"THE BIBLE UNPACKED" – a lecture given by The Reverend Stephen Sealy at Little Malvern Priory on 20th May 2025 as part of our '875' celebrations.

When the idea of our 875 Celebration was being considered, the aim was to celebrate and explore our history, our heritage as a Benedictine foundation, and our contribution to culture and learning in times past. So as well as an occasion looking at Piers Plowman later in the year, and another day considering the contemporary Church, this is a session to look at the scriptures, which should be so important for every Christian and those who would try to understand our faith and religious heritage. When I have told people about today, they have often said – 'You're going to do the bible in one afternoon?' Yes, I know – it's ridiculous. So inevitably, a huge amount of what could be said won't be, and it will be my particular look at the bible, and what makes it a work of great fascination for me.

Of course I am indebted to many biblical critics, theologians and translators in preparing this, and no more so than to Professor John Barton, an Oxford Professor in Holy Scripture for 23 years, and an Anglican Priest.

My starting point comes from the introduction to one of his books – *Making the Christian Bible.* He says, "The idea of Holy Scripture seems to contain the implication of completeness, fixity and stability. The authority (of the bible) is given by God who gave it; and is not in any way negotiable and cannot be questioned. We tend to suppress enquiry as to when it was written, how collected together and for what purpose, and so we find it less interesting. The bible is an enormous and complicated work…an anthology of literature from many times and places. This makes it inherently unlikely that the story; its growth and origin will be simple and easy."

What is the Bible?

This might seem a straightforward question, and, on the simplest level it is. Here we have a gathering of 66 books – 39 we call the 'Old Testament' and 27 we call the 'New Testament'. Put on the spot, many people would describe it as 'God's word.' It is a mini-library, but as in any library, there will be a variety of writings, of different lengths and from many periods of history. However, as with many issues concerning the bible, that isn't the whole story.

Many bibles include what is called 'the ***Apocrypha***': that section of additional writings often found between the Old and New Testaments. These books of the Apocrypha were never found in the Hebrew scriptures, but appeared when holy writings started to be translated into Greek. From the late 4th-century, Greek became the principal means of communication for much of the world inhabited by Jews. Many no longer spoke Hebrew. It is said that Ptolemy II of Egypt around 250 BCE, directed 70 scholars to put the scriptures into Greek, which version became known as the ***Septuagint – LXX***. The Septuagint included these Apocryphal writings. The term 'apocrypha' is a Greek expression meaning 'hidden' or 'obscure', and it was thus named by the German Reformer Andreas Karlstadt in 1520. Since then, there has been debate about the authority of these books. As I mentioned, one reason for the debate was that these books were only ever known in Greek, not in Hebrew. Another reason is that they are relatively late by comparison with other Old Testament books. The Roman Catholic Church has always reaffirmed the authority of the Apocryphal books, but Protestant churches, generally speaking, don't. The Anglican Church, as usual, sits in the middle. We do occasionally find readings from the Apocrypha in our lectionary, but there is always an alternative from the mainstream Old Testament.

That is one aspect of my question 'What is the bible?' But a greater question is – what would be a good definition of 'the bible'? Here are some thoughts from various writers: Simon Loveday: "the

bible is a special book that has a particular authority and claim to truth for all Christians and indeed for all humanity." Or is the bible simply 'the inspired Word of God'? – and what does that mean? You have to be clear what you mean by 'inspired.' One definition might be 'The record of God's dealings with his people, and his self-revelation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the teachings of the early Church.' John Barton talks of the books of the OT as 'books accepted by the Jews as authoritative for religious practice and/or doctrine, and whose authority is binding upon the Jewish people for all generations. He adds, "The same could apply to the Christian scriptures."

So we're moving from the idea of the bible being just a collection of texts to a work having living authority, and which somehow is indispensable for the practice of our faith. Indeed, it is one of the world's classic foundational texts, important to many people who would not necessarily view it as a sacred book. You could argue that the bible contains the basis of the moral code by which much of the world lives. Thou shalt not murder; thou shalt not steal; love thy neighbour as thyself.

But there does seem to be something important about the book itself. Carrying the gospel in procession. The 'Almighty Word.' To this day, I would find it hard to destroy a copy of the bible, even if it was dog-eared and tatty with many pages missing. The bible has come to be seen as a sacred object in its own right. Somebody suggested that if you can't recycle a bible through a second-hand bookshop, you might bury it in a churchyard.

How was it written?

