John McCarthy's book Some Other Rainbow, written with Jill Morrell, tells the story of his kidnap and being held hostage by Islamic fundamentalists. Since his release, he has worked for the BBC, with his most recent series for Radio 4 being John McCarthy's Bible Journey. His latest book, written with fellow-hostage Brian Keenan, Between Extremes tells of their travels in Chile.

Looking for Omar – A Bible Journey

by John McCarthy

Few have read the Bible in such extreme conditions as John McCarthy. A treasure trove that offers some comfort, some frustration and that poses many questions, the book has led the now freed journalist on a new journey, told in two recent BBC Radio 4 series. Here he gives some thoughts arising out of that journey.

My Bible journey began during my years as a hostage when I read the book from cover to cover and found myself asking the questions that I hope my radio series begins to answer.

The Lebanese captors, Islamic fundamentalists who believed they were doing God's work, allowed me a copy of the Bible. When first given the book I handled it as if it was a delicate object that might disappear at any moment. I realised that its treasure trove of stories might occupy my mind and I also hoped, despite being a man of no great faith, that it would offer some spiritual comfort.

The frequent passages promising the freeing of captives from their chains did bring moments of great optimism – and some frustration. Having known the Bible only from readings in church and at school, I was surprised and delighted to find so much almost "ungodly" entertainment, like the humour of some passages in Ecclesiastes and the passion and sensuality in the Song of Solomon. But as well as encouraging and entertaining me, it also helped me in a difficult process of self-examination that had begun the moment the cell door was locked behind me. The portrayal of common human experiences, of individual struggles to face weakness and attempt to rise above it, helped me through periods of depression caused by my own sense of helplessness and inadequacy. The universal nature of man's condition as demonstrated in these Bible stories reassured me.

Yet I was shocked at the blood-thirstiness in the Old Testament, at God's sometimes arbitrary justice and his ordering his chosen people to massacre their enemies. Stories were repeated in different books with differing detail and emphasis. I wanted to find out who had written the Bible, how many authors had contributed to it and when and why had they compiled it? Was the Bible's history accurate or were the various versions a reflection of a people developing a moral and social code while working out a relationship with their God?

There was another huge question, often alarmingly brought home to me as I huddled in a cell while bombs and shells, unleashed by people who believed they were fighting a Holy War, blasted Beirut. How could so many people take and use a holy book to justify their claims to dominion, both spiritual and political, over others? Is it the words on the page or the way people read them that has allowed the Bible, so often, to be turned from a text of liberation to a manual for oppression?

Looking for answers to these questions while making the Radio 4

series, I found again and again that the Bible provokes very intense reactions – from believers and non-believers alike. Among the world's leading Bible historians, most agreed that there is very little evidence to corroborate the Bible's account of the early history of the people of Israel. When I visited the town of Hebron in Israel, the supposed burial place of the Patriarchs Abraham and Isaac, I found myself in a landscape that I had known about all my life but which had always remained remote and mysterious. But, as I crossed the Plain of Mamre, aware that there was no hard evidence for the stories set here, I felt myself caught up in a living past and could almost visualise the tent where Abraham had been promised by God that his descendants would be a chosen people.

Not having any religious or nationalistic investment in the story, however, I could reason that just because it was written down and the location was identifiable did not mean it should necessarily be given any literal validity.

Given that Abraham is revered by Judaism, Christianity and Islam, one might hope that the traditional site of his grave would be a place of peace. Instead, of course, the massive shrine built above the Caves of Machpela is surrounded by heavily-armed soldiers who keep Jewish and Muslim worshippers rigidly segregated and Hebron has witnessed appalling violence between the faiths. Though quiet during my visit, the tension in the air was palpable and I was struck once more by the feelings of irony and sadness that I had experienced in captivity – at the paradox of a "Holy War" in a "Holy Land".

This idea of paradox seems to lie at the heart of the Bible's great success, as the world's best-seller; it is interpreted in so many ways that it can be "all things to all men". I feel that in encouraging people, especially the young, to read it there is a paramount responsibility for teachers, be they clerical or secular, to emphasise the problems with the book's "history". The enormous moral lessons it can teach us on how to live our lives for the benefit of ourselves and those around us can only be learned correctly, in my view, if they are separated from that ancient history. There are too many examples of the disastrous results of the Bible being used to rationalise and justify indefensible political positions. There must be a duty when teaching the history, for example of the Crusades, to acknowledge this problem.

I agree wholeheartedly with Hanan Ashrawi's view that "when you make God take sides in secular issues and political and territorial conflicts, then you have set the stage for a lose/lose situation".

Rather than focusing on the Bible's myths, we should promote its radical ideas of liberation. The Bible reaches into every aspect of our culture, but there is a danger that, though we are familiar with elements of the text, through sterile teaching it will lose its vitality and relevance.

Enlightenment

I was profoundly impressed by a trip to El Salvador. Here I met people living in slums who, despite having survived years of oppression and civil war, are still facing economic hardship. Yet, with their Bibles beside them, they are living their lives with great dignity, self-awareness and a powerful sense of community. I had never really appreciated Liberation Theology before, but in El Salvador, the connection between theology and liberation was unmistakable. There was nothing false or patronising about this movement.

As Jon Sobrino, one of its leading thinkers explained to me, liberation theology is as much "an enlightenment of the Scriptures through the lives of the poor", as it is the enlightenment of the poor through the Scriptures.

As with so many aspects of Bible usage, even here one has to be wary. The Exodus story is often cited to give encouragement to the oppressed. But, of course, that led to genocide against the Canaanites. I was intrigued and impressed with Fr Michael Prior's powerfully put argument that the text should be treated with great caution and might need editing in some way to make sense in the modern world and to avoid setting in motion yet another cycle of violence.

I can appreciate the temptation to feel that God has acted on your side to overcome oppressors, but realised that it can be a short step from being the oppressed to becoming the oppressor. Happily in El Salvador, and subsequently speaking with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, I was impressed at how many people of great faith were able to acknowledge the Bible's limitations, or perhaps I should say the limitations of our interpretations of it, and how important it is to be careful not to fall into the trap of a one-time David becoming a Goliath.

Although the Bible can still provoke extreme attitudes, whether religious, political or academic, the human experience it portrays, even after two to three thousand years, speaks directly to the present.

While preparing to set out on this Bible journey, a phrase I'd read in captivity kept coming back to me. It went something like "and in the desert there was Omar with his sheep and goats".

Reading it then it struck me as odd: this character did and said nothing and was never referred to again yet somehow he'd warranted immortality in the world's best-selling book. From a hot cell in Beirut, I'd imagined Omar pottering about with his flock when the skies opened and a finger (like that in the adverts for the National Lottery) pointed down as the voice of God boomed "and in the desert there was Omar!"

How would he have reacted? Prostrated himself in faith, or fear? Would it have been a moment of revelation or terror? Re-reading the Bible, I have been unable to find this Omar and when I've asked scholars, believers and the internet for help they have pointed out other Omars but not the one I was looking for. Perhaps I dreamed the verse up, or maybe my memory cobbled together one or two passages to express my early reactions to the Bible text. Yet the image of the little guy in the desert, curiously singled out and perhaps not happy with the role he was given, remains very vivid for me. It reflects how the Bible's stories are so often about very human beings in recognisable situations, all struggling to deal with such a colossal idea – God.

While I haven't found a deep faith through working on this project, I will continue reading the Bible and looking for Omar.