

Why does the Bible Matter?

The significance of the Bible for contemporary life



Reflections from the Centre for Bible, Ethics & Theology

Why Does the Bible Matter?

The Significance of the Bible for Contemporary Life

Edited by C.L. Crouch, Roland Deines, and Mark Wreford



This publication was produced by the Centre for Bible, Ethics and Theology at the University of Nottingham, with the generous support of Bible Society.

First published 2016 by Bible Society

Stonehill Green, Westlea, Swindon, United Kingdom, SN5 7DG

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ISBN 978-0-564-04527-3

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Introduction ON

The Bible is indisputably the most read book in history. Translated into over 2,500 languages and counting, with 150,000,000 copies printed in China alone, it is by far the world's best-selling book. Yet recent years have seen a decline in biblical literacy and interest. Household ownership in the UK has fallen from 90 per cent after World War II to about 50 per cent today. Our own research at Bible Society indicates a latent positivity towards the Bible amongst the British public, but relatively low levels of active engagement. Indeed it does seem, as Eugene Peterson has said, that, 'the Christian Scriptures need [to be pulled] back from the margins of the contemporary imagination where they have been so rudely elbowed by their glamorous competitors.'

So, in light of the Bible's past and continuing influence, how might we address the increasing gap between this significance and our response? One of the most natural influences on a society's thought lies in its centres of education and research. Indeed, though theology was once known as the 'queen of the sciences' and deemed foundational to any inquiry into the natural world, it now receives marginal attention within modern universities.

In this volume, the Centre for Bible, Ethics and Theology (CBET) has addressed this issue head-on, and collected a number of essays from experts in various disciplines, each discussing the importance of the Bible to their field. It neither attempts to be comprehensive in terms of the breadth of academic disciplines, nor exhaustive even

within the areas it does touch upon. It does however, point beyond the critical aspect of the study of the Bible for current academic disciplines to the nature of reading, communities, and texts themselves. It poses the counter question, 'If we neither understand how people engage with texts, nor the role of texts in building a community's identity, can we truly understand the significance of any document for our current culture?'

C. L. Crouch pens the first essay, focused on the Hebrew Bible. She raises the question of the relevance of such an ancient and diverse set of texts to the modern reader. Her answer: its distance and diversity make it an invaluable tool for understanding ourselves. The gap between the times of the biblical authors and our own allows us a fresh vantage point to look at our own

BEHALF OF BIBLE SOCIETY

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practices and prejudices. Its multiple voices allow us to hear more than one side of often very complicated human issues, and to develop a sense of perspective, much as having two eyes viewing the same object gives depth. This depth effectively forces us out of our comfort zones, where we tend to oversimplify the world and our categories of what truth is.

Roland Deines writes about the ongoing relevance of the New Testament, specifically the Gospels. He speaks not only of their pervasive influence throughout the cultures of the world, but also of the unique messages found within them. For example, the Bible contains insights into how forgiveness works and what it can affect, which may not be readily visible to the biblically illiterate. Conversely, the Bible has much to say about the divine, and questions related to it, which people of all nationalities have pondered for millennia.

Richard H. Bell looks at the Pauline corpus and finds in it both a reflection upon the Old Testament 'condemning' word from God and the gospel's 'life-giving word'. Though he sees Paul's use of the Old Testament as a 'highly selective' one which transforms the meaning of the former, he



Dr. Brian Howell, former Dean of Studies and Research for Bible Society.

claims just such a 'critical,' though not 'destructive,' study of the Bible is necessary to understand the 'good news' of God. In examining this use of one ancient text by another, we come to see value in its different senses of meaning. Thus, this 'gospel' becomes one that pronounces humans 'not guilty' by virtue of their faith and participa-

tion in the historical and mythical event of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

Antony C. Thistleton looks at the various approaches to interpretation of biblical texts, initially outlining the various contributions of hermeneutics to the issue of the Bible's importance. He describes the varying approaches of traditional historical-critical analysis of the Bible, which began with an approach that opposed theology and history, but has since evolved into approaches that demonstrate the compatibility—even advantage—of the coexistence of faith and scholarship. This insight alone is helpful for those looking into the Abrahamic faiths that dominate the belief systems of most of the world. Secondly, Thistleton examines the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin and John Searle. In the performative utterances that God makes in the Scriptures, such as promises, we find actions that seek 'to make the world match the words.' Thus, one continuing value in Scripture lies in the very acts it performs, just by being what it is. Understanding these trajectories and divine actions directly impinges on our current understanding of the world and ourselves.

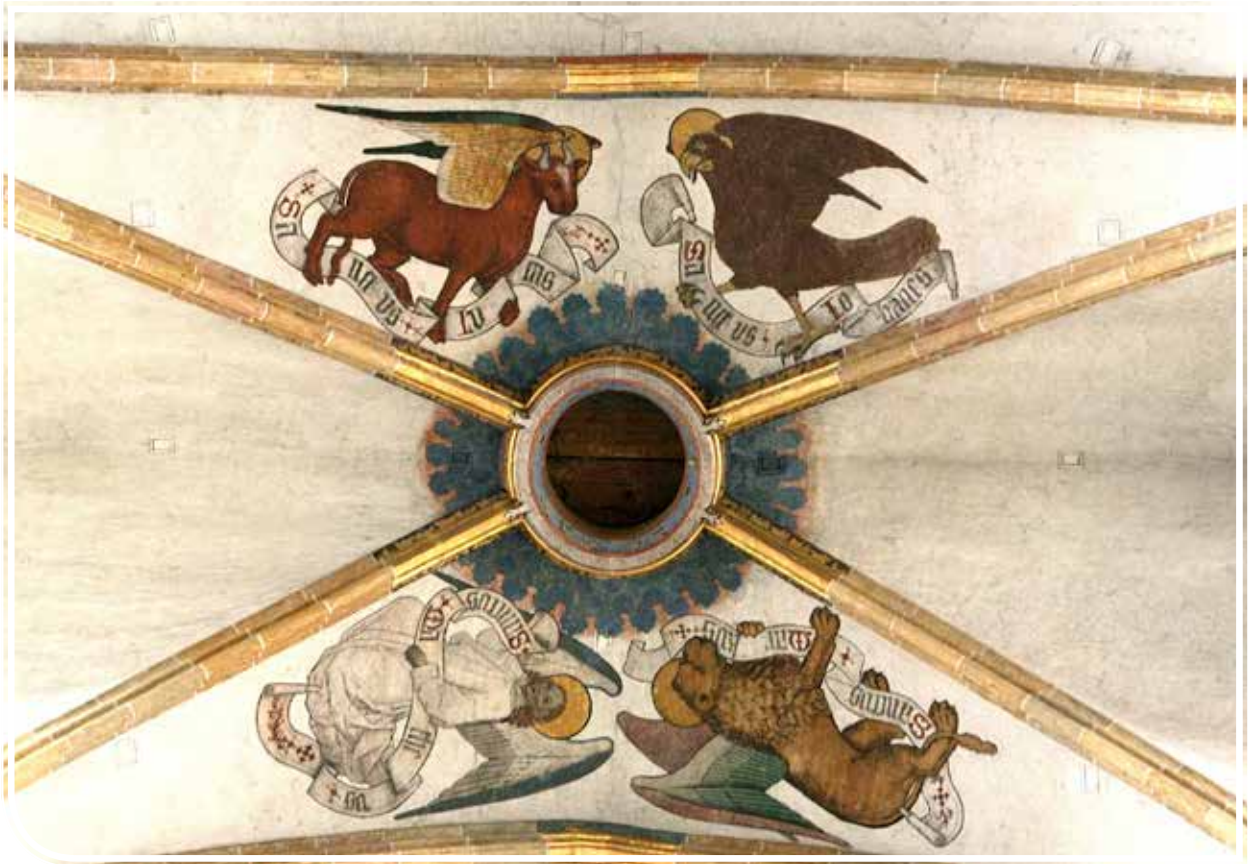
Mary B. Cunningham writes of the value of the Bible for the Orthodox tradition of Christianity. Her discussion ranges across the nature of the canon of Scripture, the Greek texts, and the extra-biblical texts which also influenced the early church. She then turns to the complex nature of Biblical interpretation, with its many senses, the role of a context of faith for its reading, and its many paradoxes. Finally she points out the value of the Scriptures for living life. Though a monastic life may not be required, there is much to be gleaned from it. It is this treasure, which the Orthodox tradition preserves by incorporating the study of a group of texts—including the Fathers and church teachings—into its communal

faith, which allows it to offer access the Bible's deeper meanings.

Thomas O'Loughlin writes about the act of reading. Coming from a culture so different from ours, a book such as the Bible is all too often evaluated according to practices which were not germane to its writing or used in the centuries within which it was written and collected, not to mention the majority of its history of usage. He reemphasises the idea of a book as a shared story for a community—the glue that not only holds it together, but allows it to face the future.

Philip Goodchild examines the relevance of the Bible to ethics. Though the Bible is often naturally connected to this arena, Goodchild observes that this is not done in the sort of straightforward manner we might expect. He highlights the nature of how we measure life: whether in terms of goods and actions that can be measured, or in 'religious goods' which are only ours when given away, such as time, attention, love, and devotion. The Bible speaks to both, but with an eye fixed on the latter. In a world increasingly measured and ruled by the material, the Bible is crucially instructive in the economy of lasting value and values.

Systematic theology is addressed by **Simon Oliver**. Though the famous Swiss theologian, Karl Barth divided the divine Word into the incarnate, revealed, and proclaimed word, Oliver points to another aspect of the Bible's relevance. It is as a spoken word that the Bible as God's word interacts with human creativity. This means that the context, tone, and experience of the communication is as important as the words that are employed. Thus, for the reader, it is only when the particular setting, audience, and circumstance of a text are reconstructed that it carries its full weight and message. This echoes strongly O'Loughlin's comments about the nature of reading in ancient socie-



The four evangelists, depicted as an angel (Matthew), a lion (Mark), a winged ox (Luke), and an eagle (John).

ty, but also illuminates some weaknesses in how we understand texts and quotes even in the modern era.

Considering Islam's relation to the Bible, *Jon Hoover* helpfully outlines the broad history of Muslims with the Bible, touching on its similarity to the Qur'an, early Muslim interpretive literature based on the Bible, and subsequent reactions to it. He finds two contemporary Muslim approaches to the Bible—that of undermining it, and that of finding fulfilment of Mohammed's prophecies within it. Though Islam's relationship to the Bible has often been ambivalent, it has provoked a substantial response within Muslim scholarship and, hence, the questions to which it responds, making it indispensable to understanding the history and issues with which Islam is concerned.

Holger M. Zellentin looks at the common figure of Abraham as an example of one who both unites and divides the three major monotheistic religions. He observes that although particular understandings of this figure can be divisive, there is an underlying interpretive framework within each tradition. What defines these various traditions is their disagreement about Scripture—especially that which they have in common. In other words, to better understand a particular faith, it is instructive not only to understand which stories it finds important to retain, but also to examine the competing interpretations of these narratives. The differences tell us what it defines itself against, thus signalling what it upholds as significant.

Alison Milbank recounts but a few of the many instances in which English literature

depends on a knowledge of the Bible, from Marlowe's *The Tragic History of Doctor Faustus* to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, much of the irony and many of the underlying themes treated depend upon a general biblical literacy. But, as Milbank aptly observes, the Bible is key not only to the literature, but to the language itself. Whether in turns of phrase such as 'skin of my teeth,' or 'broken heart,' or the tone and rhythm of the language influenced by the King James Version of 1611, the Bible is key to understanding the world's current *lingua franca*.

Finally, **Peter Watts** considers the importance of the Bible to music. He first observes the integral nature of music to the biblical text, as well as its role in the Bible's dissemination and retention. Further, the Bible has provided musical artists a common repertoire of images, stories and contexts. From classical music to musicals, pop-rock to metal, the Bible remains a common well from which composers continue to draw.

It is this utilisation of a common literature that has been preserved as expressing the height and depth of human emotion, which allows songwriters to both identify, and quickly reference complex ideas, and thus have a hope of conveying further insight in such an economical verbal medium.

Whilst one could adduce arguments why the Bible is significant for a particular discipline, this collection of essays goes a step beyond to demonstrate some of the practical effects study of the Bible can have for each field. Though Bible Society holds no editorial sway with respect to the position of any of these particular essays, we are keen to promote such engagement with the Bible from the highest levels of academic research, to those just entering the field, and everyone in the society informed by them. For that reason, Bible Society is proud to support CBET at the University of Nottingham, in general, and specifically with this publication, 'Why does the Bible Matter?'



The New York Public Library Gutenberg Bible: one of 49 remaining copies existing of the first printed Bible.

Foreword

The impact of the Bible on contemporary life can hardly be overstated. This is not an obvious claim, given the decline in biblical literacy witnessed in recent generations. And yet the underlying assumption of this collection of articles is that it remains true. The University of Nottingham's Centre for Bible, Ethics and Theology (CBET) seeks to recognise this and to promote the idea that the Bible, as a first principle, should provide the backbone of contemporary theological discussions of belief and practice. The insightful contributions of our colleagues contained in these pages contribute to this aim by offering a robust, wise engagement with the Bible from a wide variety of perspectives. The essays encourage an informed grappling with this formative text, inviting readers to look again at the Bible and encounter its joys and challenges. In the same way that the Bible itself has shaped imaginations down the generations, we hope this publication will contribute in some small way to the task of re-presenting the Bible as part of our shared cultural heritage.

We are deeply grateful for Bible Society's generous support for this project, coming, as it does, at a time of ongoing economic pressure—especially on the humanities as academic disciplines. Nearly all of them owe a great deal to the Bible: think of Michaelangelo's *Last Judgment*, Handel's *Messiah*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The collection of seemingly disparate ancient texts brought together in the biblical canon has wielded so potent a force over our shared past that its ongoing influence cannot be dismissed. Even today, when its validity, authority, and normativity

are regularly challenged by competing narratives, the Bible remains a creative, imagination-shaping force with far-reaching influence: the 'natural' cadences of the English language themselves derive from the efforts of biblical translators; the deep well of human experience deposited in these texts is a source of insight and strength for both faith communities and floppy-haired song-smiths. Similarly, the ethical imagination of the West has biblical roots. This volume makes some of the treasure of the biblical tradition available across the religious-secular divide, responding to its challenges

whilst drawing on the deep reservoir of the Bible.

Various of the essays in this volume tell tales of decline: the disappearance of biblical literacy; understandings of Scripture impoverished by peculiarly modern reading practices; a lack of attention to the Bible as foundational in our cultural heritage. The Bible, it seems, has gone out of style. Rather than merely lamenting this phenomenon, we hope this publication—in which cutting-edge scholarship meets attractive design—can help reinvigorate the conversation.

C.L. Crouch, Roland Deines,
and Mark Wreford

Why Does The Heb

Why does the Bible matter? This is a collection of texts at least two millennia old—why do we continue to talk about, turn to, and study such ancient words? Why, indeed, does the *Hebrew Bible* matter? This is a diverse assortment of narratives, poems, laws and prophetic proclamations which are three hundred, five hundred, or even a thousand years older than the New Testament. Perhaps the most straightforward answer to such questions is that, despite their antiquity, these texts continue to serve as the sacred texts for two of the world's major religions—Judaism and Christianity—and as an interlocutor for yet a third—Islam. As such, they have served as the theological, ethical and social bedrock of half of civilisation. As the importance and relevance of the Bible for these mighty religious traditions is addressed in other essays in this collection, however, what follows is aimed at something more fundamental: what is it about these texts that makes them matter to anyone at all—of any faith or none?

The answer, I would suggest, is in that little adjective I mentioned earlier: diverse. Far from being some homogenous, highly repetitive mass, the Hebrew Bible contains a startling diversity of material. Its texts contain profound differences in their theologies, deep disputes in their ethical thought and argumentation, and disagreements in their conceptions of the world and its workings which are so fundamental as to be potentially irreconcilable. The notion that 'The Bible says' any single thing

on any particular subject is rapidly disabused after a just few minutes in the Bible's pages.

Sexual ethics provide a telling example. The Bible, as everyone knows, does not like sex. For those who are married it may be just about tolerable—one is obliged to be fruitful and multiply, after all—but even then it is a bit shameful and otherwise completely forbidden. Except: that is not what the Bible says at all.

If we start with the legal material, it might first seem like this stereotype of what

the Bible says is not too far off. For example, the laws in Deuteronomy 22:22-29 about the various circumstances in which a young woman might engage in sexual relations prior to marriage seem to imply that for a woman to voluntarily engage in sexual activities prior to marriage was punishable by death (albeit rather crudely, the laws do seem to be making an attempt to exempt a victim of rape from further, punitive consequences). Likewise, the immediately preceding law in Deuteronomy 22:13-21—in

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which the young woman who had been passed off as a virgin to her betrothed (when, in fact, she was not) is stoned to death outside her father's house—would seem to suggest that for a woman to enter into a marriage with prior sexual experience was a capital crime.

Even here, however, the permutations of these laws and the details they offer about the particular circumstances they envision give the modern reader a provocative set of tools to begin to think about sexual ethics—both in the ancient world and in the modern one. The clear concern in these laws is the reputation of the young woman, because her reputation serves as a proxy for the reputation of her father or husband. This is evident in the location of the stoning outside the father's house in Deuteronomy 22:21, as well as in the especially severe consequences for the wom-

an caught in extra-marital sexual activities in Deuteronomy 22:22-24. (Notice how the consequences for the unmarried woman in Deut. 22:28-29 are less severe: her honour, and by extension her father's honour, may be restored by the 'proper' engagement of the guilty parties.) All this may at first glance seem utterly alien, even abhorrent, to a reader in twenty-first century Britain. A similar logic persists, however, in many of our own expectations about young women's behaviour in the twenty-first century. It may be seen in traditions such as the father giving away the bride at a wedding (preceded by conversations and insinuations, however jokingly phrased, about a young man's intentions vis-à-vis the young woman in question), in the often unspoken but nonetheless extant double standard of sexual behaviour for young men and sexual behaviour for

MEET THE AUTHOR



Dr. Crouch is Associate Professor in Hebrew Bible at the University of Nottingham, where she teaches on biblical ethics, prophecy and Israelite history. She has written on the ethics of warfare, on biblical creation narratives, on the book of Deuteronomy and on Israelite ethnic identity.

young women—the former may boast of notches on the bedpost, whilst the latter tend to play down the extent of their experience—and in the public shaming

of young women whose behaviour is perceived as too provocative or too sexual. If we recoil from the idea that access to a young woman's body ought to be controlled by her father, why do we have such difficulty with the idea that a young woman might freely decide about that access for herself? The perceived extremity and apparent alienness of the biblical material, in other words, can function as a way of highlighting and facilitating discussion about our own cultural assumptions.

And, in fact, it does not take much further investigation in the biblical texts to realise that the authors (and perhaps the audiences) of these texts were well able to recognise the complexity of actual sexual practice. The book of Ruth tells the story of a young woman—a young foreign woman, no less—who challenges the expectations of female sexual passivity by actively pursuing a sexual relationship with the older Boaz. ('Feet', it may be helpful to explain, are not just the things that a person walks on, but a Hebrew euphemism for genitalia.) Ruth's audacious actions take place with the support of, or even at the instigation of, her mother-in-law Naomi.

Elsewhere, Abigail deliberately abandons her husband to ally herself with David (1 Sam. 25). Bathsheba, though her refusal of David's summons may have been politically and socially difficult (if not impossible), is never said to have cried out (2 Sam. 11). Given that the pair are undoubtedly in the city, a strict application of the Deuteronomy legislation would prescribe not only David's death but also her own. Yet—though David is explicitly punished, even if not by death—no condemnation of Bathsheba passes the narrator's pen.

In Genesis 38, Tamar goes so far as to solicit Judah's custom on the side of the road in order to get herself pregnant—directly contravening the expectation that she wait for Judah to allocate her body to his next surviving son (which, notably, he has failed to do).

In each of these narrative texts the biblical authors incorporate sexual behaviour into their accounts in a way which recognises that the reality of human sexuality is complicated and messy. Whether the concern is to prod an older and unconfident man towards sexual and marital union, the real difficulty of sexual refusal in the face of power, or the

use of sex by those without power to achieve their necessary ends, the biblical narratives recognise and respond to the complex issues involved in discerning what constitutes moral sexual behaviour.

Even less frequently remembered among the biblical depictions of sexuality is the witness of Song of Songs, a collection of poetry variously interpreted as the words of human lovers and as an expression of the love between God and Israel or God and the church. Either way, the text speaks to the intensity and power of sexual desire as a fundamental aspect of human experience—either by creating the space for the positive expression of sexual intimacy between two human beings within a collection of sacred texts, or by appropriating sexual desire and longing as a metaphor for the intensity of the desire between God and humanity.

Another well-known example of biblical diversity concerns the differences between the creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3. There are seven days of orderly structure in Genesis 1, culminating with the creation of human beings, all performed by fiat by a God whose authority over the universe



CBET Photo Competition 2015 winning entry by Cat Quine: "This image plays with the concept of archaeological strata: it toys with the idea that the Hebrew Bible is often hidden by all the other things scholars have to deal with."

forms the resounding theme of the chapter. Compare this to the intimate story of Genesis 2-3, in which an anthropomorphic God wanders in a garden with Adam and creates for him a companion called Eve, and which is at pains to explain the whys and wherefores of some of humanity's more peculiar habits—clothing, marriage, childbirth and so on. Beyond Genesis the biblical understanding of the universe's creation becomes even more diverse, with many texts remembering a story of God's creation of the universe as a result of his powerful victory over the forces of chaos (for example, Pss. 18 and 89 and Job 38-41). The stories of creation which these texts tell reflect very different ideas of how and why the world looks and works the way it does. They highlight quite different as-

pects of that creation, as they instruct their readers and hearers how they ought to live in and relate to it.

Why have the biblical texts preserved for us three such different accounts of creation? Despite the determined efforts of several generations of interpreters, they are hardly mutually compatible in any literal sense: the divine conflict against chaos which is evident in the Psalms is adamantly rejected by the magisterial portrayal of absolute divine power in Genesis 1, while the order and nature of the creation of the male and female human beings in Genesis 1 are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the account in Genesis 2-3. The differences are quite apparent. Why, then, does the canon preserve them all—rather than arbitrating



There is something perfectly exquisite about the impossibilities contained in the Hebrew Bible: that two—or three, or more—texts cannot all at once be ‘true’—and yet they are, nevertheless.

amongst them to decide which one was ‘right’, and eliminate the rest?