I guess another aspect of the bible which we don't think about too much is the actual setting-down of the words, and the process by which it comes to be a nicely bound book. We should remember that the stories of the Old Testament were circulating orally for a long time before anything was set down. The earliest form of writing in the ancient near-east was what is known as ***cuneiform*** – words represented by signs incised into clay tablets by a wedge-shaped instrument. There is evidence of this process being refined through a period of 2,000 years. This gave way to writing on parchments in ink, introduced by the Phoenicians, with an alphabet. Several hundred characters of cuneiform were replaced by just 22 letters. Texts in the new alphabet could be written on ***scrolls*** – more flexible and more portable than the cuneiform tablets. One scroll could contain all the 66 chapters of Isaiah, for instance. The next stage was the development of the ***codex*** – roughly corresponding to our present book format. The codex would have leather covers and could contain many leaves; for instance, all four gospels could be contained within one codex. It is believed the oldest text in the bible is the fifth chapter of the Book of Judges, dating back to the 10th- or 11th- century BC. The Book of Daniel, by contrast, dates from just two centuries BC. So, as you will understand, the setting down of the Hebrew scriptures – our Old Testament – was a process of over 800 years.

Some of the happenings described in the text (eg – the events that took place in Egypt as recorded in Genesis and Exodus), would have been circulating verbally for hundreds of years before being set down.

The complexity is well summed-up by Simon Loveday. "Every word of the Old Testament has been copied and re-copied, written and re-written, edited and re-edited, many times on the way to its present form (and for English-speaking readers, we must add translated and re-translated). Just this morning, the set reading came from Deuteronomy 17…all about the Israelites setting a king over them, like other nations. It sounds suspiciously like 1 Samuel chapter 8, when the people ask for a king and Saul is eventually chosen. But neither Israel or its neighbours had kings until several hundred years after the time we believed Moses lived. So that bit of Deuteronomy was probably an addition, to give the concept of kingship authority from Moses.

Simon Loveday reflects that a huge number of people don't realise that the bible was not originally written in English, and I guess that is partly because the 'King James' bible of 1611 – the Authorized Version – has become so well established. So it may be useful to talk about the languages in which it *was* originally written.

The books of the Old Testament were for the most part written in Hebrew, though there are a few sections in Aramaic. (John Barton likens the similarity of Hebrew and Aramaic as being akin to Spanish and Italian today). The New Testament was all composed in Greek. Aramaic had become the normal language of everyday speech in Palestine by the first century CE, but by the time the first Gospel was written (probably Mark) – around 70 CE, Greek was already the main language of Christians.

We mentioned the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, or LXX. It seems the LXX was written for the community of Jews living in Alexandria, who came to revere the translation as highly as the original Hebrew. It is normally the LXX that New Testament writers cite, when referring back to the Old Testament, rather than the Hebrew.

There were Aramaic renderings of the Hebrew scriptures, but these were for a long time oral in character. Indeed, for a long time into the Christian era, it was held that the Aramaic version, known as the ***targum***, should not be written down. But a dialect of Aramaic known as the Syriac does have its own Christian version of both testaments, and is used by several churches today including the Syrian Orthodox Church.

Mention should also be made of the Latin translation of the bible, known as the ***Vulgate***. Christians in the Roman territories along the northern coast of Africa began to make Latin versions of the bible. The first person to translate the Old Testament directly into Latin was St Jerome (347-420 CE). He did this at the request of Pope Damasus, but went further and did the New Testament as well! Jerome's translation was not at first well received, a riot almost ensuing in one place when people read that Jonah was sheltered by ivy rather than a gourd. However, the Vulgate did become well established eventually, especially in Italy and northern Europe.

There isn't time to go into the history of the many other translations, except to say that the Venerable Bede was said to have been working on an English translation of St. John's gospel at the time of his death in 735 – maybe the first attempt to put anything from the bible into English.

When it comes to the New Testament, we should remember that there are different ***texts*** in existence reflecting that we only have copies of copies. Into these copies crept errors, additions and 'corrections'. Some of the notable texts are known as Alexandrian, Byzantine, 'Western', Syriac and Caesarean. A number of ***manuscripts*** incorporated these texts, and the principal early manuscripts – say 5th century or earlier - are Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Ephraemi, Codex Bezae, and the Washington Codex.

I only tell you all this not to confuse you thoroughly, but to point out what a complex procedure has been gone through to produce a commonly-accepted volume such as this. If your bible is something like mine, you will occasionally see footnotes reading "Ancient authorities omit this verse" or "Other ancient authorities have divergent readings here." The existence of these different manuscripts helps explains these notes.

