

The Bible

A Frightening Book

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The Bible is the most frightening book I know. I don't go there for comfort and reassurance – I open the covers with a sense of anticipation close to dread. What challenge will I find next? The scariest moments of all come when trying to work with a Bible passage to prepare a sermon – how can I know what this means, do I really have the nerve to announce what I think I find there? What on earth I am supposed to say about a story of divinely commanded genocide, or of a God who breaches the laws of nature with spectacularly strange miracles and signs? What makes the preacher more than a spiritual entertainer or theology anything more than an intellectual trick to square these impossible circles?

The Bible, as we know, is not one book but a library, written, edited, collated and copied by countless individuals and communities through several millennia of human history. With all its internal variety and inconsistencies, it is held together by a grand narrative – an overarching rainbow story of a universe that has its origin and end in a gracious and loving God. Whatever we find in there – even the strangest and most disturbing things – is hanging upon that story like an ornament on a Christmas tree.

The key to understanding it all is to accept that you and I are also a part of that story, our lives, stories and experiences are continuous with those of the Bible. I hate it when people say 'your faith must be a great comfort to you'. It is not my comfort: it is the eyes through which I see the world, the language I speak to communicate in the world, the community which holds me, the culture through which I experience the world, and the story which both shapes and challenges all that I do. Comfortable it is not.

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