Perhaps these diverse depictions of the origins of the universe were allowed to stand, one alongside the other, because the compilers of these texts—and the later arbiters of the canon as a whole—recognised that we gain more from the richness of their variety than we might have won from the simplicity and coherence of a single account. Thus the two accounts of the creation of humanity each, in different ways, emphasise the intimacy of the relationship between these new creatures and their creator, but their differing ways of talking about this intimacy emphasise and illuminate this concept in suggestive ways. In the creation story of Genesis 1, the author uses the language of God making humanity in his own image (Gen. 1:26-27) to present the relationship between God and this new creation as the intimate relationship of a parent to its new child. At the same

time as this language emphasises the intimacy of humanity’s relationship to God, it articulates the nature of humankind as something which is nearly—if not quite—divine, elevating humankind towards the divine and its fullest potential.

The story in Genesis 2, on the other hand, creates the intimacy between God and humanity by approaching their relationship from the opposite direction: rather than drawing humanity up towards God, the text emphasises God’s willingness to come down to the human level, describing God as keeping the humans company in the garden and coming to visit and look after them there. Both of these texts speak to the importance of the divine relationship with humankind—one lifting humanity towards God, one bringing God down to earth—and, in their *logical* incoherence, offer greater *theological* and *anthropological* insight than either could provide individually.

Perhaps also the authors, editors and communities which developed and bequeathed these texts to each successive generation recognised that too much agreement, too much consensus, is rarely a good thing. There is a wonderful line in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* about believing as many as six impossible things before breakfast, which—from an admittedly unexpected direction—suggests the potential and power of impossibilities. There is something perfectly exquisite about the impossibilities contained in the Hebrew Bible: that two—or three, or more—texts cannot all at once be ‘true’—and yet they are, nevertheless. The diversity of these texts, in other words, forces us out of the monotony of the mundane, towards an acknowledgement and an appreciation—if never a full grasp—of the complexity of our realities. By reminding us constantly of the existence—even necessity—of multiple perspectives, they resist our temptation to provide simple answers.

The image I’d like to suggest for what we have in the Hebrew Bible is something akin to a community—a community of texts which, like any com-

munity, comprises a diverse assortment of members. Just like a church, a synagogue, or an academic department, these texts have disagreements and arguments—sometimes quite virulent ones, reflective of the importance that the issues they address had for their authors. The biblical texts represent a diversity of ancient opinions on what it means to be human, on what it means to be a human being in relation with the divine, and on the appropriate manifestations of these in ordinary (and extraordinary) human lives. In their diversity, these texts preserve a dialectic—a dialogue, a conversation—about some of the most profound questions human beings face. Despite all their disagreements, this diverse collection of texts has also managed to co-exist. In this they provide a welcome model for our own lives. Indeed, the mere fact that the canonical collection(s) of Scripture preserve this dialectic demands the attention of those interested in the ongoing relevance of these texts. It suggests that the forces behind this agglomeration of texts were less interested in the production and dictation of absolute moral norms than they were in the process of trying to discern them: that they were more interested in the lived experience of human beings, trying to work out what it means to live in a world created by God, than in pre-empting that process by fiat. Like a community, the advantages which come of having a diverse assemblage of perspectives and opinions outweighs the sometime difficulties of the disagreements and uncertainties.

It also suggests that these texts recognize the contingent nature of their interim conclusions, and preserve them not as the final word on the subjects they pursue so much as a witness and an invitation to the process in which they are deeply engaged and to which they are deeply commit-

ted. To engage these texts in the context of modern lives, then, is to accept an invitation to join their conversation. Rather than declaring, '*This is what it means to be human,*' these texts invite their audience to ask a more complicated question: '*How do we acknowledge and engage with both the diversity of human experience and the diversity of interpretations of that experience?*'

It is the diversity of the biblical texts, and their attendant complexity, which is why these texts continue to matter. They reflect the diversity of the ancient world itself, but also the ability of our predecessors to allow and to create space for significant and meaningful differences of opinion. They challenge us, with our all too human preference for simplicity and order and consensus, to stretch our minds beyond their natural confines, and allow for—even encourage—an apparently impossible diversity.

Further Reading

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Why The Bible Mat

This is an important question, to which I would like to give a four-part answer. Firstly, I want unashamedly to make the point that the Bible matters because it is received by a significant portion of the global population as the word of God. In this perspective, it is a book of meetings between God and this world, whose central storyline of the creator God's self-disclosure to his creation continues to inform the lives of billions today. This leads to the second point: that the Bible matters because many people take it seriously as an important signpost on their life's journey. Though Christianity's vitality may appear to be waning in the West—in contrast to its vibrant rise in the Global South—its influence on everything, from politics to the arts, not to mention ethical thought, remains. Knowing nothing about the Bible means neglecting the most important foundational text in European culture. On the other hand, precisely because the Bible is so important to so many a short warning seems an appropriate third point: wrongly read, the Bible can be a dangerous incentive towards fanaticism, racism and bigotry. This is why it is vital that we continue publically, and as a community to read, understand, discuss and apply the biblical message. Finally, I want to take a short example from the Bible to demonstrate the irreplaceable relevance of its message to contemporary lives.

I - The Bible as Word of God

In the Christian tradition the Bible is seen as the word of God.¹ Although many human authors contributed to the core 66 books, the 'real' author of the Bible is God. Some form of revelation—initiated by God—stands at the beginning of a process which ultimately produces Scripture and 'Bible'. The prototypes of our biblical books were written in response to this experience—either personal or collective—and in order to preserve what the writers valued as a divine disclosure. Something extraordinary, something inspirational,

provoked the biblical authors to speak and write in such a way that their words were preserved, transmitted, edited and read again and again. The manifold religious experiences that shaped Israel, and later the church, as God's people are reflected in the different literary modes and genres used to preserve deposits of God's revelation: historical narratives recount Israel's historical experience of God's election, guidance, judgment, and restoration in descriptive terms; the Torah, prophetic, and wisdom literature are dominated by prescriptive material. This range of material relates different modes of divine disclosure—a hierarchy from the ultimately

ters: A Gospel View

Roland Deines

foundational and binding (the Torah as revealed on Mount Sinai) to personal counsels inspired by nature's revelation of God's wisdom (Prov. 8:22-36). Further, the responsive genres (psalms, prayers, laments, liturgies) enable human encounter with the divine, which can lead to new understandings and, as a result, to new writings. Although the historical process which turns an experience of God's revelation into its written deposit in the Bible is a complicated, partly inaccessible story, what really matters here is the outcome: in the end these writings, that can be found in any Bible, are accepted by all Christians as the word of God. Debates about biblical authority have accompanied the history of Christianity from its beginnings, but even these debates demonstrate that, while the implications of this conviction may vary in detail, the Bi-

ble is the 'first principle' for Christianity.

II - The Bible as First Principle

As a truly global movement, Christianity has seen its centre shift to where growth and demand is at its highest—in the South. In 158 countries and territories, about two-thirds of all the countries and territories in the world, Christians form the majority of the population. Even in England and Wales, where Christianity is in decline, it remains the largest religion: nearly 60 per cent identified as Christian on the 2011 census. Unfortunately, for many of them biblical literacy is no longer an integral part of their Christian life. This means it is necessary to re-lay biblical foundations, as a Christian life cannot exist without them. The dividing of history into 'before

MEET THE AUTHOR



Born and raised in Germany, Prof. Roland Deines came to Nottingham in 2006. He is an expert in Jesus and Gospel studies with a profound interest in Matthew's Gospel. His other teaching and research interests include the Letter of James, the Jewish context of the New Testament and the process by which texts received the status of (Holy) Scripture. Theologically, the question that matters most for him is how God's active role in history can be accessed in a historically responsible way.

Christ' and 'after the birth of Christ' is a daily reminder of the importance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection—the pinnacle of the biblical master narrative. This same Jesus—the one who sustains 'all things by his powerful word' (Heb. 1:3)—persists as an important reference point for the majority of people in this country, as for a third of the world's population. For them, the Bible serves as a foundational source text, functioning as a first principle and reference point for ethical judgments, both individual and societal.

Obviously, not all who consult biblical teaching act in accordance with it, nor do all necessarily agree with its ethics; they should not feel obliged to. In fact, Christian self-identity, while (hopefully) inspired by biblical ethics, does not follow the Bible to the letter: 'The letter kills, but

a book; rather, Scripture wants to be a dialogue partner, worthy of consultation in every generation anew. It is a living word, for the living.

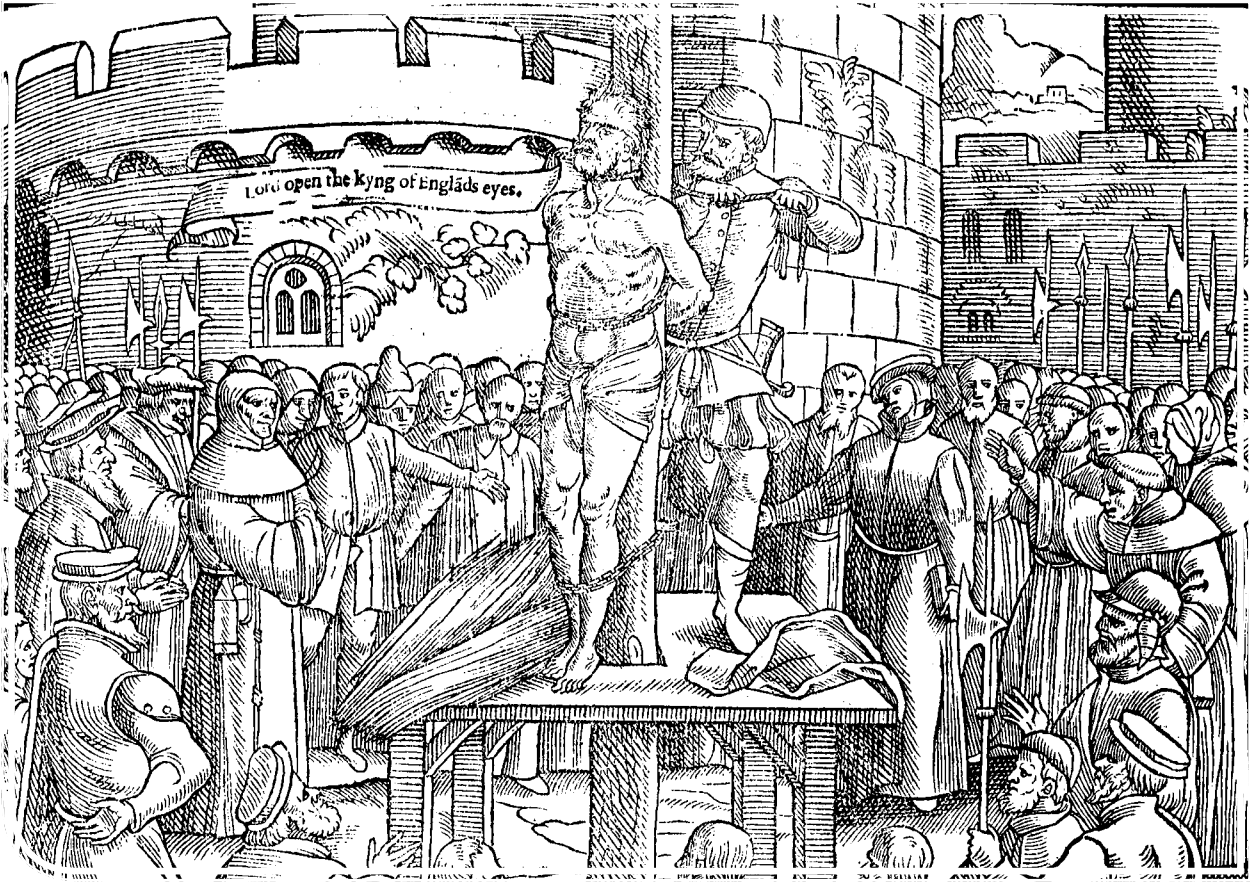
The Bible's influence on ethical decisions and our understanding of a 'good life' might not always be obvious. It has come to feel—or, perhaps, not feel—similar to the foundation of a building; everyone knows it is there, but it only requires attention when it starts to tumble. The worth of both is most acutely felt when they are in danger. When society faces fundamental and controversial questions about how we should act as a community, take responsibility and behave ethically—how to 'do the right thing'—people often attend more to 'what the Bible says' than to other voices, whether ancient and modern—Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes or, for that matter, Richard Dawkins or any of our many politicians. In short, the content and teaching of the Bible still matter.

As a central part of the Bible's content, Jesus' teaching is vital for many Christians. But it is perhaps not too surprising that non-Christians, even opponents of belief, draw on his teaching as well. People who would not necessarily identify themselves as Christians use Jesus as an example in a given situation or quote biblical teaching as inspiring: even out of context biblical wisdom is often eye-opening, thought provoking and loaded with insights about human traits.² The Bible's iconic status is also used by 'publicitoholics' seeking headlines who publicly express disdain for Jesus or the Bible to achieve it: the nastier the comment, the bolder the print.³ Such statements rarely reveal a deep grasp of what is being dismissed—as is, sadly, often the case even when well-meaning believers use a simplistic representation of biblical teaching to support a political agenda.⁴ It seems many people never realise that the



Biblical ethics cannot be sealed in a book; rather, Scripture wants to be a dialogue partner, worthy of consultation in every generation anew.

the Spirit gives life' (2 Cor. 3:6). In this, Paul's attitude follows Jesus' example of how to fulfil God's will: Jesus was faithful to the way Israel, as God's people, had experienced God through their history. He was faithful and true to Israel's Scriptures. And because he was faithful and true he was also free to say, 'You have heard what was said to those of previous times... but I say to you' (Matt. 5:21ff.). He was free to say that the law and the prophets were in effect until John the Baptist came, but since then—that is, with his own coming—'the Kingdom of God is proclaimed' (Luke 16:16). Biblical ethics cannot be sealed in



William Tyndale—depicted here in a woodcut from Foxe's Book of Martyrs (1563)—was burned at the stake for translating the Bible so that people could read it in their native language.

Bible is the most examined piece of literature in the world: every aspect of it has been treated and studied with the most sophisticated methodologies available at any given time. Let's not forget, the study of the Bible was at no time in history confined to 'the church'. The Bible was read by philosophers and philologists, historians and clergy, Jews and Muslims, Marxists and atheists and many more from all walks of life. For two millennia the Bible has provided a starting point for media attention, controversy and that most valuable of currencies, publicity. What other book stirs up such heated discussion? This is because any statement about the Bible is a claim—at least indirectly—about God.

For the atheist mainstream any ethical framework shaped by religion is to be regarded as no longer in line with contem-

porary knowledge and scientific thought; repressive and prone to abuse; fundamentalist, totalitarian, patriarchal, and [insert your own negative adjective here]. Despite such denigrating attitudes towards biblically inspired thinking, the vehement reaction just demonstrates the one point that needs to be made: Jesus still matters; his teaching still matters; his ethical ideas still matter. The fact that Christianity is seen as so active and effective that it must be censored by certain regimes is further testimony to its profound impact on individual lives and societies.

III - The Bible as Dangerous Reading

The history of the Bible reveals an im-

mensely powerful and therefore potentially dangerous book. It is little wonder that even churches have sought at times to dissuade believers from reading the Bible on their own.⁵ The Bible is dangerous because



There are indeed dangerous statements in the Bible—if taken out of context, un-historically and uncritically.

it empowers: it allows people to form their own understanding of what is right and wrong, justice and authority, and to speak truth to power—something power brokers are rarely keen on.

Stories of rulers suppressing the ‘word of God’ can already be found in the Bible. In Jeremiah 36, the prophet instructs Baruch to write his words on a scroll, then sends it to the king of Judah in the hope that he might listen and avert divine judgement. The king was not convinced. Instead, he cut portions from the scroll as they were read and threw them into the fire. After that he ordered the arrest of Jeremiah and his scribe but they could not be found (Jer. 35:26). In the New Testament, two of Jesus’ followers were arrested for preaching in his name after his death and resurrection. They were ordered ‘not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus’, to which they replied: ‘Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard’ (Acts 4:18-20). A little later, Peter as spokesperson for all the apostles said: ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority’ (Acts 5:29). This is very bold: a fisherman defying the civic and religious authorities, backed only by his conviction he knew God’s will.

As much as Peter is to be admired, though, his stance has dangers if applied large-scale. Uncritical and literal belief in ‘Holy Scriptures,’ or what is perceived as a divine order, can lead to terrible atrocities. In the Bible, the prescription of genocide (Deut. 20:16-18) stands alongside the description of brutal punishment for minor misdemeanours (Num. 15:32-36); even Jesus can be described as riding a white horse over a battlefield, killing with a sword coming out of his mouth (Rev. 19:11-21). Admittedly, this last depiction comes from the book of Revelation, which contains a lot of figurative expressions, which informed readers understand for what they are. But in a less figurative saying, Jesus makes shockingly brutal remarks: It would be better for those who destroy the trust of children to have a large millstone fastened around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matt. 18:5-7). It is a disturbing saying—but reading about child abuse by clergy one wishes that these professional representatives of the Bible had taken it more seriously! There are indeed dangerous statements in the Bible—if taken out of context, un-historically and uncritically. This is why academic study of the Bible, in an open forum like the university, is necessary and helpful for Christians and for society.

Such academic study has to be both historical and critical. To be ‘historical’ it must take the human origin of the Bible seriously: its writing was less a miracle than the result of a historical process that can be studied in almost the same way as other historical developments. Even if one allows for something like divine revelation which demands an account that goes beyond the traditional empirical limits of historical method, it will have been accompanied by a recognisable impact that can be accessed with the tools of historical re-

search.⁶ Religious studies, which includes the study of texts like the Bible, works best when it brings together both the personally committed and those with greater distance. When Christians and non-Christians discuss the origins, development and content of this influential, enriching, dangerous book together, with mutual respect for each others' convictions, both afford each other the opportunity to see their respective blind spots. Demanding—as some do—that academic study of the Bible be conducted without any faith commitment would be like studying the psychology of car driving without ever allowing the researcher to drive a car. It is crucial to maintain a critical balance. In some disciplines personal experience can support understanding—but only if experience is framed by a careful methodology, rather than treating gut instinct or blind faith as a reliable guide to what should be believed true.

Because of this inherent danger in any belief system, the study of religions, religious texts, and other master narratives has to be done critically. Such an approach affirms that not everything is right, true, and significant forever just because it is written in a holy book: only a critical engagement can avoid the unfortunate consequences of fundamentalism and totalitarianism. However, this need not necessarily mean giving up faith altogether. On the contrary: it is precisely when one wants to maintain the position that the Bible matters as the word of God, that it is crucial to reflect on the limits of such a claim within a pluralistic society. The Bible itself offers insights, but does not force them on unwilling readers. Similarly, if biblical thinking is to inspire contemporary public discourse, it must address a pluralistic environment appropriately. But at the same time, militant 'new atheism' ought to adopt a sim-

ilarly critical approach: fundamentalism and radicalization are not the preserve of the religious.

When the Bible is approached in this way—carefully and in dialogue with the rich traditions of Christianity and biblical interpretation—its meaning is not lost but clarified. Despite its potential misuse, some of the most encouraging, helpful and comforting sayings originate in the Bible; many lives and our cultural heritage would be poorer without them. Where would we be without the claim that humans are created according to the image of God (Gen. 1:27)—along with its attendant claim that humans maintain a dignity that cannot be eradicated even by the worst of circumstances, however broken a life might be? The Ten Commandments—whatever one thinks of them—could at least prevent many tears. That we should love our neighbours, seek their good and prevent any harm coming to them is a message worth saving from oblivion.

The value of the Bible as a reservoir of cultural heritage and an interlocutor in

If people no longer know what Jesus (or the Bible) says, they can easily be manipulated with pseudo-biblical slogans.



ethical debates casts the current decline of biblical literacy in both the wider public and the church in an unhelpful—perhaps even dangerous—light. If people no longer know what Jesus (or the Bible) says, they can easily be manipulated with pseudo-biblical slogans. Stripped of context, these are often applied to support a contemporary socio-political agenda but side-lined when inconvenient to modern

sensibilities. (Mis-)Using Scripture in this way undermines biblical thinking rather than supporting it.

It is worth remembering that biblical teaching addresses the individual first: you must change your own heart before you set out to teach others. This approach easily punctures claims to the moral high ground, as we see in some of Jesus' famous sayings: thus, 'do not judge, so that you may not be judged' (Matt. 7:1-2), and 'in everything do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matt. 7:12), while when Jesus is asked what to do after a woman was caught in adultery he said, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8:7).

IV - "And Forgive Us Our Sins"

These short, sharp statements—seemingly designed to be tweetable—sit starkly at odds with the clamorous tone of much contemporary public discourse with its trite mantras which create moral pressure

without empowering individuals to live up to their demands. In this respect, perhaps the most important message of the Bible concerns sin and forgiveness. Despite its significance, it is frequently overlooked. Surely there is something more pressing—war and peace? Human rights? Social justice? Overcoming poverty? Gender and equality? Assisted death? A biblical contribution to such debates is occasionally sought and considered useful. But sin? Why sin above all else? Because sin is the one thing consistently omitted from these discourses, yet so often at the heart of them. Here a biblically grounded theological perspective can add to the debate by bringing a more realistic perspective on human nature. Unfortunately, people are often less than eager to see their flaws exposed: this is why most ethical debates about human rights, justice, welfare and human progress, in their present secularized form, are not open to a truly theological perspective. When religious representation is invited it is often because religion is regarded as part of the problem, rather than out of an interest to invite a



genuine theological perspective.

In the remainder of this article I want to focus on this necessary existential question of the individual, to demonstrate that the Bible has something important to contribute to matters that matter, albeit often on a subconscious level. I want to focus on the individual to avoid emphasising the more easily demonstrable social benefits of Christians engaging in education, caring for the poor, helping the elderly, tending the sick, fighting against intolerance and for a better society. These are rather apologetic and utilitarian ways to demonstrate the beneficial influence of Christianity and the Bible, more acceptable because they impact the more immediate concerns of a secular culture with little interest in talking about sin or other esoteric (religious) teachings which have no discernable (economic) value. But the Bible begins with the individual and has a vested interest in how they influence their family, tribe and people; the human heart must be healed before societal benefits can be reaped.⁷

The Christian message begins with a call to repent (Mark 1:4, 15; Matt. 3:2, 17).