Who decided what was included (or excluded)?

Perhaps you know the old joke about Moses returning from receiving the Commandments on Mount Sinai, and meeting Aaron. "Well," says Moses, "I've managed to keep him down to ten, but adultery's still in." There is the comment in Deuteronomy ch. 5, after Moses recites the ten commandments from God, it does say "And he added no more."

That's not quite the subject of this section, but you might well ask, 'Who decided what should be included in the bible?' 'When was it all finalised?' There are some books in the bible which many people question today; for instance, The Song of Songs (or Solomon) – very erotic in parts; how did that get in? The Book of Esther – which doesn't mention God once. In the New Testament, the Revelation to St. John is of a very different order from almost any other book in the bible. Then there are questions about material that didn't get included in what we call the 'canon' of scripture. There were other gospels concerning the life of Jesus circulating at the time of the others, such as the Gospels of Thomas and Peter. And there were some very worthy and illuminating writings circulating in the Early Church, such as the Epistles of St. Clement, and writings known as *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache.* Indeed, the last two were quite close to being accepted.

And why did the bible become a document to which nothing could or should be added after the fourth century? If the bible is the record of God's revelation to his people, has there been no writing worthy of being added to the canon since then? Why, for instance, should not the writings of Saint Benedict, or Mother Julian of Norwich, or *The Cloud of Unknowing,* or the ponderings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, all full of divine wisdom, be considered to be in the same 'league' as scripture?

So what about the formation of the bible. What we know as the Old Testament is obviously the Hebrew scriptures still used by Jews, almost word for word. John Barton notes that three processes overlapped. The writing, the collecting of texts and sayings, and the treating of them as scripture. The Pentateuch – those five books of Moses – were always seen as of paramount importance, as they contained the law handed down through Moses. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Chronicles and Kings are known as the Deuteronomistic history, written it seems by the compilers of Deuteronomy itself. Then we have the 'former' and 'latter' prophets: the 'former' being the long books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and the 'latter' prophets the smaller books found at the end of the Old Testament. We often refer to them now as the 'minor prophets.' By the time of the early Jewish texts known as the *Mishnah*, at the end of the second century AD, the Hebrew bible existed in its present form. There had been controversies over the inclusion of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, and later, Esther, because they didn't mention YHWH. There was also some doubt over the book of Daniel, and Ecclesiasticus, but apart from that there was little controversy about what should be included.

As regards the formation of the 'canon' of the New Testament; the first stage was the making of collections of Christian writings, which, whatever their original intention, came to be regarded as in some sense scriptural. But the evidence on how the canon came to be fixed is not entirely clear. We have to rely on snippets of information by various theologians from the second to fifth centuries. At the end of the first century, Clement, Bishop of Rome, quotes Paul's correspondence to the Corinthians as though it had binding authority. Similarly, Justin Martyr considered the gospels in that way.

The first list of collections were the writings of Paul. We should bear in mind that much of this material was written before the gospels, the earliest text being 1 Thessalonians in about AD 49. The next collection to emerge was the four-fold gospels. Yes, there was an attempt by Tatian, a 2nd-century Christian writer, in about , to compose a single narrative out of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but in the end attempts at harmonization were unsuccessful. The two collections of Paul's writings, and the Gospels, were fixed by the end of the 2nd-century, but there was less agreement about the third major section

Marcion, an early Christian heretic as it happens, was maybe the first to produce a list. But it was only from the beginning of the second century that Christian writers began to show an interest in which books were 'inspired.' From the 4th-century two classic lists of worthy texts were in circulation – the work of Eusebius and Athanasius. Eusebius has three categories of books; firstly, books universally acknowledged; secondly, books whose status is disputed, and thirdly, books which should be rejected. For Eusebius, books disputed were the Epistles of James and Jude; 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. Revelation always seemed to have a question mark over it, and books to be rejected were the Gospels of Peter, Thomas and Matthias, and the Acts of Andrew and John. In his 'disputed' list were the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Didache. All this confirms that the process of canonization was a long process, with, as Barton says 'much fuzziness.'

The long process was eventually concluded through a series of decisions of church councils, even though none of these was a general council of the church. For instance, the Council of Laodicaea in 363 omitted Revelation from the list. But the Councils of Hippo, 393, and Carthage, 397, gave the present list of 27 books, and Athanasius issued this list in a letter to his clergy in 397. But the order of books in that list is not the same as we have now. 2 and 3 John were still not accepted by some of the churches in the East as late as the sixth century. So if you ever feel guilty that you're doubting the Christian worthiness of a particular passage in the bible, be sure that someone has been there before you!

