend to be set by the more conservative strands in both religions. In this book I shall try to engage with different styles of belief about Scripture, as I show how Bible and faith have been related down the ages.

ANCIENT AND MODERN

The Bible is thus absolutely not dead in the modern world. But it tends to be alive as either a cultural or a religious icon, distinguished from other books, and revered – in either a secular or a religious mode – rather than read as one might read other books. Both its cultural and its religious evaluation are alike in treating it as a uniquely special book; and as a result many of the questions we ask of other books are often ignored: how did it come to be written, who were its authors, above all what does it actually mean? There is an assumption in many Christian circles that it will speak to the present-day Christian community directly, and that questions about its origins and history are a secondary matter. Yet more secular readers, along with Christians of a less biblically conservative kind, sometimes do ask these questions. They may be surprised at how many of them can be answered.

The Bible may be a modern book, in the sense that it is still alive within the practice of Christianity and Judaism. But it is certainly also an ancient one, and cannot be understood except as the product of a long, often baffling history. Fundamentalist models of scriptural authority – and even official attitudes towards it in non-fundamentalist churches – elide this

historical dimension by treating the Bible as in some sense a single book. Church reports on current issues, for example, frequently begin with 'the biblical background', treating the Bible as a single source, by comparison with the diversity of later writings. This is not only historically misleading, but diminishes the power of the various voices in the Bible to be heard – even while apparently honouring it as special. In the words of the great sixteenth-century Anglican writer Richard Hooker (1554–1600), 'as incredible praises given unto men do often abate and impair the credit of their deserved commendation, so we must likewise take great heed, lest, in attributing unto Scripture more than it can have, the incredibility of that do cause even those things which indeed it hath most abundantly, to be less reverently esteemed'.[22]

Hooker sets the scene for my treatment of the Bible in this book. I wish to show how it came into being, developed and was used and interpreted down the years, in both Christianity and Judaism. In the process I shall call in question the tendency of religious believers to treat it as so special that it cannot be read as any other book might be – 'attributing unto Scripture more than it can have', as Hooker put it. Yet at the same time I shall not seek to diminish the sense, shared by believers and many non-believers alike, that the Bible is a collection of great books. That it is not perfect (and what could be meant by a perfect book anyway?) does not mean it is of poor quality: on the contrary, these are some of the most profound texts humanity has produced. I have no intention to 'cause even those things which indeed it hath most abundantly, to be less reverently esteemed'. This may initially strike some readers as an uncomfortable balancing act, but I hope by the end to have shown that it is an approach that does justice to the Bible as it actually is, rather than to an imaginary Bible that exists only in some theoretical realm. As C. W. Goodwin put it 150 years ago:

> Admitting, as is historically and in fact the case, that it was the mission of the Hebrew race to lay the foundation of religion upon the earth, and that Providence used this people specially for this purpose, is it not our business and our duty to look and see how this has really been done? not forming for ourselves theories of what a revelation ought to be, or how we, if entrusted with the task, would have made one, but inquiring how it has pleased God to do it . . . It has been popularly assumed that the Bible, bearing the stamp of Divine authority, must be complete, perfect, and unimpeachable in all its parts, and a thousand difficulties and incoherent doctrines have sprung out of this theory.[23]

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible comes to us from the ancient Near East and cannot be understood without some knowledge of the history of Israel at that time, and the languages in which it circulated. I begin in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, the age of major prophetic activity in the two kingdoms into which the Hebrew nation was divided, when the books began to take shape. All, or almost all, of the books were complete by the age of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE).

I turn next to the contents of the Hebrew Bible, detailing its four major genres: prose narrative, law and wisdom, prophecy, and psalms and other poems. In the narrative books (Chapter 2) a variety of styles can be detected, and these help us understand their character and provide clues about their authors and the dates of their composition. Reading these books raises what will be a recurring theme: given that they tell a story rather than give instruction on what to believe or to do, the path from the biblical text to religious belief and practice in Judaism or Christianity today is far from straightforward. Legal and wisdom books (Chapter 3) appear more overtly to address the reader with demands or advice, but even such apparently universal texts as the Ten Commandments were written for and presuppose a society utterly different from our own, and cannot be applied today without extensive interpretation. This is even more obviously true of the books of the prophets (Chapter 4), which arose from various specific political crises in Israel's history, and in any case often seem to speak in riddles. Finally I examine poetic texts (Chapter 5), especially the Psalms and their obscure origins and uses. The Psalms have been attributed to a number of different periods in the history of Israel, from the time of King David (eleventh or tenth century BCE) down to the age of the Maccabees (second century BCE). One important theory suggests that they were used liturgically in the worship of Solomon's Temple, but many may also have arisen as personal prayers. What can be said is that they provide a digest of many religious themes characteristic of ancient Israelite thought – themes that recur in later Judaism and in Christianity.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament makes sense only against its historical background. Chapter 6 describes the world in which Christianity emerged, and especially the blossoming in Judaism of various social and religious groups such as Pharisees and Sadducees, among