The current trend in churches and society, however, goes in the other direction: change the circumstances and you will have better people. Despite daily evidence to the contrary, this is an appealing notion which might explain its persistent pull: if individual wrongs can be offloaded onto society they are no longer personal. This shirking of responsibility can already be found in the first few pages of the Bible. When God confronted the first man with his transgression, his instant response was to point to the woman and to throw the charge back at God himself: 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' The woman pointed to the snake: 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.' Ultimately the accusation returns to God, because he gave the commandment in the first place. However, this vicious cycle of accusing others and rejecting responsibility can be broken. In the biblical tradition God takes it upon himself to deal with sin and forgiveness. This is one of the key threads along which the Christian biblical narrative—from Paradise in Genesis to the New Jerusalem in



Revelation, by way of Golgotha—is strung. At its heart stands Jesus’ death for the sins of the world.

In contemporary discourse, though, Jesus’ ethical teaching regularly takes centre stage. Jesus as a teacher of love is as true as it is cliché. Therefore, it is worth looking at perhaps the best-known part of this teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. Found in Matthew 5–7, it is nearly a proverbial summary of what many believe Jesus says about right attitude and behaviour. As part of Matthew’s Gospel, it is the first of five major speeches by which the author structures his work and creates a thematic arc from the ‘mission statement’ of the kingdom of God (the Sermon on the Mount), through the spread of the message of the kingdom of God (the mission sermon in ch. 10), the description of its irresistible growth (the parables in ch. 13) and its result in a community of faith (the community sermon in ch. 18), to the final tribunal where rewards are handed out (the end time sermon in chs. 23–25).

Considering the Sermon on the Mount, the content can be summed up as an explanation of what the kingdom of God—the central content of Jesus’ message—is: a blessing, a challenge and a decision. The first and last beatitudes (Matt. 5:3, 11) promise entrance into the kingdom, which means the promises between the two (Matt. 5:4–10) should be seen as exemplifications of what the kingdom of God stands for as God’s blessing. Matthew 5:20 and 6:33 frame the challenges posed by the kingdom of God to those who want to belong to it. Chapter 7 then shows what it means to decide to be part of the kingdom. At the centre of this speech, though, is not a command but a prayer—the Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus taught the disciples and has united Christians around the world since the first century. At the heart of a predom-

inantly ethical discourse is a prayer; in a truly biblical perspective, the horizontal relationships within the human community depend on the vertical dimension of the God-human relationship.

This short prayer has a simple enough structure: an address (v. 9b), three pleas for God’s intentions to happen (vv. 9c–10: ‘hallowed be your name; your kingdom come; your will be done’) and three pleas addressing human needs (vv. 11–13: ‘Give us this day our daily bread; forgive us our debts; do not lead us into temptation’). In a sermon on this prayer,

The Bible doesn’t just address the ‘big questions’ of life and death, but is relevant to individual well-being.

I started with the question, ‘which of the six petitions is the most important one?’ Having dropped them one-by-one, I argued for the plea in v. 12: ‘And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven those who are indebted to us.’ This is the one part a person cannot achieve alone; if accused and guilty, a judge alone can acquit one from the charge or impose the rightful penalty to redeem the guilt.

This is also the only plea which recurs in Matthew; it is immediately taken up

again, with an explaining comment—‘If you forgive other humans their stumbles (trespasses, sins), your heavenly Father will also forgive you’ (Matt. 6:14-15)—and is also the basis of a later parable (Matt. 18:23-35).

Leaving aside the theological complexities raised by Jesus’ imposition of a condition on God’s forgiving grace, there is a universally meaningful ethical and psychological aspect to this plea. The situation presupposed is simple. Somebody has wronged me and therefore owes me something. Although Matthew’s language is financial, the context makes clear that it is metaphorical: it is about the resentments someone bears somebody else; wrongdoings remembered and neither forgiven nor resolved. (It may well still be good financial advice, however.) Jesus’ saying is about healing interpersonal relationships—a topic one can see throughout the Sermon on the Mount and, actually, throughout the Bible. The Bible doesn’t just address the ‘big questions’ of life and death, but is relevant to individual well-being. The plea for forgiveness, embedded in a promise to forgive others, illustrates this in a remarkable way. Reconciliation between the accuser and the accused is a vital precondition for approaching God (Matt. 5:21-26). But the emphasis is not only on the religious question, or of what I can do for my neighbour, as important as this is. Rather, it is even more strongly on what I can do for myself. Healing begins with oneself before it can affect others.

When we say ‘I bear a grudge against someone,’ we make two statements. Firstly, someone has burdened me with something which I now have to bear. The insult or injustice is like a heavy backpack strapped to my shoulders. As long as I bear a grudge against someone, I am loaded with the burden. It is me who feels

the weight of it. It is me who is bent beneath it. It is me who is worn out by dragging it along; my life which is spoiled by its nagging, draining presence. In German, the appropriate phrase is ‘Schuld nachtragen,’ which represents this metaphoric expression even more graphically. ‘Schuld’ translates as guilt, and ‘nachtragen’ as to carry or take something after somebody. But it is the wronged one who has to carry the load. Aside from any theological claim, the ethical admonition and psychological wisdom of Jesus’ saying is that as long as I am not willing or able to let go of my resentment against others—as long as I am unable to let loose what bears me down—no peace of mind is possible.

At first blush forgiveness may seem a very personal matter without many political corollaries, but it often has a deep impact. A well-known example is South Africa’s first black president, Nelson Mandela, who led his home country from apartheid to racial equality. Despite being imprisoned for 18 years, he forgave his captors and, through his example, was able to initiate a process for peace and reconciliation.⁸ The willingness to forgive is not only a theological necessity and a means to spiritual and emotional wellbeing but also affects the world around us. It can be practised by everyone; one need not be Christian.⁹ Unredeemed human relationships are a challenge that affects individuals and societies; biblically inspired thinking is able to contribute to their solutions. It would be a worthwhile endeavour to write a world history considering the impact of unforgiven guilt between individuals or lasting resentments between nations, to reveal how much ill results from unforgiving attitudes.¹⁰

For those who read it as God’s word and promise, the Bible matters on an even deep-

er level. Matthew's Gospel subtly builds to a climax in Jesus' words at the last supper with his disciples. Taking the cup, he proclaimed the wine in it his blood, 'poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26:28). By doing this he fulfilled the promise which was given to his father Joseph before his birth, that 'he will save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21). The message of the kingdom of God is laid out between these two thematic statements, indicating the importance of forgiveness for a biblically inspired theology.

God in Greek is *theos*. A rational discourse about something is called a *logos* in Greek. Together, these form *theologia*—a reasoned account of God in words or, as the standard Greek dictionary translates it, 'science of things divine'. Christian theology as a scholarly discipline is based on the conviction that God made himself accessible through revelation and that the deposit of this revelation can be found in the Bible. Reflection about divine matters is a core dimension of human existence from its very beginning—as are different forms of prayer and a belief in divine guidance. The presence of theology in the name of a university department or centre like the Centre for Bible, Ethics and Theology makes it possible to join this age-old tradition; it compels reflection about reality under the assumption that God exists.



1. Some church traditions include a number of other books as part of their Bibles. These additional books are labelled as 'apocryphal' or 'deuterocanonical' books to indicate that their status within the various church traditions is somehow different from the generally accepted 66 books.
2. George Orwell, for example, favourably compares the language of Ecclesiastes with modern academic writing (*Politics and the English Language and Other Essays* [Oxford: Oxford City Press, 2009], 13f.).
3. Luke Timothy Johnson introduces the danger of scandal-driven, media-oriented Jesus scholarship in very accessible and entertaining language in *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996). Maurice Casey, late Professor for New Testament Studies here in Nottingham, has also taken to task some of the recent pseudo-scholarly nonsense online, in *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
4. For a plea for a more informed usage of the Bible in politics, see Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (London: SPCK, 2010).
5. The death of William Tyndale for printing and distributing Bibles is the most prominent British example; see David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
6. My own attempt at this can be found in 'Revelatory Experiences as the Beginning of Scripture: Paul's Letters and the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible', in *From Author to Copyist: Essays on the Composition, Redaction, and Transmission of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of Zippi Talshir*, ed. Cana Werman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 303-35.
7. The biblical 'heart' designates the true inner self of a person, where decisions are made (and felt), between our deliberative and emotive faculties.



The traditional location where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with the Sea of Galilee in the background.

8. An internet search using "Nelson Mandela forgiveness" provides a plethora of quotes and appreciations for Mandela the "icon of reconciliation and forgiveness" as Channel 4 described him in their obituary for him.
9. Perhaps the best known example is Mohandas Ghandi, who repeatedly stressed how deeply the Sermon on the Mount influenced him in his non-violent fight for freedom. See Jeremy Holtom, 'Gandhi's Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 542-56.
10. The last decade has seen a growing interest in the topic of forgiveness not only in theology but also in contemporary philosophy and intellectual history. Much discussed are Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2010). For theological discussions see Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness: A Theology*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

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Why The Bible Mat

A Condemning and a Life-giving Word

‘Don’t go—don’t go!’ he implored. ‘This is my last time! I thought it would be less intrusive than to enter your house. And I shall never come again. Don’t be unmerciful. Sue, Sue! we are acting by the letter; and “the letter killeth”!’

Thus speaks Jude Fawley to Sue Bridehead, his former lover, in a key scene towards the end of Thomas Hardy’s last completed novel, *Jude the Obscure*.¹ Jude quotes from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: ‘the letter killeth’ (2 Cor. 3:6). It is a central text for the novel and, in fact, is quoted on the title page of the book.

I begin with this text within a text for two reasons. First, it illustrates how important a knowledge of Paul can be for understanding English literature; and one can extend this point to Paul’s importance in German, French, Italian, and Russian literature—and beyond.² Secondly, this text of Paul is, I believe, frequently misunderstood—and I have to include Hardy here. For when Paul writes ‘The letter killeth,’ I do not think he is criticizing legalistic Christianity or, as Hardy applies it, criticizing a ‘by-the-book adherence to [the] legal contract of “love”’. Rather the ‘letter’ refers to the ‘thing which is written’ (in Greek, *to gramma*) and, reading a little further in 2 Corinthians 3, it is clear that the thing which is written is what we now call the Ten Commandments, found in Exodus 20:2-17. It was that central part of the law given to Moses on Si-

nai. In the book of Exodus, not only did God speak these words to Moses but they were written by God himself on the two tablets of stone (Exod. 34:1; cf. Deut. 10:4).

So it is this letter, the Ten Commandments, ‘which killeth’. Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 3 that the issuing of these commandments was a ‘ministry of condemnation’ (2 Cor. 3:9). According to Paul’s reading of Exodus 34, this law given to Moses came with glory—a glory which was manifest in Moses’ face which shone (Exod. 34:29-30). But for Paul this glory, associated with the giving of the law, is a glory which kills.

This ‘killing’ function of the law is not explicitly mentioned in Exodus 20 or 34, though it is made clear that failure to keep the law will end in condemnation (e.g., Deut. 27:11-26). These Old Testament texts assume that it is possible to keep

ters: A Pauline View

Richard H. Bell

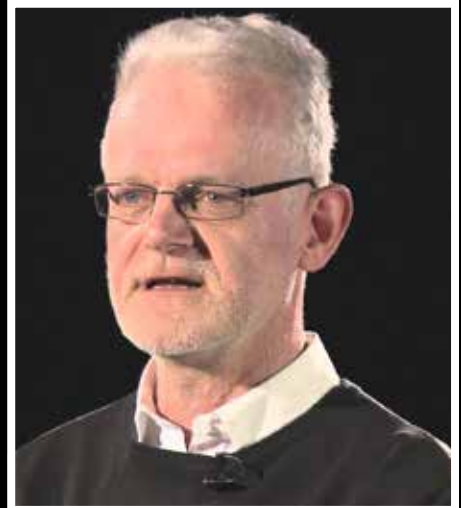
the law. Paul, however, had a somewhat different view: human beings are simply unable to keep the law. Paul had a pessimistic view of the human person, believing that human beings are under the power of sin (e.g. Rom. 3:9). They are 'in Adam' (a reference to the idea that Adam was the first sinner) and, since Adam came before Moses, when the law comes it will inevitably lead to condemnation. Hence for Paul the law can only kill and function as a 'ministry of condemnation'. But he emphasizes that the fault does not lie with the law; God's law is holy and came with glory. Rather the fault lies with the sinful human being.

The only Bible Paul knew was what Christians call the Old Testament. From his perspective, one reason this Bible mattered is because in it we find the law, God's condemning word. This is clearly a

negative reason for why the Bible matters. But for Paul it is an essential precursor to his good news. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ can only be understood against this dark backdrop of God's condemning word, which demonstrates that human beings are in need of redemption. So in Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul sets out this human problem and concludes that no one will be saved by doing good works: 'For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20).

If salvation cannot come through the law, how can one be redeemed? For Paul it was only possible through faith in Jesus Christ; this faith can only come about by hearing the gospel. In Rom. 1:16-17 he writes, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is

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the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek [that is the Gentile]. For in it [that is in the gospel] the righteous-

ness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written “The one who is righteous through faith shall live”. The gospel of which Paul writes is God’s life-giving word. Whereas the law condemns, the gospel gives life. And those who hear the gospel can become believers through the gospel. Just as on that first day of creation God created through his word when he declared ‘Let there be light’ (Gen. 1:3) so, as the gospel is preached, faith comes into being in

the hearers (cf. 2 Cor. 4:6). Faith in Christ is a ‘creation out of nothing’. Therefore the gospel is indeed the power of God for salvation.

Paul writes that in the gospel the ‘righteousness of God’ is revealed. As Luther and many others have rightly seen, this righteousness of God which is revealed is not a condemning word; Paul is not saying the ‘justice of God’ in condemning sinners is revealed. (This was something implied by the Latin Vulgate, which offers

here *iustitia dei*, ‘justice of God’.) The righteousness of which Paul writes is a saving righteousness. In fact, the word ‘righteousness’ could be even translated as ‘salvation’, provided one bears in mind that Paul is pointing to the forensic aspect of salvation. That is, he is using an image from a Jewish law-court (these were civil cases) where the judge would ‘justify’ (i.e., acquit) one party and condemn the other (see Deut. 25:1). In Paul’s use of the metaphor

Second year theologians at UoN learning to love their Greek New Testaments. The text for this class was Philippians 3:1-11, though most of the class was spent focussing on some key words.



the judge is God, who can either condemn the human being or justify him. So in the forensic aspect of salvation God acquits the sinner. He declares this sinner to be 'not guilty'.

It should be clear now that, in using the law court imagery, Paul is transforming the way the court functions in a fundamental way. In a human law court the judge hears the evidence and, if he is competent, analyses this evidence and makes what one can call an analytical verdict. But if God were to issue an analytical verdict, simply looking upon the moral quality of human lives, no one would be saved. But God's verdict to the sinner who believes in Christ is 'not guilty'—this is a 'creative verdict', in the sense that God declaring a person not guilty makes them not guilty. In the gospel a word comes forth which has the capacity to transform the human being; it is a creative word.

But what is the nature of this 'gospel'? Many, when they hear the word gospel, think immediately of the Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But the earliest texts in the New Testament which speak of the Christian gospel are Paul's letters (for example,

Rom. 1:1, 9, 16). Many have assumed that the gospel is to be equated with the apostolic preaching. I would rather take the line that the apostolic preaching *witnesses* to the gospel and that

readers being alarmed by my suggestion that the Scriptures or the apostolic preaching are 'imperfect channels'. (I hope my suggestion that the sermons we hear today are imper-

The remarkable thing about Paul's theology is the way he brings together Christ's sacrificial death and the reconciling word which conveys to us this act and enables them to cohere.

the gospel for Paul is something much more fundamental: it is to be equated with the 'word of God' in its life-giving form (as opposed to the 'law', which is God's word in its condemning form; see, for example, 1 Cor. 14:36; 2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; 1 Thess. 2:13). The gospel is to be understood as the word which issues from God's mouth. So the 'word of God,' the 'gospel', is God's own word, which issues from him and hence has the power to transform the human being. Apostolic preaching, the Scriptures, or any sermon we may hear today can witness to this fundamental word. (Some of it more successfully than others!) God's word comes via these imperfect channels.

This immediately raises the question as to the authority of Scripture; I can imagine a number of

perfect channels can be readily accepted!) Although God can speak through the Scriptures, these writings are the result of human work and are part of the created order. As Luther wrote in *On the Bondage of the Will*, 'God and the Scripture of God are two things, no less than the Creator and the creature are two things'.³ Very few Christians hold to the view that God 'dictated' the Scriptures, such a view being qu'ranic rather than conventionally biblical.⁴ Usually, Christians have viewed God's part in the writing of Scripture as 'inspiration', the classic text here being 2 Timothy⁵ 3:16: 'All Scripture is inspired by God'. The writer here is referring to the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. Paul in his letter to the Romans certainly believes that what

Christians call the Old Testament *witnesses* to the gospel, the ‘word of God’; in Romans 3:21 he writes that the ‘law and

Paul shows that, by means of his critical study of the Bible, he is able to disclose the truth of the gospel and the saving righteousness of God.

the prophets’ witness to the ‘righteousness of God’, by which he means that they witness to the salvation which is found in Jesus Christ.⁶ Also, in Romans 1:17 he quotes from the prophet Habbakuk 2:4: ‘The one who is righteous through faith shall live’.⁷ Paul’s letter to the Romans is in fact filled with quotations from, and allusions to, the Old Testament—highlighting the fact that, to understand Paul, you have to know the Old Testament!

Just as the Old Testament witnesses to this righteousness of God, and hence witnesses to the ‘gospel’, so does the New Testament. Usually someone comes to faith by encountering God’s word through the imperfect forms of Scripture, preaching, or perhaps a book or a musical setting of Christian sentiments. I say usually because there have been exceptional instances where people have come to faith by other means. One such instance is Paul himself, who came to faith by receiving the gospel directly from Jesus Christ (see 2 Cor. 4:6; Gal. 1:15-16). Paul also believed that Israel will come to Christian faith by receiving the gospel directly, from the coming Christ at his second coming.⁸

Reconciling Word and Reconciling Act

For the rest of this article I want to explore

the implications of Paul’s view of Scripture for twenty-first century Christians. I have mentioned the transformative nature of the gospel, the word of God. One person who realized the radical nature of this transforming word was Martin Luther. In his Galatians commentary he writes, ‘our theology is sure because he [God] brings us to rest outside ourselves’. Luther was reflecting the view of Paul that when God’s word comes to us we are taken out of ourselves. One way of looking at this is that, in encountering this word, we undergo an existential displacement. It is the exact opposite of Descartes’ famous ‘I think therefore I am’ (*cogito ergo sum*). My existence is not centred on the fact that I think; it is centred on the fact that something outside of me is thinking and acting on me (*cogitor ergo sum*). And in Luther’s understanding, this is precisely why ‘our theology is sure’.⁹

Luther’s ideas of existential displacement are profound, wide ranging and find their origin in Paul. And if Paul and Luther are right, it raises questions about the value of apologetics—which run according to a Cartesian paradigm. Nevertheless, apologetics does have its place—provided it is seen as clearing the way for what is the essential thing: the presentation of the gospel.

So far my discussion has centred on questions of the ‘word’: God’s condemning word in the law and his life-giving word in the gospel. But—you may well ask—what about the act of God in Jesus Christ? What about the cross of Christ? Are we not getting removed from the realm of history and that crucial death which atones for sins?

One of the striking things about Paul’s letters is that he does not dwell on the details of Jesus’ death—nor does he dwell on details of Jesus’ life, for that matter. In fact, there are few references in his letters to the life or teaching of Jesus. But the fact and significance of Christ’s death is clearly cen-



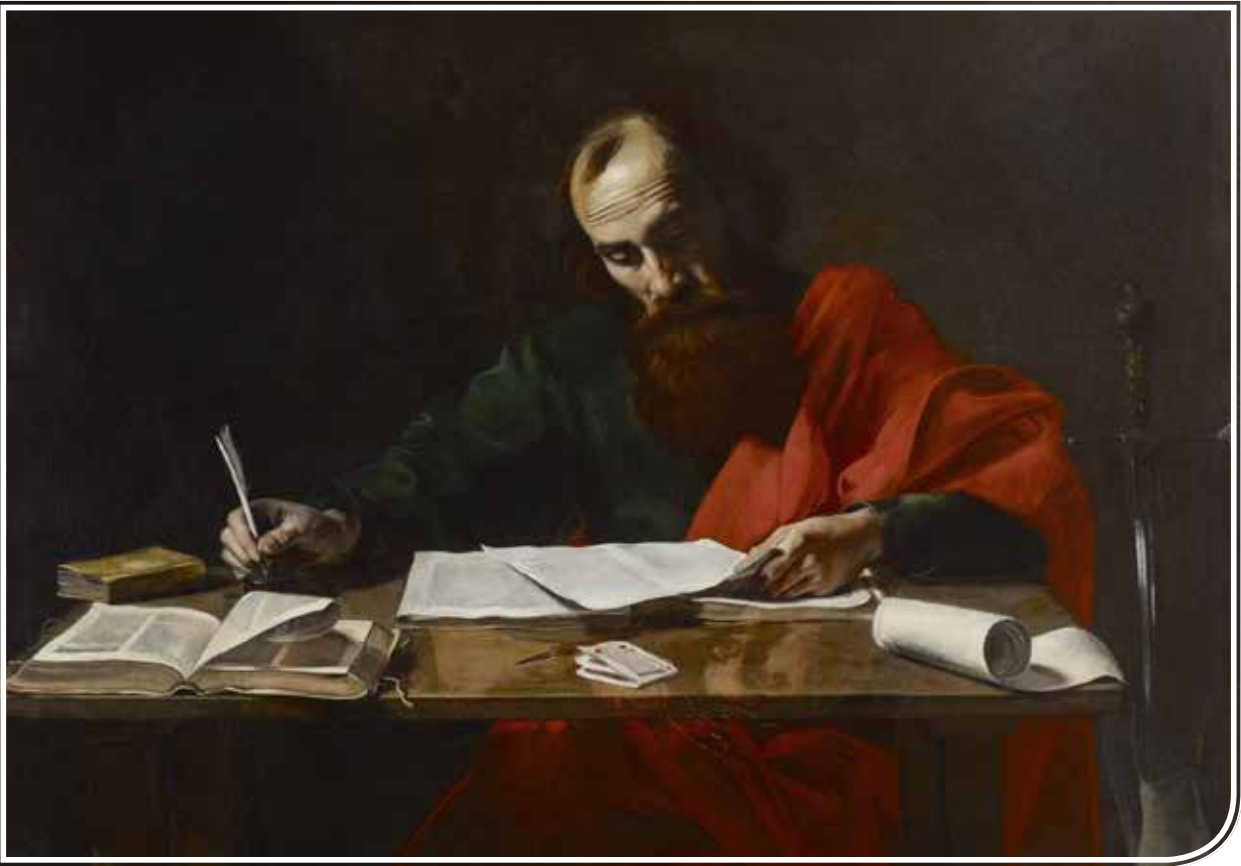
CBET Photo Competition 2015 entry by Philip Whitehead: "This photo features Martin Luther in Playmobil form. I appreciate Luther's theology and approach a great deal, but most of all his encouragement that everybody should read and interpret the Bible for themselves."

tral to Paul's thought. The question then arises: How does Paul relate the gospel—the word of God, this reconciling word—to the reconciling act of Christ on Calvary? Georg Eichholz puts it nicely: 'according to 2 Corinthians 5 the Christ event and the witness to this event must be seen as a dual but integrated activity of God'.¹⁰ In 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 we see the interweaving of the reconciling act, Christ's sacrifi-

cial death and the reconciling word, which conveys to us this act. The remarkable thing about Paul's theology is the way he brings together this reconciling act and word, and enables them to cohere. For, as we have seen, in terms of *word*, the gospel comes to us and transforms us. We are taken out of ourselves and taken into a new reality—the reality of Jesus Christ. But in terms of *act*, we participate in the death of

Christ. Thus Paul writes of being crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20) and being buried with Christ (Roman 6:4). Further, the author of Colossians¹¹ writes that we are raised with Christ (Col. 3:1) and that our life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).