The bible's different types of writing

It is important to recognize that the bible contains many different styles of writing, and we sometimes miss the point if we do not distinguish these different styles. So, within the covers of your bible, there is history, prophecy, myth, teaching, poetry, song, and what is often known as 'wisdom.' Some books are a mixture of styles. So, in the 66 chapters of Isaiah, for instance, there is history, such as at the beginnings of chapters 7 and 36. There is certainly prophecy, with some of the foretellings about the Messiah which we hear often in the Advent and Christmas period, and there is some beautiful poetry, such as chapter 5 – 'Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.'

Some books of the Old Testament are very much history, such as the books of Chronicles and Kings, charting the beginnings of the nation of Israel and its kings; its defeats and victories, often seen by the writers as the result of disobedience to God, and then his subsequent favour after repentance.

There is also a considerable amount of material which might be described as 'myth'. Now, the word 'myth' needs careful explanation. When we say in general conversation that something is a 'myth', we usually mean that it is not true; that a falsehood has grown up around a particular story. But as regards the bible, we think of 'myth' as a story or an account of something that embodies a deep

truth, or an explanation of how something came to be. In fact, somebody has said that 'myth' embodies 'truths, not truth.' The stories in Genesis are often known as ***aetiologies***: explanations of origins. So, for instance, in Genesis chapter 11, comes the story of how people decided to build the Tower of Babel, with its top reaching heaven, with the purpose of 'making a name for ourselves.' You'll recall that the Lord came down from heaven and confused the people's language so that they didn't understand one another, and so left off building the tower. So was this a story designed to explain why people have different languages, as early tribes moved around and discovered that not everyone spoke in the same way? Did it somehow become connected with an account of a tower being built somewhere? A little further on in Genesis – chapter 19, we read that the Lord rained down sulphur and fire on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, as Lot and his wife escaped. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Could it be that this story arose as some kind of explanation of the humanlike rock formations that are found in the Dead Sea area, and became a lesson for those who were tempted to disobey God's word? You'll recall that the angels who visited Lot and his wife told them not to stop or look back as they fled. Incidentally, if you want an example of how complex the construction of the bible is, take a look at that chapter and the one before it, Genesis 18 and 19; where three men visit Abraham, and he calls them 'Lord', and then they seem to become two angels.

I suggested earlier that in the bible we find history, prophecy, myth, teaching, poetry, song, and what is often known as 'wisdom.' Many of the New Testament writings are letters to churches, mainly of St. Paul, but by others as well, so this could be another category, although of course they are mostly teaching.

Because the New Testament letters were written to churches in particular situations and at specific times, it's quite important to understand their wider context, and not necessarily to think that the passage will speak to us in the same way as it did to the first readers. For instance, the letters of John were addressed to churches having a hard time of it – persecuted, embattled; afraid that they could contaminated by 'the world'. So the writer adopts quite a harsh approach. For instance "Do not love the world or the things in the world" (1 John 2: 15) contrasts sharply with the great message in John 3. 16 – 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son…' Later, the writer of 1 John says, "We know that we are God's children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one." That sort of generalization isn't one I would like to propound from the pulpit. It's noteworthy that 2 and 3 John were books that took longer to be accepted in the canon of scripture, because they were polemical, even forbidding believers even to greet those considered deviant to the group. So context can be quite important. As I say, the letters of John were written to a struggling church who needed encouragement; Corinthians to churches where there had been some unbecoming behaviour; other letters written to congregations who may have wandered away from sound Christian teaching. If some of teaching doesn't immediately resonate with us, it will be helpful to know why it was written and how it was written at that time.

Of course, the bible was not compiled in isolation, but came to be amidst the traditions and stories and writings of other cultures. We have the account of the great flood and of Noah and his ark in Genesis. Other similar stories can be found in the writings of the ancient near-east. The most famous parallel to the flood story is known as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, discovered in 1878 and believed to originate from the third millennium BC in Mesopotamia. The hero of this story is Utnapishtim, the parallel figure to Noah, who also is saved by building an ark. Which story came first we shall never know, but both speak of the memory of a vast deluge that flooded the known world, a story that Israel shared with its neighbours.

