



8th February 2009
Septuagesima
Choral Evensong
Psalm 137
Luke 1 vv. 1–15

Reading the Bible as...



...History

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Early in the 1930s a team of archaeologists started work on a hillside, north of Jerusalem. After they had cleared the rubble they found what they were looking for, the ruins of a three thousand year old palace. This was the site which Omri, the soldier king, bought for two talents of silver and this was his palace, Samaria. And then the archaeologists found that with every step they walked on flakes of ivory, their trowels and brushes turned up stunning ivory carvings. Not local work, it was too sophisticated by far for the hill farmers of Israel, this was high Phoenician art and behind it there was a story

Omri died in 869 B.C.. He was succeeded by Ahab, one of the most fabulously unpleasant kings Israel ever had:

Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.

And Ahab took a wife, Jezebel, a foreign princess; a princess, in fact, from Phoenicia. It was Jezebel who brought ivory to decorate the palace on the hill. Those archaeologists, in the 1930s, were walking in Ahab's 'ivory house' (I Kings 22:39), exploring rooms where fragrant, painted, deadly Jezebel had once walked.

Is the bible history? Well, Omri, Ahab and Jezebel are history, and the biblical Book of Kings, is history of a sort. It is a narrative and evidence that you can put to the test, at Samaria you can even hold the evidence in your hand.

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Is the bible history? Again and again biblical events, the places, the people are part of the historical record. A walled city at Jericho, a king named David, Nebuchadnezzar, Bethlehem, the Roman collaborator Herod, Capernaum, and the brutal Pontius Pilate, these are the proper concern of history. You can look for God in many ways, in vigils, or visions in the night, in books, in sunsets, or in the eyes of your beloved. The biblical writers looked for God in history. The bible is history with attitude, heavy with interpretation and just occasionally light on proof. Bits of it, the story of Ahab's palace, are very accurate and other bits, like the walls of Jericho have grown in the telling. It is all urgent and eager, but it's not all the same. Write essays like this and your supervisor might pour herself a dry sherry and you an acid draught of sarcasm.

Is the bible history? You have just heard the introduction to Luke's gospel.

I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.

(Luke 1:3)

There St Luke writes like a historian, all that insistence on an orderly account; the interest in events and eyewitnesses. Other famous history books start in the same way. Luke sets out his stall, *in the days of King Herod of Judea*, he begins. He does it again, famously, in a passage we hear each Christmas:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.
(Luke 2:1-2)

Luke wants to tell us when these things happened. It begins with Herod and with mighty Caesar. It is deliberate. This is not a 'Once upon a time' sort of story, it is not myth, nor make believe. It is history. That is what Christianity is, the record of what was and is: history not mystery. Let's be clear about this. When everyone is asking us to debate the propositions that there probably isn't, or probably is, a God and jumping on buses in different directions, Christianity does not ask us to speculate and imagine, it asks us to weigh evidence. It happened in the days of the Emperor Octavian, named 'Augustus' by the Senate in AD 27. We deal in history not mystery. That is why every time we say the creed we speak of Jesus Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. History not mystery.

But Luke is not a historian like the one living on a staircase near you. History is a tricky business, a task of evidence and imagination and the best of our historians take their shoes off at the door. I am a historian I could tell you more than you want really want to know about St John's College four hundred years ago, but I would include the odd 'perhaps' and get cautious. I would tell you too, that students then were younger than you, spoke in Latin, had toothache and b.o. I would remind you not to jump to conclusions. I would remind you that this was a different time and these were different people.

Not Luke, he never tells his story as if it is a thing apart, something that happened once, long ago. He tells a story that made a difference to everything, forever. Luke isn't a bit of history, it is *all* history. He has one of those long lists: *Ca-i'nan, the son of Arphax'ad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah*. We hurry past it, but we shouldn't. It is a list that goes back to Adam and Luke uses it to tell us that every ancestor of every human being is part of this story. His story is a story about all of us, it is the only story. All history gathers with the shepherds at the stable.