But now the fundamental question arises as to how on earth we can participate in Christ. Some speak in terms of Paul using a figure of speech. For me this



St. Paul writing his Epistles—ascribed to Valentin de Boulogne, famed for his Caravaggio influenced tenebrist style.

is inadequate. Paul seems to be speaking of the believer being there, with Christ, on Calvary. The answer to this conundrum is found in one of the most important pillars of Paul's theology: the 'myth' and 'ritual' of the sacrifice of Christ. I use quotation marks because, though the sacrifice of Christ can be seen in ritual terms and though it has mythical elements, it also transcends these categories: a ritual is usually something repeated; the sin offerings described and instructed in the Old Testament were a repeated ritual, for example. However, Christ's death, as a sin offering (Rom. 8:3) was 'once for all' (Rom. 6:10). And, as far as myth is concerned, although one is usually concerned with something which is not rooted in history, Christ's death was localized in both space and time:

he died in Jerusalem around the year 30 CE. Nevertheless, the idea of Christ's sacrifice has many mythical elements. Myth, if received positively, has the capacity to change our existential situation; indeed it can facilitate the very existential displacement I was referring to earlier. If a myth is received positively, we can find ourselves embedded in a different reality—in our case, this being the reality of Christ.

Paul's Use of the Bible and Ours

I hope I have given reasons why the Bible matters from this Pauline perspective. Paul speaks of the righteousness of God which is witnessed to by the Old Testament. He pre-

sents his understanding of the interrelation between the reconciling word and reconciling act. A case can be made that, of all the biblical witnesses, he is the most profound; many have also made a case that he is the most reactionary. I have no space or intention here to delve into issues of gender and sexuality, which have recently so exercised the church, though it is the writings in the Pauline corpus which have caused so many of the controversies. But it is worth reminding ourselves that despite his 'conservative' views, Paul is by no means a fundamentalist in the sense that he held to the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture. Although he believed that the Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament) witness to the gospel, he was also highly selective in the use of these Scriptures—and was prepared to go well beyond and against the original meaning. Deuteronomy 30:12-14, for example, speaks of a word which is near; in the original setting this word was the law, while for Paul it has to point to the gospel (Rom. 10:8). Paul certainly shows that the Bible matters; but at the same time he demonstrates that the Bible has to be studied 'critically'. I use quotation marks because the adverb 'critically' is often taken to mean 'destructively'. However, Paul shows that, by means of his critical study of the Bible, he is able to disclose the truth of the gospel and the saving righteousness of God. Therefore Paul not only shows why the Bible matters, but sets an example as to how to work with the Bible.

Further Reading

- Bell, Richard H. *No one seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18-3.20*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998.
- Bell, Richard H. *Deliver Us from Evil: Interpreting the Redemption from the Power of Satan in New Testament Theology*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007 (23-65, 230-91).
- Jeffrey, David L., ed. *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992 (445-47, 588-93, 742-46).
- Sanders, James A. "Hababbuk in Qumran, Paul and the Old Testament". Pages 98-117 in *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel*. Edited by Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders. JSNTSup 83. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993.
- 1. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 468.
- 2. One could give many examples of New (and Old) Testament influence on such literature. In Goethe's *Faust*, for example, there are allusions to a vast array of biblical texts, including allusions to 2 Cor. 3:6 in Faust I 1228, 1236 (Faust's translating of John 1:1) and 1716-1733 (Mephistopheles's requiring Faust's signature for the 'contract'), as well as wider use of the polarity of the letter and the spirit (see Osman Durrani, *Faust and the Bible: A Study of Goethe's Use of Scriptural Allusions and Christian Religious Motifs in Faust I and II* [Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1977], 61, 72, 194).
- 3. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip Watson, eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, LCC 17 (London: SCM, 1969), 110.
- 4. Even a conservative theologian such as R.A. Finlayson, for example, rejected 'dictation' or 'mechanical writing' ('Contemporary Ideas of Inspiration', in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F.H. Henry [London: Tyndale, 1969], 223).
- 5. The overwhelming majority of scholars consider that this letter (along with 1 Timothy and Titus) was not written by Paul. I share such a view, though for the purposes of this article the question may be left open.
- 6. Strictly speaking the 'law' here refers to the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy). This was the first and most important division of the canon of the Jewish Scriptures. The second division was the 'prophets', which comprises the 'former prophets' (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings) and the 'latter prophets' (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Book of the Twelve, also known as the Minor Prophets). There is a debate as to whether the third division, the 'writings', was closed when Paul was writing his letters (this division includes Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles). The fact that Paul quotes from the writings (Psalms, Job and Proverbs) suggests he uses 'law and prophets' to refer to the Old Testament as a whole. One should also bear in mind that Paul alludes to texts from what Protestants call the 'apocrypha', such as his use of the book of Wisdom (13:1-9) in Rom. 1:18-32.
- 7. In fact, Paul has changed the sense of both the Hebrew and Greek texts here. The Hebrew says, 'The righteous shall live by his faithfulness'—that is, 'the righteous shall be preserved alive because of his faithfulness' (as paraphrased by C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans I* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1977], 100). The Greek has the sense that the righteous man will live because of God's faithfulness (or possible because of his faith in God). Paul applies this text to mean that the one who is righteous through faith in Christ 'will live'. The text of Hab. 2:4b has been changed in the light of the gospel.
- 8. Richard H. Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy: The Origin and Purpose of the Jealousy Motif in Romans 9-11* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 128-45.
- 9. Luther, WA 40.1:589: *theologia nostra certa est, quia nos ponit extra nos*.
- 10. Georg Eichholz, *Die Theologie des Paulus im Umriß* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1985), 200.
- 11. Just as there is a debate about the authorship of the pastoral epistles (see above), so there is about Colossians, although much stronger arguments can be put forward for Paul's authorship of the latter.

The Bible And Bibl

From the perspective of biblical hermeneutics, there are six key issues involved in the question of why the Bible matters.

First, it is impossible adequately to answer the question of why the Bible matters without at least minimal reference to theology. In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—that is, in all the Abrahamic faiths—the reason why a reading and understanding of the sacred writings is important is because God has made himself known through revelation. Revelation is entirely different from human discovery. All three of these traditions trace the origins of God’s speaking to humanity to what is recounted in Genesis 12:1: ‘The Lord said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land which I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you”’. The Bible, then, is an account of how God has spoken to his people, since the time of Abraham through contemporary com-

munities of the people of God.

Second, reference must also be made to history. Before the seventeenth century, Christians simply presupposed the importance and authority of the Bible, both for doctrine and for daily life. This consensus was initially weakened by deists, who conceived God as more remote than the biblical texts describe, and by the effects of the Enlightenment, together with the early rise of biblical criticism. We shall note, however, that the effects of this period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were of limited duration; today almost all parts of the church stand together on the importance of Christian Scripture based on the revelation of God and careful exegesis in the light of historical context. This is true whether they stand in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant tradition. Indeed, the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome has endorsed the use of the full range of approaches used in critical studies of the Bible.¹ **Third**, confidence in the importance of the Bible depends on understanding that God speaks and works through human

*CBET 2015 Photo
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Jonny Rowlands.*



ical Hermeneutics

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MEET THE AUTHOR



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agents, and not in spite of them. The Roman Catholic writer James Burtchaell observes that '[t]he real issue here is what confounds scholars in so many areas: the manner in which individual human events are jointly caused by God and man'.² He responds to this issue by pointing out that the root problem is that of the incarnation: how can God appear as truly man? Since the foundation of the church many have reverted back either to docetism (the notion that Jesus was whol-

ly divine but human only in outward appearance) or to Arianism (the notion that Jesus was only a created human being). As in the paradigmatic case of the incarnation, we must regard the status of the Bible as genuinely embodying the voice of God, while simultaneously being spoken and written through human agents, with all their human characteristics and place in history.

Fourth, there is one particular approach to demonstrating the divine character of the Bible whose value is severely limited. This can be seen, for example, in the work of Charles Hodge. A nineteenth century American Presbyterian systematic theologian, his ideas on biblical authority have a lasting impact on evangelical forms of Christianity. He produced what many regard as a circular argument, by citing several biblical passages which appear to confirm the authority and importance of the Bible.³ He cites, for example, the apostle Paul's first letter to the newly founded church in Thessalonica: 'You accepted it not as a human word, but what it really is, God's word' (1 Thess. 2:13). In context, this refers to Paul's early preaching (that is, the 'gospel of God', as in v. 9)—not to the Bible

as a whole. Admittedly the comment is useful, for it reminds us that God genuinely speaks his word through human agents, but it is not a knock-down proof that the Bible is 'God's word', without further qualification. The same can be said of the oft-cited verses in 2 Timothy 2:16 and 2 Peter 1:21. To be sure, the Scriptures are 'God-breathed' and spoken through the Holy Spirit, but simply referring to these verses may not convince the insistent objector.

Fifth, a more important issue is the transformative power of the Bible. It is not just that we scrutinize the Bible as an object before us; rather it addresses us, making God and the Bible subject and the hearer or reader, so to speak, its object. As James M. Robinson declared, '[t]he flow of the traditional relation between subject and object in which the subject interrogates the object... has been significantly reversed. For it is now the object... the subject-matter [of the Bible] that puts the [human] subject in question'.⁴ Famous hermeneutical theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer declares that what the reader first has to use to understand a text is not the eye, but the ear.

As evidence of this we

may consider as our **sixth** and final point: that the notion of the Bible—or language in general—as a transforming agent becomes very clear in the light of speech-act theory. This subject is complex in its own right. It rests on the observation that language may do things, or perform acts, not merely say things. Long before speech-act theory emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, the Reformer and Bible translator William Tyndale, anticipated an elementary form of it. In his treatise *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, Tyndale expounds his central thesis that Scripture is above all else promise: ‘it conveys promises of God’; it ‘maketh a man’s heart glad’; it ‘proclaims joyful tidings’; it ‘nameth to be his heirs’.⁵ Indeed, within a dozen pages Tyndale specifies no less than seventeen or eighteen distinct speech acts: Scripture promises, names, appoints, declares, gives, condemns, curses, binds, kills, drives to despair, delivers, forbids, ministers to life, wounds, blesses, cures, and wakes.⁶ In each case, the words of Scripture perform actions—many of which have lasting consequences in life. This is still the case today; through the researches of scholars such as J.L. Austin and John Searle, the usefulness of speech-act theory for understanding the Bible has become even clearer. I have tried to illustrate this in my own work and it has become a popular topic for research more broadly.

A Review of Historical-Critical Methods

We have not space to consider in detail all six issues outlined above. However, we shall consider two of them. First we select the issue of bible criticism and historical-critical methods. Although so many speak of the historical-critical method, in

practice many such methods abound. Indeed, to use the singular ‘method’ is misleading, as our brief historical survey will make clear. There is no such thing as ‘the’ historical-critical method. Initially the term usually denoted an approach through historical reconstruction alone—together with what many regarded as the ‘assured results’ of biblical criticism. The initial method carried with it strongly ‘anti-ecclesial’ intentions (as if theology came only from church tradition).

It is also misleading to speak of these methods as a modern phenomenon. Historical-critical approaches emerged in the seventeenth century—and some would claim to find anticipatory traces in Origen, Luther and other figures. In practice, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a whole (though with strong exceptions) were indebted to a mentality which saw ‘history’ and historical research as an exclusive alternative to theology. Approaches from after the second half of the twentieth century—and still more so today—are less dominated by this unfortunate dualism. We must therefore outline briefly how historical-critical methods have developed and been modified over the years.

Some trace proto-critical methods back to Benedict Spinoza (a seventeenth century Jewish philosopher), to Richard Simon (a seventeenth century Catholic Jesuit), to Jean Astruc (first half of the eighteenth century) and to the deists. But these were only partial anticipations of a more serious critical approach. Spinoza identified and criticised biblical ‘contradictions’; Simon challenged the assumption that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, as part of his quest to undermine Protestant appeals to the biblical writings; and Astruc postulated that two sources lay behind Genesis and Exodus, largely on the basis of their use of two different divine names (whereby the

proper name for Israel's god, Yhwh, characterised the 'Yahwist' source and *elohim*, the more general Hebrew word for God characterised the 'Elohists' source). This broadly anticipated the work of nineteenth



Put most negatively, an inadequate view of God accounted for the more extreme versions of biblical criticism.

century biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen, long before he popularised the argument that the Pentateuch was constructed from four sources (the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist and Priestly sources). This would become the standard theory regarding the formation of the Pentateuch for most of the twentieth century (sometimes referred to by an acronym, 'JEDP').

A more systematic approach came with the work of the eighteenth century German enlightenment theologian Johann Salomo Semler, whose *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon* argued that reason or rational enquiry should not be 'hindered' by any overly traditionalist appeal to faith or to Christian theology when approaching biblical texts. The tragic separation between theology and strictly historical versions of biblical criticism can be traced to his originally positive motives for separating rational and historical study from faith and theology.

In a magisterial book *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, Henning Graf Reventlow masterfully accounted for this change of intellectual climate in Europe, especially in Germany, that made this early biblical criticism seem so plausible.⁷ Part of the change was due to the influence of the eminent philosopher Immanuel Kant, as well as the Enlightenment more broadly, which sought to release people

from reliance upon church tradition and encouraged them to think for themselves. But Reventlow places most of the emphasis on the deists, who conceived of God as remote. While, in theory, they acknowledged the place of revelation, in practice this rendered revelation unnecessary. Put most negatively, an inadequate view of God accounted for the more extreme versions of biblical criticism.

During the eighteenth century this approach became institutionalised, through the work of biblical scholars like J.D. Michaelis, J.J. Griesbach and W.M.L. de Wette, as well as writer and dramatist G.E. Lessing. De Wette, for example, stressed different outlooks in Kings and Chronicles, arguing that Chronicles was secondary as a historical source, and Lessing proposed a theory on the development of the gospel tradition from an 'Ur-gospel' to Mark, Matthew and Luke—an idea which remains influential today. In the nineteenth century David Friedrich Strauss extended historical criticism to the Gospels, especially in declaring the miraculous events to be 'myths'. Ferdinand Christian Baur—equally (in)famous as his onetime pupil Strauss—extended this higher criticism to Paul. He postulated a sharp division between the Petrine and Pauline traditions, which he then applied to the letter to the Romans. He regarded the whole epistle as expressing Paul's opposition to Judaism and his defence of the admission of the Gentiles to the church. He imagined that the church in Rome was predominantly Jewish and regarded Romans 9–11 as an important part of Paul's argument about the Jews. His view of the contrast between Peter and Paul had earlier emerged in his lectures on 1 Corinthians, in which he took literally the so-called party-labels: 'I belong to Paul', 'I belong to the Cephas' (1 Cor. 1:12). In a later work, Baur began to

draw on Hegel's theory of thesis, antithesis and synthesis to suggest that Paul opposed Peter's more 'Judaistic' gospel (thesis), especially in Galatians and Romans, by focussing on the 'law-free' gospel for the gentiles (antithesis). A synthesising, 'catholic' phase supposedly emerged in Acts and in some of the later New Testament writings. His influence is still strongly felt in New Testament scholarship.

During the same period—the early years of the twentieth century—an approach referred to as the History of Religions School (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) was on the rise in the study of the New Testament. Paul Wendland and Rudolf Bultmann, for example, proposed analogies between Greek literature and Paul. Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*—in which he claims that the faith of Jesus' followers and their resurrection appearances turned Jesus into a divine messianic figure after his death, whereas Jesus himself thought of himself neither as Messiah nor as divine—became particularly important. Like Adolf von Harnack—the representative of classical liberal Protestantism—Bousset contrasted the simple and basic ethical demands of Jesus with Paul's supposedly more complex theology, which allegedly drew on Hellenistic mystery religions. Also part of this scholarly movement was Richard Reitzenstein, primarily a classical philologist who argued that Paul derived some aspects of his thought from the so-called Gnostic redeemer myth, about a saviour figure who came down from heaven to rescue spirits imprisoned on the earth. In the meantime, scholarship came to the conclusion that such a myth never existed in such a form in the first century.

The startling range of historical-critical methods can be illustrated by selecting reactions to the theories of both Reitzenstein and Baur. Against the suggestion that Paul

was dependent on Greek mystery religion in his depiction of salvation as a way from death to life (as both Bousset and Reitzenstein proposed), scholars like Günther Wagner published helpful critiques.⁸ He carefully examined Paul's view, not least in Romans 6:1-11, and compared it with the myths or 'mysteries' of Attis, Isis, Mithras and other ancient deities. First, he argued, if there is any parallel with Paul this does not at all mean that Paul derived or borrowed from them. Second, the dating of such sources indicates that they often post-date Paul, so could not have influenced him. Third, the supposed parallels do not turn out to be parallels at all—hence he places 'parallels' in inverted commas in his sub-title.

Our second example comes from Danish New Testament scholar Johannes Munck, whose *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* critically engaged Baur and the nineteenth century 'Tübingen School'.⁹ Baur is accused of having his critical theory ready before it was even applied to Paul; things are thus

Like Adolf von Harnack, Bousset contrasted the simple and basic ethical demands of Jesus with Paul's supposedly more complex theology, which allegedly drew on Hellenistic mystery religions.

made to stand on their heads. The so-called 'parties' in Corinth were not parties at all, but 'splits' (schismata) motivated by power-claims, not by adherence to contrasting doctrines. In fact, he argues, Corinth is a 'church without factions' in any doctrinal sense. What Bousset, Reitzenstein and Baur suggested was far from being 'the assured results of biblical criticism, but were a flim-

the German Werner Georg Kummel, he utterly rejected the notion that Romans 7 could have anything to do with autobiographical reflections. The 'I' of Romans 7:7-25 is not Paul's autobiographical 'I'. (As a Lutheran pastor, Stendahl had witnessed the agonies of conscience among some Lutheran students and was eager to show that such

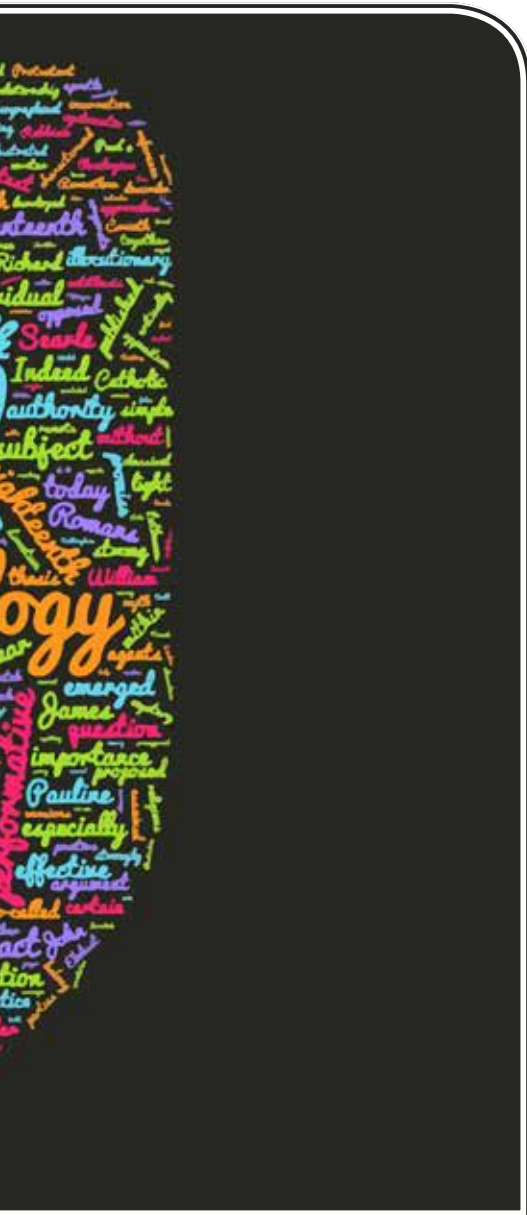
introspection was emphatically not Pauline.) Paul, Stendahl argued, did not emphasize personal, individual guilt, but the corporate sin of humankind.¹¹ Indeed the apostle even asserts, 'I know nothing against myself' (1 Cor. 4:4) and 'as to righteousness of the law [I am] blameless' (Phil. 3:6). Stendahl concludes that Paul had a 'robust' conscience, even if he took sin very seriously as a universal phenomenon.