I mentioned that among the different kinds of writing we find in the bible there is 'wisdom.' We find it almost entirely in the Old Testament – books such as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Jonah, perhaps; and of course Wisdom in the Apocrypha, and Ecclesiasticus there. Again, similar wisdom literature was found in Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture, and Proverbs chapters 1 to 9 imitates an 11th-century BC work known as the *Instruction of Amenemope.*

The wisdom literature in the bible is marked by an emphasis on the fate and behaviour of the individual, in contrast to the emphasis on nation and history found in the Historical books and the Prophets. This material often comes over as an 'instruction', presenting itself as a father's words to his son or children…the teaching is often given added weight by the identification of the father with some famous figure of the past, such as Solomon.

Genesis and the books of the Pentateuch

And talking of Genesis, and myth, no discussion of the bible would be complete without some word about the creation story. The question of whether the creation story in Genesis chapter 1 is one which has generated much debate, particularly since Darwin produced his evolution theory. Indeed, the question has led to some Christians being known as 'Creationists'. Not many of us, I think, would consider the creation of the world in seven days as credible, although the order of things coming into being as described is plausible. Perhaps part of the secret in dealing with the concept of 'myth' is not to dismiss it because you can't take it literally. The myth might have a lot to teach us. Of course, if you are a biblical fundamentalist, you have to believe that the creation as related in Genesis 1 is unerring truth. Not so many creationists, though, are so ready to explain why there are two creation stories, which give entirely different accounts of the beginning of things. In Genesis 1, human beings are the last to appear in the scheme of things, but in Genesis 2, the first thing the Lord God does is to form man from the dust of the ground and breathe into his nostrils the breath of life. The account of creation in Genesis 2 is entirely different; indeed a chapter heading in my bible says 'Another account of creation.' So it seems we have two different writers compiling these early chapters. In fact, scholars have identified at least four sources, four different styles of writing, four sometimes contradictory accounts, found not just in Genesis, but throughout the five books which have become known as the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They are known as J, E, P and D. J stands for the Jahwist source, because God is referred to as YHWH, as for instance in Genesis 2. E refers to those passages where God is known as Elohim, which is actually a Hebrew plural form. P stands for the priestly source, from the priests after the Second Temple, and D the Deuteronomist source, responsible for the book of Deuteronomy and the editing of other books.

You are probably beginning to think that this is all too much information, but I thought it worth spelling out a bit to show what complexity there is when we begin to look at many of the books of the bible in detail. Not all scholars go along with the 'J, E, P and D' theory, but I found John Bowker's comment on all this helpful as we try to understand how those first books of the bible came to be as they are. "One might envisage a process whereby, as the tribes drew closer together … or when together they faced a crisis, they shared their stories and traditions. These traditions may have been oral or written, but increasingly, as the stories accumulated, they would have been written down."

He goes on to say this about the Pentateuch, which might also be helpful in thinking about the whole of scripture. He calls the Pentateuch "a work of religious genius. Indeed, for that reason, some feel obliged to say that it must be, in its finished form, the work of a single author. In that sense, the

author behind the author is God, since no one without the deepest sense of the presence and purpose of God in the world, in the people, and in the writer, could have written so unerringly. Not in the trivial sense of avoiding mistakes, but in the sense of consistently keeping God always in the text as one who has brought all this into being. No matter who that author (if one there was) may have been, these books leap out from the literature of the ancient world as extraordinary in their perception of the human circumstance and its need, and of the way in which God has met that need and transformed the circumstance in the direction of holiness and love."

The 'Inspired Word of God'? Some challenging chapters.

J.W. Burgon, 1813-88, in '*Seven Sermons'* (1851) wrote "Every Book of [the bible]…every Chapter of it…every verse of it….every word of it…is the direct utterance of the Most High." I have heard the same, or something similar, many times. John Bowker says, "A claim like this is extremely misleading. The Bible is not isolated from history but immersed within it. As regards the text of the Bible ('every letter of it'), we do not know what anyone *originally* spoke or wrote. That is because the written text has come down the years with many variations in it. One of the verses often quoted is 2 Tim 3: 16 – "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Bowker points out that the verse could equally be translated as "Every scripture inspired by God is useful for teaching etc." J.A. Fitzmyer lists 11 different ways in which two Greek words in Romans 5: 12 could be translated. Bowker goes on to say that there is no 'meaning of the text' we can hope to recover, not only because of the problems of text and translation, but also because the meaning of the text is never limited to what an author intended. We can sometimes see meanings beyond those the authors intended.