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Is the Bible history? Luke wants us to know that scripture is our past and our future, it is the whole story and it all rests like a top spinning on a single point, on a hill called Golgotha, outside a city wall. This is history with bells and whistles. Luke conjures connections, throws all the switches, tugs at every thread. Let me give you an example. Luke begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, an elderly, childless couple. Not so surprising perhaps, but if you read scripture the associations all pile up, this is the way the Book of Genesis tells a story, all those women who could not conceive, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Luke's story is the old story where the hope of Israel founders in impotence and despair. Luke wants us to make that connection, Elizabeth finally conceives and, suddenly, uses words we have heard before, she says what Rachel said when she too finally conceived a child 'The Lord has taken away my reproach'. Luke is telling us the old story has come round again. He does that again and again, the early chapters of the gospel are littered with reference, but if we tracked them down we would miss our dinner and still be here on Tuesday.

Is the Bible history? The answer is that is a particular kind of history. In the hands of Luke, and others, scripture stitches together a story that joins all places and all peoples into one great narrative of salvation.

One more example. In 597 BC a war began between Judah and the country we now think of as Iraq. An army destroyed Jewish cities and ravaged farmland. Finally, Jerusalem was starved to submission and destroyed. The Jewish King, Zedekiah, watched his children die, then his captors put out his eyes and led him in chains to Babylon. God once promised the Land to his people, promised to dwell with them in the Temple, promised to raise up a king over them. That day all of that was lost; and, captive amongst the gardens of Babylon, the Hebrews wept:

By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
Psalm 137:1

It was our first reading. Is the Bible history? Yes it is a history of salvation, a history of God.

Is the bible history? It is more complicated than that, of course. God has no history, no beginning, no end, no complex motives, and no changes of direction. The bible, struggling to say that, struggling to do in words more than words even can achieve, is poetry, law, and prophecy, it is theology, vision, myth and lots of history. It is not one thing with one voice, it is a conversation about the living God and some of it is certainly not history at all.

Is the bible history? The Bible is a courtroom, a parliament of voices, it is debate and opinion, truth and interpretation. It is an invitation to think, to learn, it is an invitation to see.

And it is something more. What the bible claims is that this story is your story and mine; it asks you to believe that there is indeed a history here and that it sweeps up you and me. Now at that point a lot of good historians will mutter into their beards or reach for their handbags. Other people at different times have tried this idea out. Other people have suggested that history is going somewhere. Some Victorians thought that all history was progress, that things get better and better – revolutions, inventions and great books leading up a gracious ladder to George Bush, Starbucks and pot noodles. Marxists did it too, looking to the day when history would stop because social justice had arrived. In St John's clever dons have smiled over glasses of witheringly dry Sancerre at the folly of all that. Good historians know that history isn't going anywhere.

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Fine, but let's be clear about the choice we make. Years ago, before she became a teenager and world weary I read bedtime stories to my daughter. Each chapter would end on a knife edge and each night she would ask, 'what happens?' And I would say 'Wait and see'. I could say that and she could accept it because we both trusted the story to be a good story, to have a beginning and to have a proper end, in which everything would be resolved. That is what the bible asks you to believe, that this story, our story has an ending, it asks us to believe this story makes sense and is going somewhere. You can doubt, be my guest, it is what we do in Cambridge, but if this is no story, then there is no ending and there is no point, and that is a very interesting place to pitch your tent when the winds blow and the cold comes.

The Bible sets Christ before us, history not mystery. The Bible tells us that God has spoken to us in the one thing we can most easily recognize in our history, in human life. The bible suggests that tonight we have direction and purpose and, above all, we have hope. The Bible is a history, a language, an explanation we need. Here is the way we talk about living and dying, about being human and about God. What is it like? Well it is like watching love and truth and peace being nailed to a cross and it is like love and truth and peace rising again quietly in the early morning because still there is hope and still there is a promise that in John's and Gaza, in hospital wards and cemeteries, in recession and depression and wherever life and spirit fail our story will still have a different and a better ending.

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