Subsequently E.P. Sanders published his monumental book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.¹² He aimed to draw a more careful comparison between Paul and Judaism than had yet appeared, rejecting a simple relationship of contrast between the two: Paul did not simply 'convert' to Christianity and begin 'attacking' Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism. Although in many ways Sanders followed the work of Davies, he argued that Davies tended to compare backgrounds—not 'what is essential' in both 'religions'. Sanders especially examined the role of obedience in rabbinic theology and concluded that '[a]ll Israelites have a share in the world to come unless they renounce it by renouncing God and his covenant.'¹³ He adds, 'God has appoint-

ed a means of atonement for every transgression, except to reject God and his covenant.'¹⁴ Salvation is by remaining within the covenant. Rabbinic religion was thus corporate and collective as well as personal and individual. In reaching this conclusion, Sanders questioned the traditional understanding of the Pauline doctrine of justification; the challenges he posed still dominate Pauline scholarship.

Sanders' work has come to be known as the 'New Perspective' on Paul. In broad terms it has been defended, with modifications, by James D.G. Dunn and, with more radical modifications, by N.T. Wright. However, a significant minority—including C.E.B. Cranfield, Joseph Fitzmyer, Seyoon Kim, Mark Seifried and Nottingham's own Richard Bell—express very strong reservations and the jury is still out.

From all this it is clear that 'the' historical-critical method is no single approach but embraces many methods, and is no longer driven by the 'history versus theology' slogan which first began the movement. Its more positive attitude to theology can be seen from the manner in which many exponents of historical-critical methods today



write. Critical scholarly work and being deeply embedded in the various Christian traditions is no contradiction, as the lives of many prominent New Testament scholars demonstrate.

We have also seen that many critical theories were later exposed as false or, at best, speculative. The best critical scholarship not only examines historical sources critically, but also holds its own results lightly, as constantly under scrutiny. A beginning student must often hold his or her nerve and suspend judgment until issues become clearer.

The Transformative Role of the Bible in the Light of Speech-Act Theory

Speech-act theory owes its origin in the modern era to Oxford philosopher John L. Austin, whose William James Lectures at Harvard were published as *How to Do Things with Words*.¹⁵ He recognized the ability of language to do more than simply describe reality. To highlight this capacity, Austin differentiates between ‘the performance of an act in saying something, as opposed to performance of an act of saying something’.¹⁶ Only the former is strictly speaking a speech-act, constituted by an illocutionary utterance. The idea of this term is that in such utterances the effect of the words is the intended outcome, as opposed to their plain meaning (*locutio* is Latin and means ‘speech’, with the *il-* prefix indicating negation). An act of speaking is a ‘locutionary’ act; the performance of an act by saying something is a ‘perlocutionary’ act, or ‘perlocution’.¹⁷ After Austin, the philosopher of language who most influentially developed speech-act theory was the American John R. Searle.¹⁸

In the first of his lectures Austin gave

numerous examples of performative (or illocutionary) utterances, such as ‘I do take this woman as my lawful wedded wife’ in a marriage; ‘I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth’, uttered by the appropriate person while smashing a bottle against the stern; ‘I give and bequeath my watch to my brother’ in a duly valid will; or ‘I bet you...’¹⁹ Each of these utterances does something: they make someone a married person; give a name to a ship; transfer property; convey money. After this explanation of performatives, Austin sets out conditions for a ‘happy’ (that is, effective) performative utterance. Not just any individual could ‘name’ a ship, simply by smashing a ginger beer bottle against it. Therefore Austin adds the qualification: ‘For a certain performative utterance to be happy, certain statements have to be true’.²⁰ I cannot bequeath a watch which is not mine; or marry a bride if I am already married.

Of special significance for theology is the example of promising. Austin asks us to imagine a boy who sends his cricket ball through next door’s greenhouse. It is not effective if his mother calls on the neighbour and says, ‘He promises he won’t do it again, don’t you Willie?’ It is effective only if Willie make the promise himself, as a commitment. To differentiate the different performative utterances Austin classifies them as ‘behabitives’, which relate to behaviour—such as ‘I apologize’ or ‘I am sorry’; ‘verdictives’, which express verdicts—such as ‘I acquit’ or ‘I pronounce’—and which relate to justification by grace; ‘exercitives’, which exercise power—such as promising—and ‘commit you to doing something’.²¹ In theology, we argue, if God makes a promise, it commits him to a certain course of action and makes some alternatives impossible. Promises voluntarily tie our hands. All this underlines the point that performative utterances depend on in-

stitutions, not causal force. In biblical theology the institutional framework is provided in the covenants God made with this world, with the people of Israel and with the church. It is decisive that God bound himself to them through his promises. Philosophy can help us to fully appreciate the range and meaning of these promises—or, as we may say now, these performative utterances.

In place of Austin's word 'exercitive' Searle proposes the word 'directive'. In theological terms, 'the Word of the Lord' has power to appoint, to direct, to authorize and to command. All this presupposes the relationship established between God and Israel or the church. The purpose of this becomes clear in Searle's exposition of 'the direction of fit' between words and the world. The purpose of most simple descriptions or propositions is 'to get the words (more strictly their propositional content) to match the world'. This is one 'direction of fit'—but in the case of commands, promises and most directives, the purpose is 'to get the world to match the words. Assertions are in the former category; promises and requests are in the latter.'²²

All this provides just one illustration of how biblical words—when their 'illocutionary force' is properly grasped—change the reality of our world and of our lives. When Jesus says 'Your sins are forgiven', this is a life-changing pronouncement because he has authority to do this. In the case of Jesus, the 'verdictive' fits and is therefore effective. When God pronounces that the Christian believer has been put right with God, or 'justified', this confers us freedom and joy. When God declares us his servants or his messengers, this gives us a new purpose in life and a mission to perform. Most precious of all, when God makes promises through his word, he has committed himself to perform them. The

practical and transformative consequences are endless. In this light, the question 'Why does the Bible matter?' answers itself!

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The Bible And Ea

Orthodox Christian prayer, liturgy and doctrine are built on the foundations of the canonical Bible. By 'Bible', we mean the Old and New Testaments, a body of texts that was held to be divinely inspired from about the late second century onward.¹ We are using the term 'Old Testament' (with respect to the Jewish writings that preceded the incarnation of Jesus Christ) advisedly here: Greek-speaking Christians in the earliest period were more familiar with a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible which had, according to legend, been compiled in the third century BCE and was known as the Septuagint. The Old and New Testaments represented Christian Scripture for early Christians; then, as now in Orthodox Christian tradition, the two halves of the Bible were regarded as a unity. Both bear witness to the central mystery of Christian faith, namely, the incarnation, passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whereas this truth is revealed obliquely in the Old Testament, with the help of 'types' (prefigurations or symbols of Christ, as in the figures of Isaac, Moses and Jonah) or prophetic utterances, it becomes a historical (but also highly theological) narrative in the writings of the New Testament.

It is worth saying something briefly about the canon of Scripture in Orthodox Christian tradition. As we stated above, Greek-speaking Christians (and the Orthodox Churches that use translations based on the Greek Christian tradition) have always employed the Septuagint version of the Old Testament. This means that a number of books that were eventually excluded from the Hebrew Bible (probably around the end of the first century CE) are included in the Orthodox Christian canon. They include 'apocryphal' or deuterocanonical books such as the Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Judith, and others, some of which were originally composed in Greek

rather than in Hebrew. Protestant Bibles later rejected the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament, but the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian Churches still adhere to the wider Old Testament canon.

Another group of texts, which has never been accepted into the Orthodox Christian canon but which has nevertheless played an important part in church tradition, includes the so-called 'apocryphal' texts of the New Testament.² Such texts represent only a remnant of the numerous compositions that were circulating among Jews, Christians and gnostic groups from about the end of the first century onward. Many such texts adopted literary forms that had

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become familiar in the early church, including the letter, gospel or visionary treatise. All appear to have undergone scrutiny by the early leaders of the church, with those that preached an 'orthodox' message being valued and those that were deemed 'heretical' attracting condemnation. However, it is easy to oversimplify this process—and its effectiveness—by which such literary matter was received by early Christians. Some scholars suggest that even mainstream Christians read and valued texts that have come to be viewed as 'gnostic' or otherwise heterodox.³ The cache of manuscripts that was discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, for example, may have

belonged to an orthodox owner (such as a monastery) in Upper Egypt; it may have been hidden in order to evade scrutiny by hierarchs of the church in the course of the fourth century.⁴

Those texts that did achieve recognition—to the extent that they circulated widely and influenced liturgical, literary and iconographical developments in the church—include, for example, the *Protevangelium of James* (written in the course of the second century) and later accounts of the death and assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven.⁵ The acceptance of these texts reflects the dearth of information that is provided about Mary in the canonical New

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Testament as well as a growing need for a narrative about her conception, birth, childhood and final days. Although patristic and liturgical writers by and large did not refer to such apocryphal texts by name, they did accept the information about the Virgin Mary that they provide. A whole narrative involving Mary's saintly parents, Joachim and Anna, her infancy in the temple, her betrothal to Joseph and subsequent activities, thus entered Christian consciousness from a fairly early date. Such interest in Mary reflects the growing emphasis on Christ's humanity and divinity; this was based on faith in his birth from a virgin and, in turn, the worthiness of that virgin to become 'Birth-giver of God' (*Theotokos*).

Thus canonical scriptural texts, supplemented by a few less authentic—but also valuable—ones, support the Eastern Orthodox Christian theological tradition. This branch of Christianity regards the Bible as a unified group of texts that convey divine revelation, even if human authors were involved in their production. There is recognition in this tradition of the potential dangers of reading Scripture in an undis-

cerning way, as we shall see in the following section. The early Fathers realised that a method, or methods, of interpretation is needed if the Bible is to be understood correctly. Then, as now, the church recognised the fact that the reading of Scripture

The Patristic and Orthodox Christian Reading of Scripture

Modern Orthodox Christian biblical interpretation, as taught both at parish level and in seminaries, is indebted to Greek Patristic hermeneutical methods. This tendency, although already enshrined in Orthodox tradition, grew stronger in the first half of the twentieth century due to a movement of *ressourcement* ('return to the sources') that was initiated both by French theologians of the school known as 'Nouvelle Théologie' and by Russian scholars including Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky.⁶ Theodore Stylianopoulos acknowledges in a recent study the importance of patristic thinkers in establishing methods of reading and interpreting Scripture in the early church.⁷ The early Greek Fathers, beginning with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons in the second century, recognised the fact that biblical writings need to be read in the context of a church community. They exist in an accepted—and to some extent mysterious—frame of reference that is understood only by those who have faith in the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Later Fathers, including Athanasius, the Cappadocians and John Chrysostom (all of whom lived during the fourth century CE), also emphasised the human element that lies behind Scripture. Its authors, who lived at various points in history, may sometimes have been framing a narrative that had topical relevance only for their contemporaries but which contained a deeper (moral or allegorical) message for posterity.



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The need to develop different levels of interpretation in order to make sense of passages that may at first sight seem puzzling had been perceived about a century earlier by the important Alexandrian theologian, Origen. In Book IV of his great work, *On First Principles*, Origen suggested three methods for interpreting Scripture: the literal, the moral and the allegorical (or spiritual).⁸ This exegetical method, which was also adopted (and expanded into four) in the medieval West, provided a basis for patristic and later interpretation of the Old and New Testaments. Greek patristic interpretation of Scripture was thus based on the assumption that different levels of meaning may coexist in any given passage. The Fathers varied in their preferences for literal or moral, as opposed to allegorical (or vice versa) methods of interpretation; their choices sometimes reflected the didactic or liturgical circumstances in which they were working and sometimes their individual theological outlooks.

Reading the Greek Fathers on Scripture is thus encouraged in the Orthodox Church. Many good—and often quite inexpensive—translations of their works now exist both in print and online.⁹ The Fathers, who were mostly bishops in the early church, interpreted the Bible in various contexts. These include sermons, delivered either in morning or evening offices or during the Divine Liturgy (or Eucharistic Mass) on Sundays or feast-days, treatises or mystical writings such as Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, and biblical commentaries. The biblical hermeneutic that developed during the first millennium of Eastern Christian history remains formative for the Orthodox Christian understanding of Scripture. The witness of the early Christian and Byzantine Fathers continues to guide modern Orthodox theologians. This approach is governed less

by the historical-critical method that has become so dominant in Western biblical scholarship and more by the belief that the various books in the Bible present a unified

The Eastern approach is governed less by the historical-critical method and more by the belief that the various books in the Bible present a unified message.

message that is above all concerned with the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. Individual New Testament writers may tell this story in different ways, but the underlying *sense* of Scripture remains the same. The Fathers of the church regarded the Bible (including both the Old and the New Testaments) as the main source of revelation about God, although such revelation continues to be offered to humanity through the incarnate presence of Jesus Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Liturgy and Scripture

Another important way in which Scripture is mediated to Orthodox Christians is through liturgical celebration. The services of the church, which include daily or festal offices and eucharistic liturgies, are made up not only of hymns and prayers that draw inspiration (and even many passages or words) from biblical texts, but also of direct readings from the Old and New Testaments. Such readings are chosen carefully to reflect the particular themes or pre-occupations that belong to different parts of the liturgical year. This arrangement of lections, which is set out in liturgical books that dictate the order of the services, is in fact quite ancient: it probably developed sometime between the fourth and tenth

centuries in Constantinople, with influence from the Jerusalem patriarchate, and Palestinian monasteries, such as St Sabas. The material that was composed specifically for the Constantinopolitan liturgy, made up mostly of hymns and prayers, is also inspired by Scripture—especially the Psalms.

*Be glad, O Bethlehem, for you are Queen among the princes of Judah [Mic. 5:2; Matt. 2:6]; for from you comes forth, before the sight of all, the Shepherd who tends Israel, He that is seated upon the cherubim [Ps. 79:1], even Christ. He has raised up our horn and reigns over all.*¹⁰

This short passage, which is typical of Orthodox Christian hymnography, displays such a typological approach. The hymnographer says first that Bethlehem, the village where Christ was born, was prophesied by Micah. But other Old Testament passages, such as Psalm 79:1, also prefigure Christ's divine and human natures. He is King, Shepherd and Son of God; passages drawn from the Septuagint and newly woven together in liturgical song reveal this central Christian mystery. In the liturgical context, Scripture thus provides the foundation, but also the method, for teaching theology. Inspired by biblical sources that were themselves inter-textual, or woven together from many strands of the Old and New Tes-

If we look at the hermeneutical method of such material, it is safe to say that much of it is typological in nature. By this we mean that places, personalities or events in the Old Testament evoke the Christological meaning of the New. Here is an example to illustrate what this means:

taments, hymnographers and compilers of the Byzantine liturgy sought to perpetuate this tradition. For them, however, it is the Christological mystery that provides meaning to the whole of Scripture and which is being celebrated in the daily, weekly, or annual celebrations of the church.

Doctrine and Scripture

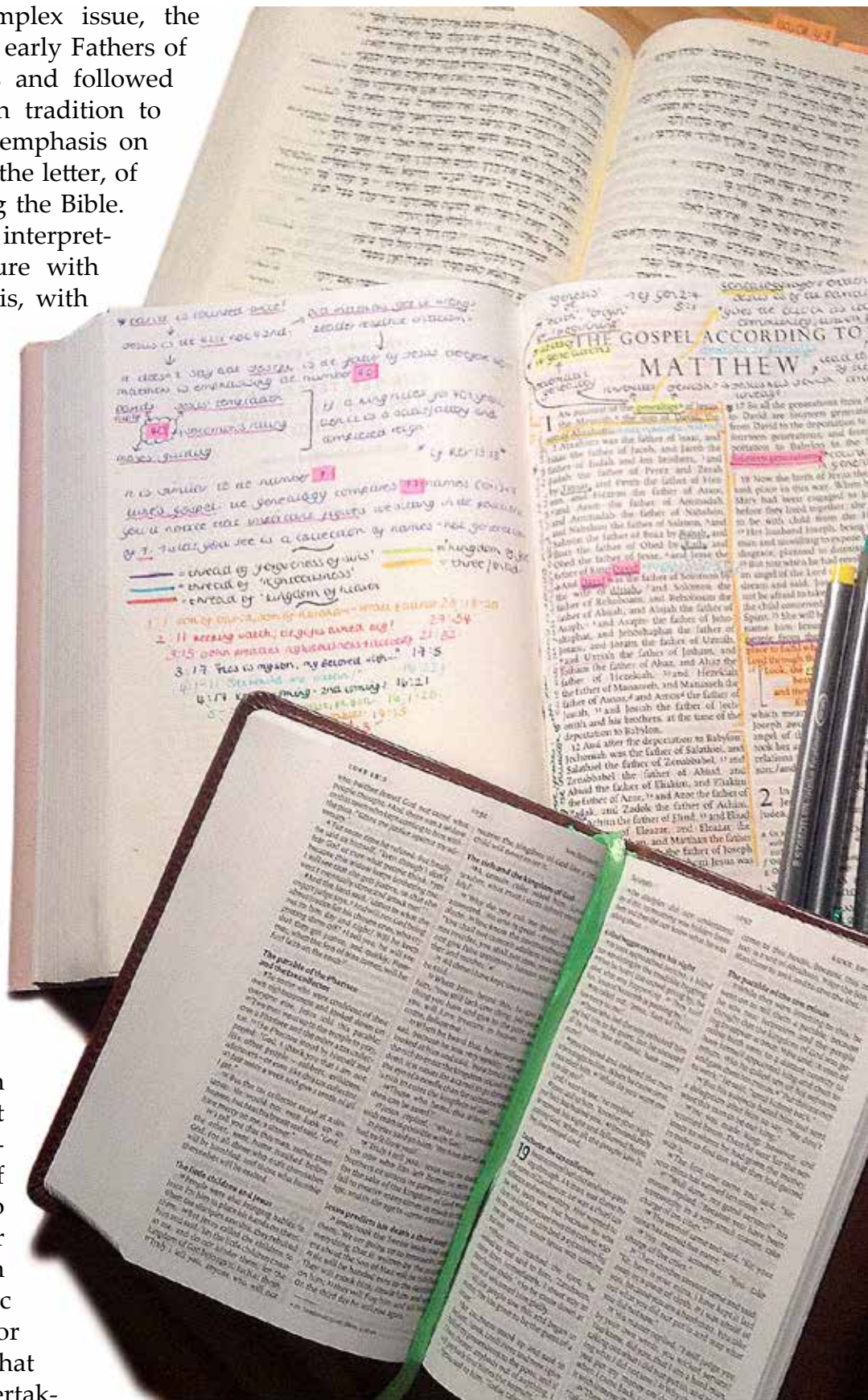
Scripture also formed the basis of all doctrinal debate in the early church, so its correct interpretation was of fundamental importance for the Fathers. St Basil of Caesarea wrote about the weight of biblical testimony in this respect in the following passage:

*Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favour of that side will be cast the vote of truth.*¹¹

The problem that the Fathers, like their modern counterparts, faced, however, is that the Bible can often be ambiguous—or worse, contradictory—in its statements about Jesus Christ. How does the interpreter make sense, for example, of the evangelist John's two statements, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God' (John 1:1-2) and 'I am going to the Father, for my Father is greater than I' (John 14:28)? Different passages, even within the same Gospel, sometimes appear to be saying the opposite thing. How are Christians, who depend for their salvation on a correct understanding of the person of Christ, to reconcile such statements?

To summarise a complex issue, the solution found by the early Fathers of the Eastern Churches and followed in Orthodox Christian tradition to this day involves an emphasis on the sense, rather than the letter, of biblical texts including the Bible. There is a belief that interpreters who read Scripture with an eye of faith—that is, with an understanding of the mystery that they have experienced in a life of prayer and absorption of church tradition (which includes both doctrinal and liturgical texts)—will know that the evangelists and other biblical writers say different things at different times. In fact, this should be expected when one meditates on the paradox that lies at the heart of Christian faith. Jesus Christ was both God and man; it is thus understandable—indeed, to be expected—that the evangelists describe him in both ways at different points in their narratives. Such a method of interpretation is not to be viewed as naïve or simplistic; what we can say about the patristic exegesis of Scripture for doctrinal reasons is that this was usually undertaken



CBET Photo Competition 2015 joint third-place entry by Ellena Hill: "Comparing the New Testament Scriptures fulfilling those of the Old Testament is a favourite of mine. Here, the Gospel of Matthew uses Isaiah 7:14 and it is satisfying to compare as one sees the differences between the NT, Hebrew, and Sepuagint versions of 'virgin'."

en against a background of sophisticated philosophical and rhetorical understanding. There was also recognition that the human interpretation of biblical revelation can go only so far; God speaks, especially in the Old Testament, obscurely and in riddles. He expects his chosen people to understand this message only slowly and in the course of a history that is still in progress before the Final Day.

Scripture as a Model for the Christian Life

Orthodox Christians, like all other Christians, see the Bible as the main source of teaching about how to live in accordance with God's will and loving example. While following the Pauline directive to emphasise the grace of the New Testament over the letter and law of the Old, Orthodox Christian tradition nevertheless does not reject the lessons of the Septuagint. The Ten Commandments, the teachings and moral conduct of the prophets and the wisdom contained in books such as Job and Proverbs are all seen as guides for Christian behaviour. Above all, however, the Old Testament bears witness by means of typological signs to the fulfilment of this history in the person of Jesus Christ. He, as the incarnate Word and Son of God, represents the preeminent model of Christian behaviour.

Orthodox Christians absorb Jesus's teachings, which express above all God's intention that human beings should love one another, through liturgical and private reading of the Gospels. In the case of the former, which takes place in certain offices but above all in the first half of the eucharistic Divine Liturgy, the reading of passages describing Jesus Christ's miracles, parables or historical life and passion is

followed by a sermon in which the bishop or priest explains the meaning of the Gospel reading in a way that (ideally) enables the laity to put its teaching into practice. Orthodox Christians recognise that Jesus says different things to different people in the Gospels, according to their particular circumstances and needs; passages such as the injunction to give up everything and follow him (Matt. 19:21) should thus not be understood literally by everyone. Nevertheless, the Orthodox Christian tradition as a whole has always valued the radical nature of the gospel message. Reverence for those individuals who do abandon 'worldly' concerns, sell their possessions and either serve the poor or devote their lives to prayer is witnessed in the canonization of the saints who embody these ideals. It could be argued that this undermines the ethical position of wealthy—or even moderately comfortable—Christians with regard to New Testament teachings. However, such a criticism could be levelled at all Christians, not just Eastern Orthodox ones. The radical teaching of some biblical passages can be tempered with others, such as Jesus's own instruction to obey the Roman emperor and pay taxes in accordance with civil laws that may have little to do with the ethical ideals of Christianity (Matt. 22:21).