I'm always worried when I hear people say that they have decided to read the bible from start to finish, because I don't think this is the best way to get to know what is important in the scriptures. And you do have to know something of the context of the passages you are reading to make the best sense of it, or even to come to an understanding about the nature of God and his dealings with his people. After the Israelites ended their wilderness period and crossed the Jordan, they embarked on the conquest of Canaan. They drove out peoples and nations, slaughtered kings, captured livestock, and all in the name of God. You could say that some of the exploits of Joshua would today be considered as ethnic cleansing. Fortunately, we don't tend to have those passages coming up in our Sunday readings very often.

In 1 Samuel 15 the prophet Samuel instructs Saul to utterly destroy Amalek: 'Go and destroy Amalek, utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." The context here is that although Saul is the Lord's chosen anointed one, he falls from grace in preparation for the arrival of David, who can seem to do no wrong, at least at first. In chapter after chapter we have the denigration of Saul, who, in sparing the livestock of Amalek after slaughtering all the people, is seen as expressly disobeying God's command through Samuel. Incidentally, that passage does throw up one of those biblical lines that always makes me want to laugh out loud. When Saul reports to Samuel after he has not fully obeyed the Lord's commands, he says to Samuel, "May you be blessed by the Lord; I have carried out the command of the Lord." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?" However, the humour soon turns to horror. Saul also spared king Agag of Amalek. But Samuel says, "Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me." And Samuel hewed

Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal. I remember one of the biblical lecturers at King's College, London, saying to us students, "Ladies and gentlemen, I think Samuel must have been a very unpleasant person."

Of course, these accounts would have been written much later than the events they describe, so the writer is giving history a particular slant in an attempt to honour David, whose time as Israel's leader was seen as the greatest period of the nation's life. Undeniably, there are difficult passages in scripture detailing rape, incest, fratricide, widespread slaughter. Some of the sentiments expressed in the psalms are also distinctly un-Christian, such as the infamous last verses of Psalm 137. 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept….' it begins, words made famous by Boney-M. But it ends "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back for what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock." Would you want to recite those lines when we say or sing the psalms in public worship? In many of the psalms, writers cry out for their enemies to be ruthlessly punished or annihilated.

In Genesis 22, God instructs Abraham to take his son Isaac to a mountain in the land of Moriah, to bind him and slay him. We know that God stayed Abraham's hand at the last moment, but what sort of God is it that would test Abraham in this way?

Or to take another, you might think, slightly frivolous example in Paul's letter to Titus. Titus is ministering in Crete. But Paul doesn't have a very good opinion of Cretans. Chapter 1, verse 12: Paul writes, "It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said, "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons." That testimony is true." I wonder how the people of Crete feel when they hear that passage read? Were we to read such a line in Shakespeare, or in a novel, we wouldn't bat an eyelid. But as John Riches suggests – texts, once canonized, change. They become sacred texts, and in the communities which recognize their new status, believers regard them as set apart, and their expectations of these texts are rather different from those which they have of other texts. So people find it very difficult when the text conflicts with the believer's own deepest sense of the sacred. Any serious dissonance cries out for some kind of resolution. Either the world of the text must be made to conform to the experience of the community, or the community must change to conform with the text. Of course, we all read texts in the light of our own experience, which may not be the experience of the writer, or the community being written to.

A Jewish rabbi Judah Goldin wrote that 'the Scriptures are not only a record of the past but a prophecy, a foreshadowing and foretelling, of what will come to pass. Text and personal experience are not two autonomous domains. On the contrary, they are reciprocally enlightening: even as the immediate event helps make the age-old sacred text intelligible, so in turn the text reveals the fundamental significance of the recent event or experience.'

John Riches says, "…[in all literature] there is a recognition that writers may help people come to terms with the height and depths of experience which polite society simply ignores or suppresses. Such changes also occur in religious communities. There is in Southwark Cathedral a memorial to the 51 people who died on the pleasure boat *Marchioness*, which hit another boat on the Thames in 1989 and sank near the cathedral. A text from the Song of Songs appears on the memorial: 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.' How wonderful that a text from the 5th-century before Christ is still bringing solace and hope to people around 2,500 years later.

