

Preface

THIS BOOK WILL BE worrying to many ordinary Christians. Part of what I am saying is that the Bible's understandings of the universe are based on ancient "science" and are no longer the way that we think about the world. This will *sound* to many people like I am saying that the Bible is simply wrong. I am not. Let me assure readers **right at the start** that I am a Bible-believing Christian. My view is that the books of the Bible are divinely inspired and together are authoritative as Holy Scripture. As such I am committed to the belief that they remain relevant in the modern age and that Jehovah¹ continues to address his people through them. However, I am also committed to the view that we ought to try to understand the biblical texts, as far as we are able, in their ancient contexts. There is a lot more to interpreting the Bible well than reading in this manner; but it

1. I should perhaps offer an explanation for my use of the somewhat old-fashioned name Jehovah. This may seem odd because, contrary to what Jehovah's Witnesses say, Jehovah is *not God's name*. Let me explain. God revealed himself to Israel by means of his holy name. This name is reflected in the Hebrew text by four consonants YHWH (or JHVH in older writings). By the time of Jesus, the name was considered so holy that pious Jews would never utter it but would use a range of devices to allude to it without speaking it. Jesus himself and the authors of the New Testament followed this practice and I now do so too. Now one such device was to substitute the word "Lord," *Adonai*, in place of the name. Thus, when JHVH was *read* in the text the word *Adonai* was *spoken* in its place. When vowels were later added to the Hebrew text the vowels of *Adonai* were written by the consonants of JHVH as JeHoVaH (trust me on the first a changing to e) to remind readers to say *Adonai*. So "Jehovah" was not a word that was ever used by Jews and it is not God's name. However, I think that it is actually a very helpful pseudo-name to use. The problem is that substitutes such as "Lord" are titles and not names at all. An audience listening would not know whether someone saying *Adonai* was reading the name JHVH or the title *Adonai*. Jehovah, however, contains the consonants of the name itself. As such it clearly gestures towards the name; but it is *not* the name. And for that very reason is helpful, for it allows us to clearly reference the name without saying it. So in this book I will often use the word Jehovah, and when Bible verses use YHWH I have changed the LORD of the translations used to Jehovah.

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remains the case that biblical books were written by ancient people in ancient contexts, and we need to give space to hearing them as such. Doing this may well be disorientating for believers; indeed, it can often have the effect of distancing the Bible from us and making it seem very strange and alien. This can be scary—we may fear that the Bible could be lost to us, stranded in the past. And if we left matters there we will not have read the Bible *as Scripture* but simply as an ancient text and we will indeed have lost it in the process. This is not, however, a reason to abandon the attempt to better understanding biblical books in historical context. One ever-present danger for the church is that we can domesticate Scripture; we can mold it into our own image and tame it so that it only reflects back to us what we're expecting it to say. The act of distancing Scripture from ourselves, as one movement within the drama of interpretation, can have the useful function of allowing it to confront us again in its very strangeness; giving it breathing space to say something different and surprising to us. This opens up the possibility that in a second movement within the interpretative act—that of bring our own world into dialogue with that of the Bible—Scripture can speak a fresh word to us. So the first few chapters may well be disorientating but I can only ask the reader to bear with me. My prayer is that by the end of the book you will not be thinking that the Bible is old and out of date but that it is excitingly relevant to our modern understandings of the world in which we live.