The Old and New Testaments as Sources of Orthodox Christian Monasticism

The ascetic, or monastic, way of Christian living has found a place in Eastern Orthodox tradition since at least as early as the third century CE. Some scholars argue that such a life-style, which sometimes involved retreat into the Egyptian desert and rigorous training of physical appetites and

'passions', took the place of martyrdom—as the most extreme form of Christian witness—as the period of persecution came to an end in the later Roman empire.¹² It may also have been influenced by pagan philosophies such as Cynicism and Stoicism or by earlier ascetic communities, such as the Essenes, within Judaism.¹³

In any case, it is clear on the basis of the hagiographical texts that began to be composed in honour

“Prayer, which involves both conversation and intercession with God, serves the world even when it is taking place in a remote community.”

of early ascetic saints that such individuals understood their way of life to be in direct imitation of the teachings of the New Testament.

The fourth-century Father, Athanasius of Alexandria, who composed an important *Life of St Antony*, for example, tells us that the latter decided to sell his possessions and devote his life to prayer after hearing Jesus Christ's advice to the wealthy young man (Matt. 19:21) read out in church.¹⁴ The narrative that follows, involving Antony's withdrawal into ever more remote parts of the Egyptian desert and battles with

demons, is more difficult to relate to the teachings or example of Jesus and his disciples. However, such behaviour can be associated with the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness immediately after his baptism (Matt. 4:1-10), especially if viewed in the context of Antony's subsequent life, in which he emerges from his deserted shelter and begins to lead and teach a circle of disciples.

Nevertheless, many Christians (especially from the Protestant churches) may find the monastic ideal that is upheld in Orthodox Christian tradition difficult to understand. In what way, they might ask, does retreat from the rest of the world, whether for a solitary or communal monastic life, have anything to do with the teach-

ings or example of Jesus and his disciples? The latter spent their short lives in the midst of ordinary people—teaching, healing and performing miracles—with periods of withdrawal or prayerful reflection being strictly limited in the context of such missionary activity. This question is difficult to answer, since in some ways the monastic way of life owes as much to Graeco-Roman philosophical antecedents as it does to biblical witness; however, it should be emphasised that the monastic life is understood in Orthodox Christian tradition to represent service both to God and to the

rest of humanity. Prayer, which involves both conversation and intercession with God, serves the rest of the world even when it is taking place in a remote hermitage or community. Those who uphold the importance of monasticism would also cite the examples of Old Testament prophets such as Elijah, as well as Jesus Christ and his disciples, as practitioners of physical austerity and a prayerful relationship with God.

Conclusion

As Theodore Stylianopoulos points out, the Orthodox Church, following the precedent set by the Greek Fathers, assumes 'a dynamic view of inspiration that allows for the contingency of human understanding' in interpreting the Bible.¹⁵ Scripture was written against the background of a believing community and it should be read in the same context. Or to put this in another way, the church, guided by patristic contributions to this field, shows Christians how to read and interpret a biblical tradition whose sense is not always immediately visible. Such a position differs considerably from the Protestant assumption that Christians may interact directly with the Bible and thereby gain access to God. Orthodox Christian tradition suggests, on the contrary, that Christians need guidance from the church (i.e. from the Fathers, the liturgy, and preaching in church) to reach an understanding of the Bible's deeper meaning.

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5. For the former text, see Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 48-67; for the latter, see S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) for orientation and discussion.
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The image opposite shows detail from Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae of Christ in majesty surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists.



The Bible And We

Before attempting to answer why the Bible matters—and this is a real question for me as a Christian—we should note just how recent this issue is for believers. Jesus was remembered by his first followers as reading the Scriptures (look at Luke 4:16-20) and his followers not only continued to read those Scriptures (i.e., those texts widely accepted as ‘the Scriptures’ within Judaism in the decades before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE) but—through their repetition of their memories of Jesus—generated another body of ‘Scripture’ which was valued and read. These new Scriptures eventually embraced 27 texts from the first and second centuries: we call them ‘the New Testament.’

New Problems and Old

The reasons why they continued to hear these texts—the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Scriptures—varied, but what was not questioned was that it was a valuable activity. For some it was the case that these texts provided human beings with God’s law; for others they were texts that revealed the mind of God and the mysteries of the universe; for others they were the means

through which they came to a deeper knowledge of Jesus whom they acclaimed as ‘the Christ’—an attitude summed up in a phrase from the late-fourth century: ‘ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of the Christ.’

The exact reasons why the Scriptures were used and valued also varied with times and cultures and there is hardly a Christian thinker writing on the topic who does not give us a different slant, but there are a few common elements. First, encountering the Bible was seen as a religious event: to encounter these writings was to encounter Truth with a capital ‘T’; it was somehow to enter into the divine presence. This sense is already captured in the late first century in the statement ‘where the things of the Lord are talked of, there the Lord is present’ (*Didache* 4:1). What the *Didache* intended as a proverb for disciples came to be seen as applying, first and foremost, to the Scriptures.

Second, the Scriptures were seen as belonging to the everyday life of Christians—not in the way we might imagine today, when everyone can own and read a Bible, but in that there was no religious gathering at which there was not a reading (long or short, and very often many of them) from these two collections. Our

stern Christianity

Thomas O'Loughlin

earliest detailed description of a Sunday gathering (from around 150 CE) assumes that there are readings from 'the law and the prophets' and from the Gospels. One could not meet with Christians without knowing that they placed a high value on books and reading from books, did it whenever they met, and put enormous resources into having copies of those books.

Third, they placed a sacred value on those books in that they sought to preserve them in times of persecution, expended time and effort on decoration, and used these books as religious objects—the legacy of this view of the book, the Bible, as intrinsically sacred can be seen in our practice of placing one hand on a Bible when

swearing an oath (despite what one could read about oaths in the very book one is touching, in Matt. 5:33-7!).

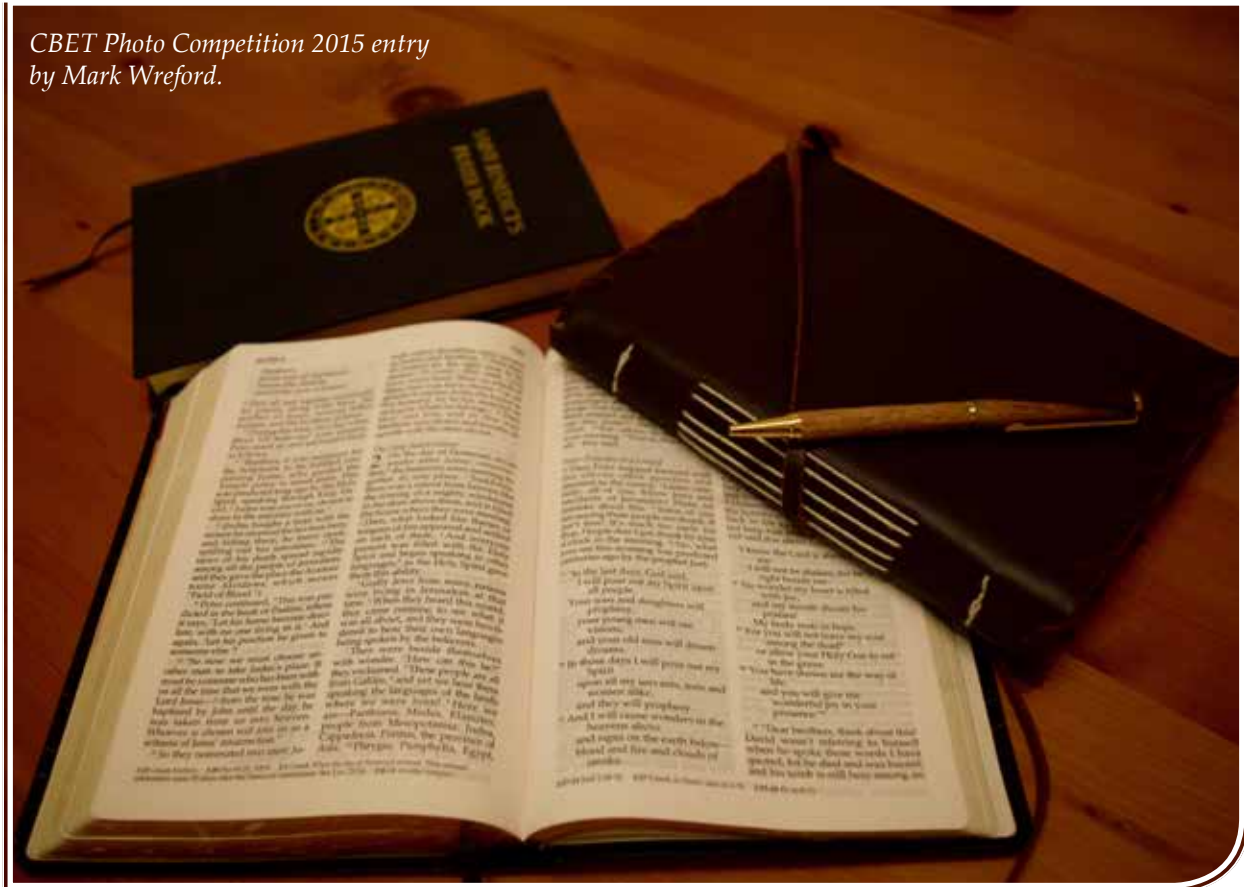
Fourth, communities put a great deal of energy into their relationship with the Scriptures: there were those who took care of the books, those who could turn marks on papyrus or skin into sounds (readers); those who could sing psalms (an element in virtually every gathering); those who could teach from and explain the Scriptures; and then the people in the background who could teach the teachers and write the commentaries. On the basis that 'where your treasure is, there also will be your heart' (Matt. 6:21), Christian churches have always set enormous store on the Bible. Moreover,

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CBET Photo Competition 2015 entry
by Mark Wreford.



given the range of practice and belief that one can find over the course of Christian history, this set of attitudes is one of the great commonalities among all the followers of Jesus, linking them to one another.

In contrast to this age old trust, many today find this collection of texts—with all its randomness, its confusions, and its sense of being just irrelevant details of a long past and foreign society—just much ado about very little. The Bible is not a work of philosophy answering great human questions—though many have found their answers

through it—nor does it set out a consistent plan for an ethical or a happy life—despite generations having drawn on it for just such guidance—nor does it contain great ‘spiritual’ guidance—yet millions have made it the basis of their spirituality. Similarly, even when it looks like history, historians need to treat it with skepticism; those parts of it that for centuries were looked on as ‘the story of the creation’ and the early history of humanity are now known to be variants on ancient myths. Even with regard to the life of Jesus—where what we

treat as accounts of his life, the Gospels, were written just a generation or two later—we know that we cannot treat the details simply as ‘facts.’

So, taken as a piece, it would appear that this book’s ‘sell-by date’ is now long past. Moreover, this looks like the fruit of modern critical methods or modern skepticism; certainly those who dismiss the Bible are enormously pleased to see such keen awareness of the limitations and inconsistencies of the Scriptures as a sign of human maturity.

However, we should

note that these criticisms are by no means new. In the century or so before Jesus, many Greek thinkers dismissed the Genesis stories on the basis that they possessed much better historical records from Egypt that showed a much longer human history than that found in the 'sacred books of the Jews.' Similarly with the Gospels: in the early second century Celsus pointed out the discrepancies between the Gospels' accounts of the life of Jesus and concluded that they were unworthy of belief—and so he ridiculed the followers of Jesus as fools or knaves. We not only have a rebuttal of Celsus by Origen (c.185-254), but we have attempts to create a 'backstory' for Jesus that would iron out some of the contradictions that follow from taking the Gospels at face value as biographies. Then in the later third century we have Porphyry (c.232-303), who made a careful study of the Christian Scriptures and found them so riddled with confusion and nonsense as to be unworthy of thinking people.

So was it the case that the followers, who continued to read and value the Scriptures, were simply unaware of the problems—and I am sure many were unaware—or did they just pretend that the confusions and jumble could be glossed over? I suspect that the answer lies not in what one says about the book as such, so much as the way the book was used.

Books and Performance

Imagine you say to yourself 'Let's read the Bible.' What image does this convey? Do you think of getting the book, sitting down—perhaps at a table or desk, and then reading silently to oneself? This is clearly an option—you can read or you would not have got this far in this article—and this is the normal pattern of reading for us: we have books on our shelves or on a comput-

er, we open texts and read and absorb the information. At this point please note that you have (probably) not moved your lips nor made a sound while you have been reading this. The ideas stored in text—marks made in a distinctive way called an alphabet and then arranged to mimic sounds through a set of spelling conventions—have moved from paper or screen into your head without becoming sounds; the words have not been spoken or heard.

Now imagine a second scene: someone says to you 'Let's read the Bible.' There are several options: both of you (or more) open their books and each read silently—this often happens in a classroom setting. Another option is that one reads aloud to the other or the group. But very often when this happens there is an instruction given: 'I am reading from John, chapter 2, beginning at verse 12.' This assumes that the listeners are going to each 'follow the reading' (i.e., read it for themselves) in their own book. In fact, this second option seems to be just a bit silly: if we are all going to follow it in our own Bibles, it would be better if we all read the passage in silence, as this might allow us to study and absorb its message better than trying to both read and listen! Moreover, if someone did say, 'Let's read the Bible', and then read aloud while everyone had a text, many would think this a peculiarly religious affair: we only see this phenomenon in worship and in Bible study groups. In the rest of life we think of reading as a private affair; when someone reads aloud it is because the audience (literally 'the hearers') do not have a text. Note that the idea that all can 'follow a passage in their own books'—an invariable practice in the worship of most western Christians—makes several assumptions: first, that reading is a pretty well-nigh universal skill or, at least, a common one; second, that copies can be made easily and cheaply, and that these

are virtually identical; and third, that most readers progress to a stage where they can read silently, absorbing words without making the sounds even to ourselves.

All three of these assumptions are more recent than the texts that make up our Bible. Look at any ancient copy of the Gospels, on papyrus or skin, and you will see something like this:

INTHEBEGINNINGWASTHE
WORDANDTHEWORDWASWITH
GODANDTHEWORDWASGODHE
WASINTHEBEGINNINGWITHGO
DALLTHINGS CAME INTO BE
INGTHROUGH HIMANDWITOUTH
IMNOTONETHINGCAME INTO BE
INGWHATHASCOME INTO BEING
INHIMWASLIFEANDTHELIFEWAS

Word spacing, punctuation, and upper and lower case—what is referred to as ‘the grammar of legibility’—came into existence precisely to make reading an easier and more diffuse skill among Christians. Reading in antiquity was a skilled activity: it was the ability to convert marks made with ink into sounds that could be heard. The reader in the early churches was more akin to a cassette player converting signals back into sounds, rather than reading being a personal skill for absorbing information at speed. Indeed, many who could read (e.g., Pliny the Younger, c.100 CE) pre-

ferred to have a reader read to him than to read himself—having a reader meant one could concentrate on the meaning, not on the task of reading. This is the exact opposite of our situation.

It is not insignificant for the history of the Bible that one of the lesser ‘orders’ in most churches in antiquity was that of the ‘lector’; without a reader, books were just piles of sheets with marks on them. Second, while there were special copying shops in Paris and other university towns by the thirteenth century, it was only with printing in the late-fifteenth century that copies become plentiful and more or less uniform. Universal literacy was still some way off, but in comparison with the world of manuscript copies books now were common. In a world where every copy was a ‘one off,’ even for those who could read there would never be sufficient copies, nor would they be identical! In the past, reading had to be a public affair, many sharing a book through listening. We usually describe such a society as ‘an *oral* society’, emphasizing that information was passed on by word of mouth, but it would be better to describe it as an *aural* society: it was by listening, in a group, that information, ideas, and stories were absorbed.

Lastly, you have not moved your lips as you read these last sentences—a skill known to very few in antiquity and only taught from the early-twelfth century. This was a skill propagated by a Paris theologian, Hugh of St Victor (d.1142). The effect of that skill is to make reading an intensely private and individual affair. I read my book, I reflect on my reading and much of my thinking takes place more or less in silence. And, when I read alone, I expect my reading to be ordered, consistent and tailored to serve the specific purpose for which I have opened the book. The only common exception to this purposefulness



The reader in the early churches was more akin to a cassette player converting signals back into sounds, rather than reading being a personal skill for absorbing information at speed. This is the opposite of us today.

in reading is when we read whatever is lying around 'to kill time', as in a doctor's waiting room you might glance at magazine or an article that you would never otherwise seek out.

These three, relatively modern, assumptions work against us when it comes to the Bible—it was put together, as were its individual books, when reading/hearing was virtually always a community experience and story telling was seen as the great common performance art.

Common Stories

We humans make sense of our world through our stories; our shared stories form, inform, and re-inform our sense of collective identity. With each passing generation, that set of stories mutates and becomes once again the pattern against which we tell ourselves who we are as societies. If you want to understand a society, you have to know its common stories. For the most part, we see ourselves as the most recent actors in a long narrative—in which we may be the heroes or the victims—but it is *our* history and it is a history that leads us right down to today. The narrative explains to us how we got here, in the state—for better or for worse—that we are in. We may like or reject our history, but it is still *our* history, and we need to repeat it and mark ourselves against it. If you want to understand a group, big or small, you need to know its history; it will display that history in its buildings, its memorials and, above all, its narratives. If you want to destroy a group's identity, you need to remove its monuments, banish its history, and replace it with another. The first thing a totalitarian regime does is to change the history syllabus and the history books used in schools. History and a sense of identity are intimately linked.

But when we look more closely at these narratives, these historical paths that lead to the present, we see that they rely on telling and re-telling: telling one part of the story in one situation and telling another part of the story in another. History is never one big story, nor is it monolithic; there are sub-groups in every group. The story is never frozen; a living story is dynamic as human life in a group is dynamic.

Now consider what it was that made Israel—the people—distinct: it was the belief that they were responding in a special way to God. Their history made sense to them when they viewed it in terms of their relationship with God. To this relationship they gave a special name: 'the testament', or 'the covenant.' Faith was not so much an issue of affirming or denying abstract items of a creed or of ticking boxes about what they accepted or rejected as it was a matter of belonging to stories: if you belonged to this group, then you had these stories as your stories. Stories became not only the common possession of the group; these stories gave this group—despite all the bitter differences between sub-groups such as Judeans, Samaritans, Grecophiles, Pharisees and Essenes (and that is but the tip of the iceberg)—something to hold in common. The telling and re-telling—and the willingness of each generation to find an explanation of itself in these stories—was what formed their 'social glue.' It was the common stories—always heard in common settings and which were performed regularly and formally—that made them into a people. If you wanted to be part of this witness to God from generation to generation (look at Ps. 79), you had to listen to the narratives and absorb them, by 'reading' your own life as part of the common story.

The same process can be seen among the disciples of Jesus. They already shared the

common Jewish story and it was against that background that they heard the stories of Jesus—hence the constant references back to their existing Scriptures—and then it was their own stories of Jesus that they used to make sense of their lives as disciples. Again, these were stories they heard in common, when they assembled weekly for their community meal and blessed the Father for his goodness. To ‘believe’ was to belong to one of these new communities and to take on, first, its retelling of the Jewish story (which now included making sense of Jesus as ‘the Anointed One’) and, second, a story in which God acted ‘among our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a son’ (Heb. 1:1-2) in such a way that it included you as an individual. Christianity was a community to which one was committed—and, as with every community, that meant taking on board its common story. It would be several centuries before Christianity ceased being primarily a community (from which a theologian could extract some key ideas to arrange in a ‘creed’) and became a ‘creed’ (with an organization, call ‘the church,’ tagged on).

A Network of ‘Apostles, Prophets and Teachers’ (Eph. 4:11)

How should we imagine the early churches? Rather than seeing them as a philosophical party—a group sharing the same ideas, theology, or worldview—it is better to see them as groups who were so convinced that what they saw as the promises to Israel were fulfilled in Jesus that they now formed ‘a new people’ (see, for example, 2 Cor. 6:16). The boundary of this group was marked by baptism and the

group was held together by sharing stories of Jesus. These stories were told within each group and reinforced by teachers who travelled from group to group giving performances of the memory of Jesus.

In the process, this memory evolved as the settings of the groups changed and the times changed. For example, early groups may have heard stories directly from those who heard Jesus or from those who thought that the world’s ending was close at hand. Then later, after 70 CE, the temple was no longer performing its function of offering praise to God for all the people, so the stories had to evolve to take account of this new reality: how would disciples now offer praise and sacrifice? Later again, tensions grew between those who were identified as ‘Christians’ and those who, by distinction, called themselves ‘Jews.’ Similarly, it was one thing to join the group c. 50 CE and meet people who had met Jesus; it was quite another to belong to a group—such those to whom Luke might have preached c.100 CE—who could have had parents or grandparents who were disciples or who heard these stories as they were passed down. So the stories evolved, because in the re-telling they were explaining the new situations in which the audiences found themselves. The focus of the stories was not in the past—what did Jesus do in place X at time Y—but on what he, risen and present when they gathered (Matt. 18:20), meant for them as they heard the story. The story brought them from the long past and God’s promises, down to Jesus and his life and preaching, and on to the very place where they were on the very day they were listening to the evangelist. And they heard the evangelist either in person or when his words were re-sounded by a lector from a book—the book which was the recording of the performance of the evangelist. The whole

encounter with what we call 'a biblical text' was a community event; it was the story of a community, it identified an individual with a community, and it was experienced in the midst of a community.

What about Us?

If the Bible is approached in the same way that we approach a philosophy book (as Celsus and Porphyry did long ago), or as a book specially designed as a 'spiritual guide' (there are thousands of such works, both Christian and non-Christian), or as a self-help book, or as a guide to ethics (and many think that might be its only value), then sooner or later the user is likely to be disappointed. All such approaches are designed to be used by an individual, as an individual, and all the modern ones assume private reading. If the stories of the Scriptures are to be valued, they have to be put back into their community situation. They have to become the stories that, being heard in a group, allow the group to reflect on who and where *they* are and how God might be present in *their* lives. But is 'belonging' so important?