Going back to the story of Abraham and Isaac: in the Book of Jubilees, a text from the second-century BCE, the incident is not just about demonstrating Abraham's faithfulness and love of God, but of dark powers in the world who lead people astray and who wish to claim even the most

righteous as their victims. Philo of Alexandria, a first-century Jewish writer, suggests that the story may have been designed to denounce or dissuade pagans who offered human sacrifices. The story of Abraham and Isaac is appointed to be read on Good Friday, because of its obvious similarities with the crucifixion narrative. But here there is no human father as mediator of God's purposes; no relenting on the part of the heavenly Father. Indeed, I have come across more than one person who dismisses Christian belief on the grounds of 'What sort of father is willing to sacrifice his son?' In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus struggles to accept the Father's will; another disturbing scenario. Matthew, faced with the enormity of God killing his own son, seems to raise the question whether there is not some higher necessity controlling the action.

People are sometimes angered by the destruction of the herd of swine in Mark chapter 5. You'll recall that Jesus was casting-out a demon from the man named Legion, and the demon was permitted to enter the herd of swine who became agitated and rushed down a steep bank and were drowned. With our 21st-century spectacles on, we can find this story disturbing, not just from an animal rights point-of-view, but from a sense of unfairness on the farmer who lost all his stock. But writing about the Abraham/Isaac incident, the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard suggests that in religious faith, normal ethical laws and rules are suspended, as men and women embraced overriding goals or ends. So, Abraham's greatness lies in his continued trust and faith in God. The point about the story of the possessed man was that Jesus had power and authority over satanic forces and was concerned with the healing of the man. Don't get caught up in worrying about the swine. You might not go along with Kierkegaard, but, as John Riches says, his was a protest against a bourgeois normalization of Christianity. So, again, we come back to what I have said before: if we ignore the context or setting of a bible passage, we may be led astray in our interpretation.

The Gospels – Why four?

I'm sure a well educated body of people such as yourselves will know that we speak of the three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke; and then also of John. One doesn't have to read much of John's gospel to realise that it is in an entirely different style from the others; employing a different vocabulary, and with some strong themes missing in the synoptics.

'Synoptic gospels – meaning that you could make a synopsis out of them quite easily. The agreements of Matthew, Mark and Luke are remarkable. It is not just that they agree about the order of many events and in much of the detail of what occurred; it is even more that they agree, in the case of individual sections, in the overall structure of the narrative; in sentence structure and in choice of words. These agreements are so striking that they almost force one to the conclusion that from the start they depended on one another – not to say copy!

The Synoptic theory, very briefly, is that Mark's gospel was the first to be written; and that it was largely copied by Matthew and Luke. They added sections of their own, known to the scholars as M and L, and they used another source that Mark didn't have, known as Q. Why Q? From *Quelle* – the German for 'source'. John's gospel seems to have come from an entirely different source. He doesn't

mention many of the events in Jesus' life that the others do, and has much more focus on the meaning and of Jesus' life and his identity.

Why four gospels? One might well ask why there are several biographies of Churchill, say, or Henry VIII. People write from various perspectives, and for different readerships, and maybe even from the standpoint of another culture. We should remember, too, that Christian communities were being formed away from places associated with Jesus' life, and in an age where communication was not advanced, different Christian communities needed access to the details of Jesus' life.

It is widely believed that Mark's gospel was the first to be written, probably in Rome, and maybe at the dictation of Peter. It is quite rough and unpolished in style, and fast-moving. He skips stories of Jesus' birth and childhood. He devotes six of his sixteen chapters to the last week of Jesus' life, and seems to emphasize the suffering of Jesus. It may have been written at the time of Nero's persecution, when Christians also were suffering greatly.

It is believed that Matthew's gospel was written in Syria, probably not by Matthew himself, but by a disciple. It is the most Jewish of the four gospels, and contains nearly 60 Old testament quotes and references. For Matthew, Jesus is the Messiah whom God had promised to send Israel, to save the people and rule them in peace. Matthew has five distinct teaching sections - to mirror the five books of the Law. So Jesus is to be seen as the new Moses.

In the case of St Luke's gospel, this was written in Asia Minor for the Gentile community. It is more likely that Luke himself was responsible for it. Luke carefully selects stories that show that salvation is for everyone, and Jesus has a particular care for the outsider in Luke's gospel, and for those rejected by society.

St John's gospel, it is believed, comes last, right at the end of the first century; again, probably not by the apostle himself, but by a disciple or a group of writers in what we might call his 'school.' John is driven by the goal to prove that Jesus is the divine Son of God.

