

## PREFACE

NOBODY BELIEVES IN DRAGONS. Or do they? I used to teach teenage boys religion in schools. One summer day when the examination period was over and the school was generally a bit more relaxed, I decided to explore the nature of mythology with my students. So I asked them the question: do you believe in dragons? The responses were amusing.

The students aged around ten or eleven years old found it quite hard to answer at first. Many of them used to believe in dragons when they were younger, as dragons were an exciting part of their fantasy world. Dragons were fun and they did not want to let go of them. Their education, however, was requiring them to distinguish sharply between reality and fantasy and they knew that dragons did not exist. Intellectually they did not believe in dragons but emotionally they really wanted to cling on to them.

The students aged around thirteen and fourteen were bemused at the ridiculous question. It was perfectly obvious to anyone of any intelligence in the modern world that dragons did not exist. Mythology was invented by people who did not have a proper modern education as a way of trying to explain the universe, but that did not make it true.

The students in their late teens were more cautious. In what sense did I mean believe? What kind of truth was I after? They recognized the desire from their childhood years to conquer dragons and be a hero. They were nostalgic for that stage of life in which they could move so easily from the world of reality to fantasy and back, knowing the difference but not caring so much about the difference. *Puff the Magic Dragon* came up and one of

them wondered whether drugs might help them back into that world. I made a hasty (and probably fairly weak) attempt at moral education and they bore patiently with me. They did not believe in dragons but thought that the world would be a better place if we all still did.

I had to visit the administrative office at break time. Entertained by the fascinating and lengthy discussions I had just had, I asked some of the secretarial staff the same question. They looked at me as if I were daft. Slowly their faces changed and they began to look puzzled. Then they began to smile. They looked at each other and then they all looked in the direction of the office of a particular colleague. “Yes, we believe in dragons,” they replied.

Nobody I spoke to that day really believed in dragons. Nobody really thought that there were enormous, seven-headed, fire-breathing flying lizards that found particular pleasure in capturing helpless princesses and threatening to eat them. However, most of the people I spoke to did think the language of dragons helped them express something about themselves or the world around them. The language of dragons expressed fears and gave opportunity for excitement. The fantasy language of battling dragons gave expression to ambitions, desires, and emotions. The picture of the dragon as a fire-breathing enemy was the perfect ironic characterization of someone people found difficult. The fact that dragon language belongs to the world of fantasy gave expression to broken hope and the yearning for innocence (and perhaps power). Dragons might not exist but they were meaningful.

I did not believe in dragons either and still do not. However, the way people have used this aspect of ancient mythology to express their spirituality intrigues me. For many people today, speaking of dragons can feel a little bit silly even if wonderful conversations sometimes result. I think that some ancients had a far richer language for exploring their spiritual lives partly because they were willing to use and explore this language.

I wish to explore their language in the following pages. Specifically, I am going to look at the mythology of dragons and their demonic counterparts in Jewish and Christian literature from around 1000 BC to AD 300. There are many Jewish and early Christian texts that refer to dragons and the battle God or his angels fight against them. The myth is easily ignored or sidelined on account of its strangeness—and partly on account of the way in which people who are interested in this mythology languish in its lurid images (which can be rather off-putting for the rest of us). However

this language is present from the earliest biblical texts to the writing of the New Testament and it can be found in rabbinic writings. Not only is this language present but I suspect we may have something to learn from it.

One of the interesting things about the language of dragons in this Jewish and Christian literature is that it most often occurs in writings where the author is suffering. Somehow this language has helped different people over many years to find a way of expressing their thoughts and feelings about living with suffering and God. It is this that I want to explore in the following pages.

Quite often questions about suffering and God take the form of trying to justify God. We ask how a loving and all-powerful God could possibly allow such a tragedy to happen. We then try to work through the various possibilities. Maybe God is not capable of restraining all suffering. Maybe God does not love as we love. Maybe God has a higher purpose that we cannot see. Maybe God does not exist and this suffering proves it. Different people find different answers and the theological questions persist—not least because there are no easy answers to them.

This is not the way in which I wish to explore the subject. The texts we are going to study (more or less) accept the character of God: that God is good, faithful, trustworthy, just, merciful, and committed to the people who follow him. They also accept the pain and anxiety of suffering. There is no shying away from the realities. Nevertheless, they try to find a way through the experience. The texts give vent to various emotions. They explore what God might or might not be doing. They find creative ways of praying and hoping. Rather than trying to find out why what is happening to them is happening (which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do), they try to find ways of living through what is happening to them and living through it with God. They want to be authentic about reality and authentic about their faith in God. My hope is that as we explore their grappling and living with suffering and God we might find resources for doing the same.

I am aware that anyone writing on suffering runs the risk of being glib. I do not wish to fall into this trap and apologize to anyone who comes away from reading this book thinking I have done so. I have suffered in various ways in life, as has everybody. We all suffer in different ways and to different degrees. I recognize there are many people who have suffered more than I have. However, my own experience of suffering has made me ask the question of how we suffer as well as possible. My religious faith makes me ask that question in the context of God. I hope that by exploring what

others have to say about suffering, we can learn more about how to suffer better—if that makes any sense—and I hope my experience and perspective does not detract from your working through the ancient material with your own experiences of pain and suffering and your own questions in mind.

Before proceeding any further I ought to offer a few quick words about how to read this book. I have made an assumption that readers will be familiar with the biblical writings found in the Christian Old and New Testaments. You do not necessarily need to be familiar with them to read the book and engage with it as you can read the texts I discuss as they appear. However, I do discuss a number of texts in depth and I suggest that if you do not know those texts well, you look them up in a Bible and read them through a couple of times as you read that section of this book. Also, keep the biblical text at hand as you read *Playing with Dragons* so you can check what I have written against the text. You will probably get more out of this book that way and you will certainly engage more deeply with the things I discuss.