whom the first Christians were to become the most successful. The earliest surviving texts of this new religion are not Gospels but letters, those of Paul deriving from the 50s CE, twenty years or so after Jesus' crucifixion. The interpretation of Paul is a major scholarly industry, and no consensus threatens, but it is possible to glean some essential elements in his thought-world and teaching – about human salvation, the relation of Christianity to Judaism, and the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus and its relation to the climax of human history, which Paul thought was imminent. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (Chapter 8) derive from the second half of the first century. Though there is general agreement that Mark is the earliest and John the latest, how the three Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew and Luke) came to be written and where, what sources their authors used, and whether they were intended for all Christians or only for the community that produced them, are questions of unending interest to biblical scholars. Acts forms the second volume of Luke, but we cannot say whether it was written at the same time, or possibly much later. My concern in this chapter is to emphasize how little we know, in spite of a wealth of theories.

There is a widespread belief that the contents of the Bible were decided at a number of Church councils, no earlier than the fourth century CE, and that they excluded a substantial body of works that the Church authorities regarded as heretical. The third part of the book contests that belief. There were in fact hardly any decisions about what should or should not be canonical. All, or almost all, the books of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (Chapter 9) were accepted as Scripture by widespread consensus, in some cases probably not long after they were composed; only at the fringes was there any dispute. In the early Church (Chapter 10) as in Judaism, acceptance and citation of books long preceded any formal rulings about the limits of the canon. When there were such rulings, they usually simply endorsed what was already the case, while leaving a few books in a category of continuing uncertainty. The books which were actively excluded (Chapter 11) were in nearly all cases considerably later and less reliable than those that were accepted. That we have the Bible at all is due to generations of scribes who copied the texts by hand, and I proceed next (Chapter 12) to their transmission. There is a major contrast here: Judaism has long accepted a single text of the Hebrew Bible as authoritative, whereas Christians have never had an official text, only many different manuscript traditions. Printed Hebrew Bibles all derive from a single eleventh-century manuscript,

whereas all printed New Testaments are based on the comparison of various different manuscripts. The art of making these comparisons is illustrated with examples, and I warn that appeal to the exact wording of the New Testament is fraught with difficulty because of the lack of an agreed text.

Does the Bible have an overall theme or meaning? Christians have generally thought so, and Chapter 13 examines attempts to define it, setting the scene for the chapters that follow, which spell them out in detail. Rabbinic readings of the Bible tend to treat it as a collection of sayings, any of which may illuminate any other, rather than as a continuous work, and this contrast is illustrated in Chapter 14. Jewish and Christian interpretations have at times influenced each other, but for the most part they form two separate systems, though both have traditionally interpreted Scripture so as to support their own religious beliefs. These beliefs are partly drawn from Scripture, partly not, and the interplay between the surface meaning of the biblical text and the meanings that have been read into it is part of the fascination of biblical study. In the medieval period (Chapter 15) the tendency to read the text in the light of one's prior beliefs becomes even more evident, but so does the emphasis on the Bible (interpreted correctly) as the source of all religious truth. The reading of the Bible at the Reformation (Chapter 16) inherited medieval methods and approaches, but it also paved the way for the critical questions that would come to characterize Enlightenment and modern biblical study. Martin Luther in particular pioneered a willingness to challenge parts of the Bible on the basis of theological principles.

My discussion of the Enlightenment and its heritage today (Chapter 17) begins with the ideas of Spinoza (1632–77). Spinoza questioned biblical miracles on the basis of natural science, but he also challenged traditional attributions of biblical texts, and introduced a distinction between the meaning of texts and their truth that was crucial for all subsequent biblical study. Critical biblical study developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to produce the types of argument and conclusions presented in the first half of this book. Chapter 18 surveys biblical translation from the third or second century BCE, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, to the present. I examine the King James Version and its legacy, and subsequent attempts to translate the Bible into English afresh. Translation raises questions not only about the meaning but also about the interpretation of the text, and this

chapter discusses the ways in which some modern translations have entered into the interpretative debate.

Examining the Bible challenges as well as nourishes religious faith and practice, and my concluding chapter reflects on the relation of the Bible to its faiths, and the incomplete overlap between both Judaism and Christianity and its contents.