We are creatures whose identities are shared iden-

“ *As believers we see ourselves today as standing in continuity with the community of Israel and with the communities that gathered around Jesus—some may not like this historical dimension, but it's hard to be a 'Christian' if you are not linked to the first groups that were called 'Christians'. Then again, to be linked, we need to be in connection with their community, Israel. The Bible is the collection of those shared, connective stories; it is by inheriting them that we discover our own identity.*

tities; we want to belong. Belonging is a key to the way we live our lives and we appreciate that wrong-belonging—for example to a cult or a gang—can be destructive to us and to others. We cannot deny this aspect of our humanity, even when there is a potent myth of individualism. Likewise, as believers we see ourselves today as standing in continuity with the community of Israel and with the communities that gathered around Jesus—some may not like this historical dimension, but it's hard to be a 'Christian' if you are not linked to the first groups that were called 'Christians.' Then again, to be linked to those who claimed Jesus was 'the Christ' promised by God, we need to be in connection with their community, Israel.

The Bible is the collection of those shared, connective stories; it is by inheriting them that we discover our own identity. But these stories only 'make sense' when they are viewed from within a group and heard within a group. We can make detailed studies of them *as texts*, as individuals, in much the same way we study other ancient texts, but if they are to be valued religiously then they have to be heard

as the stories of a community which sees itself walking along the Way of Life. When they are shared as the basic stories of our belonging, they form a common starting point for our group reflection on God's presence in our lives today. In that community reflection they can be re-told and re-remembered as *both* ancient *and* valuable for us today.

It is these twin locations of the Bible as our community inheritance—it is only 'mine' because I belong to the group, the Christians, who have brought it through history down to me—that make biblical studies both so important and so different from other studies of ancient texts. The first location is that it is a collection of ancient texts—covering several centuries and several languages and cultures, with many, often conflicting, perspectives. The other location is that these are texts we hear

again when we gather and which can act as a starting point for how we see God and his Christ (see Acts 3:18 and Rev. 12:10) present among us and calling us to discipleship. When one or other of these locations is denied, either the community's action or the book's value is liable to be eclipsed.

When the Bible's otherness from our expectations is ignored, then we run very close to fundamentalism. This is the two-part belief that, on the one hand, our access to the Mystery of Mysteries can be bounded by words imagined as frozen in time and print and, on the other hand, we can read the texts as if they belong to our culture—our world—and on our terms. Not surprisingly, many who wish to banish the Bible from our religious culture tell us this is the only way to use the Bible and imagine that is what we must, or should, be doing when we hear it. To cope with these stories' oth-

The late Roman apse mosaic of the Basilica Santa Pudenziana, which dates from the fourth century, depicts Christ in the garb of a Roman Emperor, translating his significance into the visual language of the worshipping community.



erness, however, we need to engage with them critically and carefully using all the tools of investigation—they are variants on the methods of the detective—that we have developed for looking at ancient and foreign cultures. This work we could imagine as being that of carrying a lantern into the complex ways of the past. It needs historians and archaeologists, literary critics and theologians, and many others; they show how complex this collection is, how it was put together, how and for what it was used and what it tells us about communities of the past. But if this is the only approach, then while the Bible—as one of the most complex products of human culture—will remain an object of fascination in the academy, its study will be but a variation of those dedicated to the cultures of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia or the Greco-Roman world.

These stories are the inheritance of communities who, by sharing them and bringing them into collision with their other stories and their personal histories, find in this act of reflection a springboard to a vision of life that is at once both intimate to the creation and greater than it. This is no mere repetition of those ancient stories—as if the truth is to be found in the past—but a collective engagement within a community on what had brought them together, what holds them together and what sets their agenda. In any such moment of engagement there will be many stories at work—some of them biblical, some belonging to their own culture (be that medieval or modern, British or African, or whatever), and some which belong to the immediate local environment; Jews and Christians in their gatherings were the first groups who developed the skill to ‘think global, act local.’ But if these retellings of ancient stories form a link between my community and the first communities of Jesus’s followers

and to Israel, they also form the bedrock by which my community can come into discussion with every other community of disciples—they form our common culture.

Here we meet a parallel set of dangers to those of fundamentalism: those of cultism or sectarianism. These dangers manifest themselves, first, when a community becomes so involved in its own agenda of the moment that it loses its links to its original identity and, second, when it becomes so absorbed in itself that it fails to dialogue with other communities of Christians, seeing them as simple, mistaken or lost. These twin dangers—and they are endemic dangers—are counterbalanced by recognizing that all communities, in the past and today, share this great body of stories—but that, as with all such collections, these stories generate different retellings, different understandings and a plethora of more local histories. When we appreciate how the Bible functions in communities, we realize that it allows Christians to be one with each other while also preserving their differences, because it forms our common currency. So why bother with the Bible? Because it is our treasure of stories, the shared stories of our common identity, which put us in connection both with the past, with one another and with all who have been or are followers of The Way when we interact with them in our communities. Then, in thinking and praying from within that common identity, we glimpse the next steps along The Way.

Further Reading

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Why Does The Bible

Why does the Bible matter for ethics? This might seem to be a very important question. Yet only a few centuries ago in Europe this question would have been inconceivable: ‘Of course the Bible matters—how can you ask such a question?’ In our modern world, by contrast, matters are by no means so obvious and so we have to pose the question explicitly: Why does the Bible matter? Let us explore how life has changed.

Modern Rationalisation

In centuries past, the Bible offered an understanding of life—a narrative in which the world of human life made sense. It provided a story of creation, fall, redemption, expectation, and judgement in relation to which an individual life could take on meaning. The Bible also offered an account of human responsibilities, as well as an account of how people might flourish and find their ultimate fulfilment. And because the Bible was the basis for a shared culture, it offered a basis for agreement, for trust, and for cooperation. Perhaps in the modern world we have become more proficient at these tasks—understanding the world, finding practical fulfilment, agreeing, and cooperating—by setting up a division of labour between disciplines. Science gives an understanding of the world; laws and institutions help to order our human responsibilities, while economic activities facilitate our quests for human fulfilment; and our nation-states offer a

basis for agreement, identity, trust, and cooperation. So matters have changed significantly—yet why have they changed?

Consideration of ethics in modern life takes on a rather different shape from traditional discussions. For example, much of contemporary institutional life is governed by the use of numbers: even the quality of academic research and teaching is now measured by ‘metrics’, by quantitative indicators. The motivation is this: if we can find ways of counting how good research and teaching are, so that we have clear evidence of where the best research and teaching is taking place, then one can provide funding to the best research and teaching. The converse, of course, is also true: we choose what kinds of things are best to learn, to teach, and to research, because these are the kinds of things that will be funded, or lead on to paid employment. These choices are ethical, and most of what we do in modern life is based around such ethical questions: to what should we direct our efforts, devote our energies, and spend our time? Nowadays we have met-

Matter For Ethics?

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rics; we have quantifying procedures; we have defined roles and responsibilities; and we have systems to follow. If there is a national scandal over something that has gone wrong people are of course blamed, but the modern solution is always clear: let us invent new systems so that this can never happen again. People's conduct is increasingly regulated by various explicit rules and codes. Responsibility becomes limited to the performance of roles. This has the advantage of ensuring that we are much more efficient and effective. It matters much less what ends we wish to pursue than that we pursue them efficiently and effectively, and so make the world a better place. So ethics has changed its nature for those who work in institutions in

modern life, whether religious or not. Under such conditions, we might begin ask how the Bible is relevant. Does the Bible tell me how to do my job properly? Most named jobs and roles that people work in today did not exist two centuries ago, except in a few cases in very different forms. How, then, can an ancient text tell us how to live our lives? Is the Bible only relevant for personal and family life?

Here is one explanation of why things have changed. It is to do with the division of labour. We become better and better at performing a more and more specialised role and then we rely on other people to perform other more specialised roles. Together in cooperation we can be much more effective—but only as long as we are

organised properly. If my role is balanced with and interacts with the roles of others, then modern life can operate effectively. Yet this specialised division of labour raises a problem:



Once our duties are written up in the form of rules and regulations we have to follow, given us from outside, then personal ethics are not sufficient.

in order to get the world to work together, we need such a complex organisation that no one really understands every single part of it. Many people are so specialised in their expertise that few others really understand what they do, while those who manage many specialists have no hope of understanding and directing the activities of all those they manage. This means that no one person can take over-all ethical responsibility. Instead, we have to have systems, procedures, and audits. Yet once our duties are written up in the form of rules and regulations we have to follow, given us from outside, then personal ethics are not sufficient. It is not good enough for me to be a deeply ethical and sincere person; it is not good enough for me to be a deeply devout person, or

simply to have good intentions or the right personal dispositions or capacities. Instead, I have to be assessed against my given responsibilities and demonstrate that I have fulfilled

all my objectives. The formal regulation of duties, conduct, and relationships is required. In the past these roles and regulations simply did not exist, so no ancient text offers guidance on their performance. This leads to a crisis of relevance for the Bible: if so many people fulfil their professional and domestic duties responsibly without drawing on the Bible, why does the Bible matter for ethics?

Three Kinds of Goods:

*Modern Appropriation,
Ancient Participation,
and Biblical Renunciation*

What is worse, perhaps the Bible seems simply too unworldly. Let us take a classic example of some unworldly ethical instruc-

tions from the teachings of Jesus: 'Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again' (Luke 6:30). To test its relevance for ethics, consider this: could a modern university incorporate this into its statutes and codes of conduct?

At first sight, the answer seems obvious: of course not. And yet perhaps it all depends on what kind of goods we are thinking about. What kinds of goods are there? Are there goods that one should always give away? I would like to suggest that there are three important kinds of goods and that differentiating these can shape how we think about ethics.

There are *goods of appropriation*—things which can be made mine or yours. These are the kinds of things that can only be mine insofar as they are not yours and can only be yours insofar as they are not mine. Food, once eaten, is of this nature. Private property, houses, rights to things, rights to financial instruments, for example—these are goods of appropriation. These are the kinds of things that we can exchange or count. We can use these as evidence to demonstrate the quality of what we do. If our modern

life is about producing these goods of appropriation, then criteria of efficiency and effectiveness seem important. Moreover, the more that we can quantify, the more easily we can compare. There is an ethical imperative to invent systems of measuring so that we can be certain of the relative value of what we do.

There are also more subtle levels of appropriation. Appropriation might be a matter of taking in hand, using or eating something. It might be a matter of staking a legal claim. Yet when it comes to goods that we share in common, such as economic growth, our minds can appropriate them insofar as they are quantified. They constitute evidence. Once we can measure things, we can manage them. It is not that the evidence is mine rather than yours, for evidence is always shared; but once we can measure things—and say that one thing is better than another—then this relative value can only belong to one thing rather than another. Our minds appropriate our respect for this rather than that. Overall, this process leads to a further sense of appropriation: the more we make things quantifiable, the more we make things manageable. Our world is appropriated by our systems for measuring. We re-organise the way things are done so that they can be quantified and managed.

There are some who feel that this process of appropriation is ambivalent. Does the land belong to us, or do we belong to the land? More profoundly, do our lives belong to ourselves, or do our lives belong to something greater than us, such as God? As God warned Noah, ‘Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood’ (Gen. 9:3-4). Is everything subject to appropriation, to be eaten by either body or

mind or management system, or is there a remainder in life that appropriates us?

Sometimes in the modern world we are so preoccupied with evidence-based decision-making that we have to remind ourselves that the origins of ethics were not primarily concerned with such goods of appropriation. Ethics started with *goods of participation*—things that can only be mine insofar as they are also yours.¹ For example, one cannot have a private Centre for Bible, Ethics and Theology, but only a shared centre. These goods would include the environments that we share and live in, the laws and regulations that guide our conduct and the institutions that give shape to our lives. These are things that we can regulate, understand, and make sense of, but we would express them in terms of ideals rather than as things we can quantify. In relation to these goods, our personal responsibility is no longer a matter of producing objects for appropriation, but ensuring the common good above all else. Here, qualities are more relevant than quantities. One contributes towards the common good by embodying the virtues—especially the four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and prudence:

Here, qualities are more relevant than quantities. One contributes to the common good by embodying the virtues—especially justice, temperance, courage and prudence.

assessing the moral qualities of others to actively contribute to the common good is more significant than measuring the quantity of their individual achievements. An institution or a tradition is not simply accumulated; it is received, performed, and enacted through the capacities of its prin-

principal figures. Such actions and capacities participate in the virtues and educate others about how to participate as well.

So we have distinguished goods of appropriation from goods of participation. The Bible, however, speaks to us less of the common good and the virtues than it does of blood and *reununciation*. In Leviticus, God explains the prohibition against eating blood: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement' (Lev. 17:11). Blood, here, is not to be appropriated but offered. Is there another kind of good—the good of life itself—that cannot be eaten or appropriated, but only offered? Let us return to Jesus' unworldly saying, 'Give to everyone who begs from you and if anyone takes away your goods do not ask for them again.' This is strange and unworldly when applied to goods of appropriation, things such as shirts which are wearable, as well as goods of participation, such as virtues which are inalienable. Yet what of those who take up one's time, one's care, one's attention, or one's life? It would be most strange to ask for one's time back. That is, not simply to ask the equivalent amount of the time of another, for such time is never equivalent, but to ask for the very time that one has given or lent. It has already gone: it has been offered, spilled like blood, and will return to this life no more. Such considerations perhaps indicate that there could be another kind of goods: goods that we only have insofar as we offer them, or perhaps even renounce them. I live my life by spending my life, and even if I spend all my time on myself, I no longer have that time. These goods would be things that are only mine insofar as I give them away. For example, take 'care': I can only have care if I do care,

separate domains. It is important to consider goods of appropriation, but we can consider them as primarily economic goods. It is important to consider goods of participation, but we can consider these under the broad heading of political goods. But how we spend our time, what we take as mattering,

economic goods that are measured by efficiency and effectiveness? When Jesus counselled against storing up treasure on earth, 'where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal' (Matt. 6:19), was he not warning against the unrealistic denial of time implicit in seeking goods of appropriation? When Jesus advised people, 'Therefore, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear' (Matt. 6:25), was he not simply pointing out the reality that life is more than food and the body more than clothing?

We must go further. A life can be led among economic, political, and religious goods—insofar as we consider them simply as goods, and so treat them as separate domains—but insofar as we treat these as bases for ethics, then they come into direct competition: ‘No one can serve two masters: for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Matt. 6:24). My initial sugges-

tion, therefore, has to be qualified: we are not dealing with distinct domains of goods, here, but simply with faith and the way that faith guides people to live their lives. What will form the ultimate basis for our ethical judgements: measurable quantities, conceptual qualities, or a life that is offered to that which matters?

In the eschatological perspective of the New Testament gospel, it is only people's lives that count in the final judgement, not

as worthy of attention,
that to which we offer ourselves—could
we call these religious goods?

It is the nature of human life that, as temporal creatures, we have to spend our time. Even if I spend my time on myself, I don't have it any more. And yet I still have to spend it, in order to have had that time. So can we consider religious goods as more fundamental and more realistic than



CBET Photo Competition 2015 entry by Mark Wreford: "My wife, Ellie, reading a childhood Bible she was given by her parents to our eldest son, Caleb."

their wealth or their righteousness. People will be judged by their faith—by how they guide their conduct. As Paul puts it, 'For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit' (Rom. 8:5). Eschatology reminds us that life is tempo-

ral. Life itself is the investment of time, attention, and devotion; even if we spend these on ourselves, we only have our lives insofar as we spend them. As Simone Weil put it, 'We possess only what we renounce; what we do not renounce escapes from us.'³ Life is essentially offering, renunciation, and sacrifice: alongside goods of appropriation

and participation the truly spiritual goods, goods consisting in the lives of singular individuals, form the basis for ethical judgement. Or, as Jesus put it, 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, while those who lose their life will save it' (Mark 8:35).

Conclusion

The Bible speaks to us all the time about these religious goods of offering. In doing so, it offers us a philosophy of life at odds with the modern world, yet accessible to those of any religious faith, explicit or implicit. As temporal creatures in receipt of our time, it is necessary to offer our attention to that which we take as mattering: we care, we venerate things as mattering, and we distribute that care through faith and so implicit worship is a requirement laid upon us by the flow of time. In Christianity, however, such implicit worship is only spiritual when it enacts the love of God in Christ that it has received. As Kierkegaard puts it,

The more he loves the unseen, the more he will love the men he sees. It is not the opposite, that the more he rejects

*those he sees, the more he loves the unseen, for when this is the case, God is changed into an unreal something, a fancy... God is too exalted to be able to accept a man's love directly... If you want to show that it is intended for God, then give it away, but with the thought of God... God is not a part of existence in such a way that he demands his share for himself... God demands nothing for himself, although he demands everything from you.*⁴

Thus, in Paul's terms, to be 'in Christ' means that 'Christ lives in you'. There is a strange resonance between what Paul says of Christ and what we may say of love or time. Kierkegaard once more:

*God's relationship to a human being is the infinitising at every moment of that which at every moment is in a man... everything you say to and do to other human beings God simply repeats; he repeats it with the intensification of infinity.*⁵

The life that we have is the life that we give; it is only by giving our lives that we receive any life at all.

In conclusion, then, there are three aspects to this biblical basis for ethics. The first aspect is universal, affecting all creation: the flow of time means that we are continually being given up to death, but it is only by spending time, attention, and love that we have a life. 'What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15:42-4).

The second aspect is one of judgement: there are those who commit their lives to

the quest for goods of appropriation and those who commit their lives to the quest for the eternal security of ideas, but only those who live according to flow of time are adapted to reality. The flow of time judges the truth of our existential orientation.

The third aspect is one of salvation: the manifestation of love in the flesh is a power that converts attention from the things of the flesh to the things of the Spirit. The flow of time, far from being a formal structure or empty container, is always a singular existence.

So when we think about ethics, are we only going to consider goods of appropriation, what we can count and measure, and how we may perform our roles as efficiently and effectively as possible? Or are we going to consider how we live our lives, give our time, our care, our attention, and our love? The Bible matters today because it tells us about this much more fundamental level of ethical life. Ethical life is essentially worship, essentially sacrifice, and the distribution of time, attention and love.

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The Bible And Sys

Amongst the various specialisms that compose the discipline of theology today—pastoral, practical, biblical, historical—the area that is labelled ‘systematic theology’ is concerned principally with Christian doctrine. The tradition of Christian belief and practice articulates certain doctrines or teachings concerning God, creation, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, the human person and so on. This field of theology is systematic in the sense that the theologian seeks to interpret and organise these teachings in a systematic way, so as to reveal their interconnections and overall coherence and intelligibility. For example, how does the doctrine of God help us to understand what is meant by creation? What is the connection between what is professed about the person and work of Christ and the nature and history of salvation? What is the church in relation to the Holy Spirit whose gifts the church receives? In undertaking this task of interpreting Christian teaching, the systematic theologian does not deal with Scripture only as a historical text.

Through its various kinds of writing, Scripture also makes metaphysical claims: it tells us what things are and what they mean. For example, Genesis is not merely a book about how God created and neither is it *only* a measure of the priestly priorities of the Judahites when they returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. Genesis is also concerned with what creation *is* and what it *means*. In short, Genesis teaches that creation is ‘very good’ and that humanity has a particular place within the created order as formed in God’s image and likeness. In trying to interpret these scriptural claims, the systematic theologian will use a range of tools of intellectual enquiry, particularly those of philosophy. The blending of contemplation and analy-

sis in the practice of philosophy, its lack of a delineated subject matter and its shared concern with existence and meaning, make philosophy particularly well suited to the task of aiding the interpretation of Christian teaching founded in Scripture.

Over the twentieth century, systematic theologians debated vigorously how Scripture should be deployed, the nature of scriptural authority and the relationship of the theological interpretation of Scripture to the historical-critical study of the Bible. Nevertheless, there is a striking consensus between probably the two most prominent systematic theologians of the twentieth century—one Protestant Reformed and the other Roman Catholic—concerning the place of Scripture in the theological enter-

Systematic Theology

Simon Oliver

prise. For the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968), the Word of God is given in threefold form: the Word revealed (Jesus Christ), the Word written (Scripture) and the Word proclaimed (church witness to, and proclamation of, Jesus Christ as Lord through its reading and interpretation of Scripture). Whilst Jesus Christ is the Word incarnate, the Bible and church proclamation become the Word of God in their fidelity to God's self-revelation in the Word who is Jesus Christ.¹ In very similar fashion, the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988)—also Swiss—writes that 'Scripture is the word of God that bears witness to God's Word. The one Word therefore makes its appearance as though dividing into a word that testi-

fies and into a Word to whom testimony is given.'² To put the matter very simply, the Bible is rather like the picture frame around the portrait of Jesus Christ.

Very few, if any, systematic theologians of the various Christian traditions would deny that Scripture is central to their task. For some, the reason for this centrality is very simple: Scripture is God's word to humanity and is therefore trustworthy and true in a way that invites our faithful and obedient attention. To put the matter another way, in the Bible we read what God wants us to hear, so we should listen. For Karl Barth, Christian theology is a 'speaking after' what is spoken to us first by God in Christ and witnessed by Scripture. So Christian theology is not what we say about

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God, but what God says about himself and us in his threefold word—as revealed, written and proclaimed. In what follows, I would like to suggest that Scripture is central to the task of Christian systematic theology for another complementary reason: because it is first and foremost a word that is written only so that it can be spoken. In being spoken publicly, it is a creative word through which human creativity shares in divine creation. One of the most striking characteristics of the Bible is that, of all the texts produced by human culture, it is the one that is read and heard publicly, aloud, every day by millions of people. In a modern culture in which reading is usually a silent and private affair, the Bible is unique in being read aloud daily by large groups of people. Is this significant for understanding the Bible's importance? I will suggest that it is, and for theological reasons.