On another note, you do not need to read the footnotes. Feedback on my last book included discussions with people who felt they were getting bogged down in the footnotes. Once told this was not necessary, they found it a much more engaging read. Others have suggested to me that they really appreciate being able to look things up for themselves and so like the fact the notes are there. This book has been designed to be read without the footnotes. You ought to be able to read the whole text and understand it without reading a single footnote. However, there is not an author on earth who does not make assumptions. Therefore, I have tried to give people access to other ways of reading the material I discuss or access to understanding why I take a different view by including comments on my readings and those of others in footnotes. If you are the sort of reader who likes engaging in the wider discussion and having better access to it, I hope my footnotes serve your purposes well.

My third note concerns other ancient writings. My guess is that not all readers will be familiar with all the texts I refer to in this book. Therefore I have included a very brief introduction to these writings in the Appendix. You will also find details of English translations of these texts here, should you want to read them for yourselves. I discuss and refer to these texts as they help us see that what may sometimes appear odd or marginal in the Bible was part of Jewish culture more widely. Examining the traditions about dragons in wider Jewish and Christian writings can help us to

understand what these traditions are doing in the Bible. I hope that those readers who are not really interested in these texts will bear with me where I talk about them. Wherever possible, I put these references in footnotes, but patiently learning about them will help readers to understand the Bible better.

My final note is rather more important. This book does not simply try to reconstruct or discover the meanings of ancient texts. It tries to discover and engage with the spirituality of those texts. I make the assumption that in using the language of dragons to describe suffering, the ancient authors are playing with metaphor and myth in ways that try to give expression to the human experience of faith in God in the face of suffering. I hope I have traced some of the spirituality of these authors in the situations of suffering they faced. I think I have caught glimpses of the ways in which they worked creatively with this language to say what they were feeling and thinking. If I have come anywhere near success in this, then there may be echoes of our own experience in theirs. There may also be parallels between our experiences and theirs. The way in which their experiences echo our own invites us to enter into their reflections on their experiences, and I would like to comment briefly on how we might accept this invitation—should we wish and choose to do so.

Most of the writings I examine in this book are canonical for Christians or Jews (or both). This means they are authoritative. This raises an immediate question of how texts exploring the spirituality of suffering of particular people in particular places at certain points in history are authoritative for *all* people of a religious faith across time. I am not going to offer any attempt at an answer here. However, I would like to sound a note of caution. In reading for this book, I have come across some writers who would recommend that readers follow the example of the biblical writer, which entails (amongst other things) following the emotional and behavioral patterns of, for example, some of the psalmists. These writers can read as if they are saying “in this sort of situation, you should consider feeling and acting like the psalmist here—this is a good emotional and behavioral example.” I am not convinced that this is either healthy or possible. Emotions may be traced with honesty and care. They can be channeled, sometimes, with effort and self-control. However, I am not sure any human being can genuinely and life-givingly follow the emotional patterns of another. I am not sure God ever created human beings to work quite like that. My experience is that such use of texts stifles people’s

growth emotionally and spiritually. So I would ask you to suspend any belief that the authority of biblical writings demands you try to copy the emotional and behavioral patterns of the biblical authors. Hold to the authority of these writings but do so with a freedom that allows you to hear the voices of the biblical authors as they reflect on *their* experiences of God in *their* suffering and to listen to *your own* voice and experiences of God in *your* suffering.

However, the texts do invite us to make comparisons between our experiences and those of their authors. By all means bring your experiences to the table. If you want to, compare and contrast your experiences with those of the biblical (and extra-biblical) authors, but read these texts with freedom. Allow the similarities to emerge and by all means learn from them. Allow the differences to emerge and ask questions. Listen to the emotional and theological questionings and ramblings of our authors and listen to your own. Be honest and allow their own honesty to encourage you to become more honest about your own wrestling with suffering and spirituality. However, do not feel constrained by the directions in which the biblical authors go. You may not be in the same place as Job, who appears driven to sardonic despair, and so it may be inappropriate to follow his example. You may not be in the same place as those psalmists who want to praise God in adversity, and so you may not be up to following their example. There may be excellent examples in what the biblical authors do but you may not be starting from the same place as they are, and so it may be unhelpful to try to retrace their steps and make them your own. On the other hand, retracing their steps might be just what you need. All I would caution you to do is to read the texts with freedom—and preferably with honesty and prayerfulness.

It is also worth noting that I write as a Christian who accepts the canonicity and authority of the Christian Bible. I write with my own personal history and experiences of suffering. Although I have tried hard to read the texts for what they say, I suspect that my own perspective influences my reading at points. I offer this biographical information to you to help you filter and, where necessary, disagree with my readings of texts and see them (and the tradition I explore) more clearly than I have done.

In the main text of the book, we do not dive straight into this material. Biblical dragons are not a common topic of conversation—their ancient Near Eastern counterparts are even less so. Therefore, we begin in chapter 1 with some background information on the myth in the ancient world. This

information is designed to be helpful and so is worth reading, but those who wish to get stuck into biblical study might prefer to skim this and move onto chapter 2 (coming back to chapter 1 if necessary later on). Chapter 2 explores how the ancient myth was used in Genesis and Isaiah 40–55, and particularly how it expresses how high a value God attributes to people. Chapter 3 examines different ways of praying through suffering by examining various psalms. Chapter 4 considers how Job uses the myth to give vent to profound reactions to suffering. Much of this material shows people of faith lamenting their suffering before God. Chapter 5 explores how Matthew talks back to this tradition, suggesting that in Christian faith disciples are to expect lament to go hand in hand with discipline and growth in faith. The final chapter of the book brings the discussion together and ponders what we might learn from this ancient myth.

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