Comparing texts in the three synoptic gospels can be instructive. For instance, there is what has become known as the 'Matthean exception' in Jesus' teaching about divorce. In Mark and Luke, Jesus says quite clearly that whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. But in Matthew's gospel, twice, there is an amendment to that: 'whoever divorces his wife, ***except on the grounds of unchastity,*** and marries another, commits adultery.' Not all the ancient texts of Matthew include this 'exception.' So the scholars think, since these words may have been added later, that already by the end of the first century, Jesus' teaching was considered too harsh, and that there could be just reasons for a divorce. An early indication that Christian teaching does develop.

If it is a little disconcerting to think that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John may not have been written by those four individuals; have you ever read a column in a daily newspaper purporting to come from the Prime Minister, or heard a speech from a leading parliamentarian, and thought "I wonder if he/she really wrote that? How do they have the time?" No doubt aides and civil servants contribute greatly to these speeches, but it is important that the Prime Minister's name is linked with it. A bit like the King's Speech at the opening of Parliament – we know that the King hasn't written it himself. With many of the books of the bible, it was seen as important that the name of an apostle or a leading figure was attached to a writing, to give authority. So, sorry, the vast majority of the psalms of David were not written by him, though they may have been psalms he used; the Song of Solomon probably had little to do with the king of that name, and the gospels were probably attached to the name of an apostle to give greater authority, except, maybe in the case of Luke. Memories of the apostles doubtless found their way into the gospels. The call of Matthew by Jesus, for instance, is

only found in Matthew's gospel. John's gospel speaks much of the beloved disciple. He says at the end that he can testify to the things written, suggesting that he himself is not the writer. Mark's gospel contains a strange vignette about a young man arrested by soldiers when Jesus was being taken; it says the soldiers grabbed his robe and the young man ran away naked. Could the young man have been Mark himself? Why else include such a reminiscence?

Why did the four gospels survive into the completed canon of the bible? I guess because these were all books that carried some authority with them, being named after the apostles. Perhaps it was also a political compromise; no one contender had a higher claim than another.

How should we use the bible today – and how *do* people use it?

Looking back through history, it is instructive, but disturbing in some cases and encouraging in others, to see how the bible has been used in pressing political or national ambitions. For instance, the narratives of the conquest of Canaan in Joshua and Judges provided support for the conquest of Latin America by the Spanish and Portuguese. But, equally, the so-called 'liberation theologians' could appeal to the bible to justify their message that the gospel should be one proclaiming release to the captives and the setting at liberty of the oppressed.

In Africa, too, the bible was used as both an instrument of oppression and liberation. There was also a racist element, as white Africaners saw themselves as God's peculiar people, surrounded by unbelieving black 'Canaanites', cast out of their land because of their lawlessness. Desmond Tutu spoke against the Africaners' attitude, likening their actions to those of Jezebel unfairly acquiring Naboth's vineyard. He also spoke powerfully to Prime Minister John Vorster about the equality of all people in redeemed humanity; how Christ has broken down all barriers of race and creed.

These arguments show the plasticity and fruitfulness of biblical texts. They are open to the most diverse readings. The same text, depending on how they are read, can bring either life or death to the same people. We need to be aware of the different emphases of the bible, and the different emphases which readers can put on it. There is a darker side of the Bible which we should not allow our own moral judgment to be overwhelmed by.

John Bowker says, "We read the bible, not to find texts to enable us to burn witches, make slaves, subordinate women, condemn homosexuals or murder Jews. All of those acts and attitudes were justified by taking single texts and applying them without reference to the greater purpose of God in creation of holiness and love. If the Bible does not produce *that*, and instead it leads to communal hatred and acts of violence and destruction, it is being misused. There is a better way; we read the Bible in order to encounter the Word of God in the words of God, and to be made a holy people for the worship of God and the service of the world.

In reading the Bible that way, it is wise to read it sharing the understanding of others, and not making it into a matter of private opinion. John Bowker, priest as well as biblical scholar, offers this thought: "Whether reading or hearing the bible alone, or in church, or in a small group, we desire to meet God through what we are reading. Be open to hearing something new or different. If you are reading a well-known story, imagine the scene in your own world now; be a participant in that scene, not just an observer. Whether the passage is a story or not, it is good practice to home in on one word, sentence or phrase that particularly speaks to you. Stay with it; repeat it; take it through your day. It may take time to hear what God is trying to say – as it often did for people in the bible."

Principal texts used in preparing the lecture:

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Loveday, Simon, ***The Bible for Grown-Ups*** (Icon Books, 2016)

Riches, John, ***The Bible – A very short introduction*** (Oxford University Press, 2000)