The Bible witnesses first and foremost to the spoken and creative word of God. In Genesis, God speaks creation into existence: 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then

ken Word in creation and election came to form the Hebrew Bible and latterly the canon of Christian Scripture. It is a matter of historical fact that, for much of Christian history, the Bible has been heard publicly rather than read privately. Prior to the invention of the printing press and the mass production of written texts, the Scriptures remained primarily a spoken liturgical text performed in churches. Large swathes of the Scriptures were committed to memory in order to be recited orally. Even when studied rather than used liturgically, the text would have been read aloud. As Peter Candler, a contemporary American systematic theologian and writer, puts it:

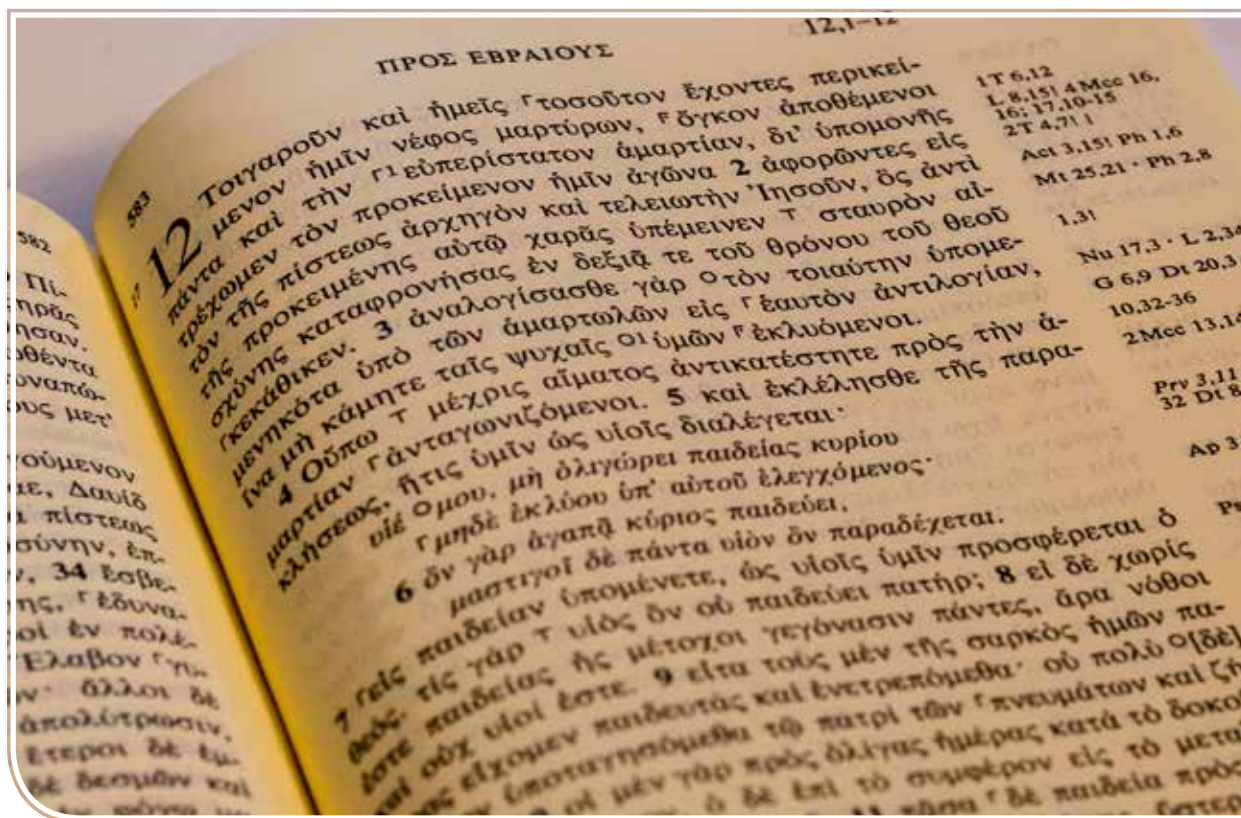
Much unlike the highly prized silence of our great research libraries, medieval monastic *scriptoria* are saturated with noise...Reading is an activity not only of the eyes, but also of the ears, not to mention the whole body. The text serves chiefly as an aid to the verbal articulation of words orally, which suggests that at this stage, writing is not only derivative of speech but also simply a record thereof for its further and future vocalization.³



Prior to the invention of the printing press and the mass production of written texts, the scriptures remained primarily a spoken liturgical text.

God said, "Let there be light..." The prologue to John's Gospel is a gloss on Genesis: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being.' The record of this divine spo-

To understand why this is significant we can turn to one of the Western tradition's most influential reflections on the relationship between the spoken and written word. Around 370 BCE, the Greek philosopher Plato wrote a dialogue about love and rhetoric named after its principal character, Phaedrus. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates, Plato's teacher and the key character in many of his dialogues, is taking a walk outside the walls of Athens. He is in conversation with Phaedrus, who has been listening to a speech about the nature of love delivered by a famous Athenian rhetorician known as Lysias. Socrates express-



es his great desire to hear Lysias's speech and, suspecting that Phaedrus has a copy hidden under his cloak, Socrates persuades him to perform the speech. What is the significance of Phaedrus possessing a written copy of Lysias's speech? To write down a speech implies that it can be repeated endlessly as the same speech; it can be read over and over again. The speech has, as it were, been 'captured'. Once written down, the speech becomes a document to be passed on; the knowledge it contains can be bought and sold. But when Phaedrus reads Lysias's speech, is Socrates hearing Lysias or merely a copy or echo of Lysias? Plato's dialogue suggests that there is far more to a speech and the learning that it conveys than merely the written words. The context of the speech, including its time and location, the immediate purpose of the speech and the characters of its hearers, are crucial to the speech's meaning. Plato sees that the context in which wisdom is conveyed is

CBET Photo Competition 2015 entry by Jonny Rowlands.

crucial to a proper understanding and the attainment of a perfect state of being and knowledge which all philosophers seek. Towards the end of the dialogue, this leads Plato to suggest that the spoken word is of greater value than the written word. Why? Because the written word implies that wisdom or knowledge can be fixed, captured and endlessly traded. But wisdom, for Plato and his teacher Socrates, is drawn out of a student by conversation in which circumstance and context—the very form of life—are crucial. The spoken word is fluid and fleeting. It does not pretend to capture wisdom, but seeks it through the performance and movement of rhetoric. To make this point more simply, think of one of the most famous speeches of the twentieth century: Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, so iconic of the American civil rights movement. Imagine the difference between

reading this speech on the internet today and the experience of an African American standing at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, listening to King's oration on that August day in 1963.

Surely, to understand the real power and persuasiveness of Martin

Luther King's speech,

one must consider

its original con-

text and the

mode of its

delivery,

not simply

words

typed on

a page or

appear-

ing on a

computer

screen.

The con-

text or per-

formance of the

spoken word is

therefore integral to its

creative power and mean-

ing. The written text implies the possibility of endless and identical repetition in which context does not matter. So whereas the written word ossifies human thought and renders imaginable the fixing of and trade in those ideas, the spoken word is spontaneous and invites communal creative conversation and shared response. It is, as it were, a living and creative word with as yet unanticipated possibilities, rather than a juridical and regulative word chiselled in stone tablets (2 Cor. 3:6).

In antiquity and the Middle Ages, the Scriptures as the written word of God were encountered in very precious manuscripts by a very few people, but by the wider populace through oral performance in the

liturgy of the church. So the Bible was, at least in theory, public and shared because it was heard collectively in a communal context. The translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular in Europe in the sixteenth century, supremely by William Tyndale,

finally made the hearing of the Bible truly public. Today, reading is

largely a private and silent

matter. Whilst we may

read the same texts

identically repeat-

ed through print-

ing (the latest

C.J. Sansom, for

example) we

do so in quite

different

contexts

and for

different

reasons,

in such a

way that

this is not a

truly shared read-

ing and hearing. The growing

popularity of book clubs tries to

make such reading more communal and

public. Occasionally, a series of texts be-

comes so popular that it captures the col-

lective imagination and becomes extreme-

ly creative by being an act of communal

reading and thinking. A good example

would be the *Harry Potter* novels by J.K.

Rowling. Indeed, the nearest we come to

the public oral performance of written texts

today is the film adaptation of such novels.

This is creative because film overcomes

the private activity of reading and gener-

ates a public and shared performance *with*

which people can think and discuss. Yet a

one-off cinematic performance of just two

hours tells us so much less than a book that

is read aloud habitually and communally

“ *The context or performance of the spoken word is integral to its creative power and meaning. It is spontaneous and invites shared response.* ”

from one generation to the next.

The Bible is unique in literature in being publically read aloud every day. As such, the context of its reading—the Christian liturgy—is crucial. Understanding the primary context of the Bible's performance is as important as remembering the context of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech when appreciating the meaning of the text beyond simple authorial intention. This is because it allows us also to consider the reception of that text, namely its hearing as well as its speaking. Just as importantly, however, the word of God in Scripture becomes creative in being read aloud in such a way that a response is provoked. The public reading of the Bible generates a shared hearing, which becomes a common framework and prompt for music, the visual arts and communal acts of education, healthcare and charity. It is no surprise that the Bible has motivated the greater portion of Western music, art and architecture precisely because, in the public liturgy of the church, it is the spoken record of the creative speech of God. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even the natural sciences found their rationale through the spoken naming of the creatures by Adam in the Garden of Eden. Here was the creative word of humanity ordering and relating the parts of God's creation. The burgeoning natural sciences took on the mantle of creatively naming then sorting and predicting the creation spoken into being by God.

In contrast to our public reading of Scripture, we do not routinely read aloud other kinds of 'public' texts, such as legal documents, national written constitutions, institutional statutes and the like. Such texts are important but occasional points of reference. They convey facts or fix a set of rules for certain practices—rules that must be enforced when potential or actual infringement is detected. Insofar as the Bible

remains only or primarily a written text, rather than a text that is read aloud, heard and discussed, it takes on a regulative rather than creative character. It becomes a doctrinal legal charter—a regulative rulebook of doctrine, or the mere written constitution of the church. Such is the importance of the Bible for some Christian churches. But for the systematic theologian, a juridical or regulative understanding to the Bible is, at best, insufficient, because it does not do justice to the *creative* spoken Word to which the scriptural text first bears witness. For both Barth and von Balthasar, the word of God written in Scripture is the word of God only in its fidelity to the Word that is first and foremost the Word that is spoken in the beginning, through whom and for whom all things were made. A central aspect of Scripture's fidelity to the Word is its creative character that emerges from its habitual public reading rather than exclusive private study. This is also an important part of the Bible's authority and its claim on us: it is a supremely public book that is heard communally. It is the first body of literature in history that is compiled for everyone rather than a particular racial, political, intellectual or ruling class.

Attending to the creative rather than regulative understanding of Scripture through its public reading is crucial to systematic theology if it is to be a living and creative mode of intellectual enquiry. For some strands of Christian theology, notably the neoscholasticism that held sway in Roman Catholicism at the turn of the twentieth century, the purpose of Christian teaching is only the transmission of a fixed body of doctrine codified in theological manuals for private reading. Scripture was merely a part of that 'deposit of truth' that was passed from one generation to the next, identically repeated on each occasion. The coincidence of scant public reading of



The pulpit at Durham Cathedral, where Simon Oliver is Canon.

Scripture in the liturgy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the ossifying, uncreative and mechanical character of the theology in this period is not coincidental. Indeed, one can deploy an important distinction used by Philip Goodchild in his contribution to this collection to understand how our reading of Scripture must remain creative by being also a shared hearing of Scripture. Philip writes about goods of appropriation and goods of participation. Goods of appropriation are exclusively or individually owned and enjoyed, such as private property. These are economically quantifiable goods and they are mine *or* yours. Goods of participation are goods that are shared. Such goods can be mine *and* yours, such as a public park or a school. In addition to these, there are religious goods of action. These are goods precisely in being given, such as caring, attention or love. We only have care if we give care. We give care, attention and love; they are relational goods. Jesus even implies that our very life is a good of this kind: 'For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matt. 16:25). Insofar as the reading of the Bible is private and silent, it risks being a good of appropriation, by remaining primarily a written rather than spoken word. This was Plato's concern with Phaedrus's writing of Lysias's speech: it had become a good of appropriation that could be traded. Insofar as the Bible is read aloud and heard communally, it is a shared good of participation. It might also be understood as a good that is ours only by being given, rather like the giving of a speech. To have a speech, we must give a speech because the audience and context are part and parcel of that speech. Maybe even to have Scripture in its fullness, Scripture must be *given* in its oral and public reading within the context of

the community of the church.

None of this is to deny the importance of the individual scholarly reading and study of the Bible, either in historical-critical or theological mode. These are crucial enterprises in the discernment of truth. We should recognise, however, that the importance and authority of the Bible, and therefore the importance of the many and various approaches to the study of the Bible that we enjoy today, rests fundamentally on the *way* it is read and not simply on the fact that it is read or bought more than any other book in the world. It is read aloud and heard communally in the body we call the church, and it is *this* Bible, not the Bible bought in the local bookshop, to which the systematic theologian attends for the source and goal of her enterprise. By attending to the Bible as the church's Scriptures whose principal home is the liturgy and secondary home the library and seminar room, systematic theology becomes a creative action that is a response to, and participation in, God's creative and redemptive Word.

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Why The Bible Matt

There is a sense in which the Bible does not matter at all to Muslims and is of no interest for the study of Islam. Mainstream Islamic tradition has discouraged or prohibited reading the Bible and has taken the Qur'an as the final and complete revelation, making earlier revelations superfluous. Moreover, Muslims maintain that Christians and Jews have either changed the very wording of their Scriptures or at least corrupted the pure monotheistic message they originally contained. It is Islamic doctrine that God gave Moses the Torah, David the Psalms, and Jesus the gospel. However, Muslims do not find sufficient evidence to believe that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have transmitted those original revelations faithfully, and they maintain that the original gospel given to Jesus has in fact been lost. The four Gospels found in the New Testament are no more than accounts written by Jesus' followers. They may contain some parts of the gospel revealed to Jesus, but one cannot know for sure.

The relationship of the Qur'an and Islam to the Christian New Testament may be compared to the relationship of Christianity to the Jewish Tanakh or Hebrew Bible. Historically speaking, Judaism and Christianity as we know them today both emerged out of the variegated Jewish religious environment found at the time of Jesus. Theologically speaking, however, Christianity comes after Judaism and sees the New Testament message of Jesus Christ as the completion of God's promises given in the Hebrew Bible. Christians thus read the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament, preparing the way for the New, and the Hebrew Bible is an integral part of the Christian canon of Scripture. Christians cannot reject the Hebrew Bible since

they believe that the story it tells is essential to God's work brought to fullness in Christ. The fact that Jews and Christians share a Scripture with its stories, wisdom, and prophetic insights means that they have much in common. They can talk together about the faith journey of Abraham and Sarah and the drama of Samson and Delilah, and they can appreciate together the prophets' calls for justice and the deep psychological insights of the Psalms. Yet the Christian relationship with Judaism remains ambivalent, because Christians and Jews disagree on the fundamental meaning of the Hebrew Bible and whether it finds fulfilment in the New Testament.

Much as Christians confess to know better what the Hebrew Bible means than

ers: Islamic Studies

Jon Hoover

Jews, Muslims confess that the Qur'an trumps both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. However, Muslims go one step further than Christians, by excluding all earlier texts from the domain of authoritative Scripture. Emerging in the seventh century, Islam comes after Christianity both historically and theologically—and the Qur'an clearly refers to both Judaism and Christianity in a way that the Bible could never have referred to Islam. The Qur'an perceives itself as proclaiming the same message as that given to earlier messengers, such as Moses and Jesus, and it sometimes regards Jews and Christians as having equal access to God's blessings and rewards: 'Truly, those who believe, those who are Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians—whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does

good deeds—will have their reward before their Lord. No fear will overtake them, nor will they grieve' (Q. 2:62). Moreover, the Qur'an refers to many stories, practices, and beliefs familiar from the Bible and late antique Christian and Jewish literature—to the point that some historians speak of a biblical subtext to the Qur'an. Yet Muslims have traditionally rejected the notion that the Bible, Judaism and Christianity had any influence on the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad, and Muslims have not taken the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament into their canon of authoritative Scriptures. Instead, it is understood that the Prophet Muhammad received the Qur'an directly from God, without the mediation of the Bible or the Jews and Christians of that time. In Muslim doctrine, the Qur'an proclaims the

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same essential theological message as the Bible and provides the final corrective to all error found in it, but the Qur'an is in no way dependent upon the Bible.

The fact that Muslims have not adopted the Bible as part of their canon of Scripture means that they need not try to reconcile its stories with differing accounts found in the Qur'an. In a simple example, the biblical account of Noah has all three of Noah's sons and their families board the ark, and they are all saved from the impending flood (Gen. 7:13). However, the qur'anic account says that one of Noah's sons refused to enter the ark and thought that he could save himself by seeking refuge on a high mountain; he of course drowned (Q. 11:42-43). For Muslims the qur'anic account takes priority over the biblical version.

In another example, the Qur'an does not say clear-

ly that Jesus died on the cross. Rather, it accuses the Jews of claiming that they had killed Jesus when in fact they had not. The text reads, '[The Jews] said, "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them... they certainly did not kill him' (Q. 4:157). Many a Muslim interpreter has said that this verse denies that Jesus died on the cross—God instead raised him to heaven directly—and has suggested instead that one of Jesus' disciples was made to look like him and was crucified in his place. Christian readers of the Qur'an have noted that it also quotes Jesus as saying, 'Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised to life again' (Q. 19:33), and have argued that there is thus no reason to deny Jesus' death on the cross, as the verse affirms both Jesus' death and resurrection. It was,

have explained this qur'anic reference to Jesus' death differently: it applies to his dying a natural death after returning to earth just before the final Day of Resurrection—not to a death during his earlier time on earth. This traditional Muslim interpretation makes no attempt to reconcile the text with the New Testament crucifixion accounts.

Even though the Bible holds no religious authority for Muslims and despite the widespread Muslim conviction that the Qur'an and Islam owe nothing to the Bible, Muslims have still found occasion to use the Bible, in a variety of sometimes unexpected ways. It is here that the Bible begins to matter for Muslims and the study of Islam, and Muslim use of the Bible certainly constitutes an important chapter in the history of the Bible's reception and interpretation.

The Qur'an is not always easy for readers today to understand, even for native speakers of Arabic. Nor was it easy to understand for the early Muslim community either. This created a demand for biblical lore—stories derived from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and especially later religious writings of biblical inspira-



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after all, the Romans who carried out the crucifixion, not the Jews. Muslim commentators for their part

tion—to fill in the gap. Two early Jewish converts to Islam, ‘Abd Allah ibn Salam and Ka’b al-Ahbar, were well known for knowledge of biblical traditions, while the most famous early Qur’an commentator, Ibn ‘Abbas (d. 686), apparently made liberal use of their traditions. Moreover, there was a saying narrated from the Prophet Muhammad permitting borrowing from the Jews. The Prophet is reported to have said, ‘Transmit from me, even if only one verse. And narrate [traditions] from the Children of Israel; there is nothing objectionable in that’ (found in the hadith collection of Bukhari). The net result of this liberality toward biblical lore was that a lot of it found its way into early commentary on the Qur’an. With the passing of the centuries, however, some Muslims grew increasingly ambivalent toward these stories; the medieval Qur’an commentator Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) was one noteworthy critic. Ibn Kathir argued that Muslims should rely solely on the Qur’an and traditions from the Prophet Muhammad to interpret the sacred text, not on stories and legends borrowed from Jews and Christians.

One example will illustrate the point. The Qur’an is not entirely clear about which son Abraham was commanded to sacrifice (Q. 37:100-107). Was it Isaac, as Jews and Christians contend on the basis of Genesis 22:1-13, or was it Ishmael? Numerous traditions were gathered in support of both views, and classical Qur’an commentators weighed up the evidence, sometimes in favour of Isaac and sometimes in favour of Ishmael. Ibn Kathir sought to put an end to this speculation by condemning the Jewish convert Ka’b al-Ahbar as the source for all traditions supporting Isaac and by reinterpreting the Qur’an, and even the Bible itself, to support Ishmael as Abraham’s intended sacrifice. Ibn Kathir’s attack on Ka’b al-Ahbar reverberated through the centuries into

the modern period. Just before Zionism ushered in the state of Israel in 1948, a Muslim commentator in Egypt named Abu Rayya labeled Ka’b al-Ahbar the first Zionist, on account of what was now seen to be his hideous attempt to undermine the Islam-

Many Muslim Qur’an scholars throughout the twentieth century worked to cleanse qur’anic commentary of biblical lore and interpret the Qur’an only through itself.

ic religion. Many Muslim Qur’an scholars throughout the twentieth century worked to cleanse qur’anic commentary of biblical lore and interpret the Qur’an only through itself and traditions from the Prophet.

Even though most Muslims no longer look to biblical lore to illuminate the meaning of the Qur’an, the Bible is still of concern to them insofar as they encounter it in interaction with Jews and Christians. For readers of the Qur’an today, the ongoing existence of Jews, Christians and the Bible provide contemporary, even if inexact, analogues for the Qur’an’s numerous references to them, and they continue to present many of the questions to which the Qur’an was responding 1400 years ago. If the Bible and those who read it as authoritative Scripture no longer existed, the Qur’an would lose much of its rhetorical force as a dialogical and polemical text speaking to a sectarian religious environment.

The fact that Jews and Christians take the Bible as authoritative and express their religiosity through it also challenges Muslims to read it and come to a view on its contents. Muslims have adopted several strategies in this regard. I will outline four, two of which are dominant. The first is to demonstrate the corruption of the biblical



An 11th century North African Qur'an in the British Museum.

text, and the second is to find predictions of the Prophet Muhammad in the Bible.

The eleventh century Andalusian scholar Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) adopted the first strategy. He is well known for pointing out alleged errors, contradictions and inappropriate claims to prove the corruptness of the biblical text. He notices, for example, that the four Gospels differ over Jesus' first disciples Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. Matthew and Mark report that Jesus called these two disciples to follow him just as they were about to cast their fishing nets into the sea and after the arrest of John the Baptist (Matt. 4:12-20; Mark 1:14-18). How-

ever, John reports that Andrew and Peter followed Jesus before the arrest of John the Baptist, not afterward (John 1:35-42), and Luke reports that Jesus' called them after they had been fishing all night, not before they were about to start out (Luke 5:1-11). Ibn Hazm concludes from the differences in these accounts that one or more of the Gospel writers must have lied and that the Gospels were written by liars. Beyond highlighting contradictions of this kind, Ibn Hazm complains that the Bible contains unfulfilled prophecies (e.g., Jesus' promise that the disciples would see the Kingdom of God before they die in Mark 9:1), por-



trays an anthropomorphic God (e.g., God as a warrior in Exod. 15:3), and attributes wrongdoing to prophets (e.g., Jacob stole Esau's birthright in Gen. 27).

The second strategy, that of finding the Prophet Muhammad predicted in the Bible, takes its cue from the Qur'an 61:6, 'And when Jesus, Son of Mary, said, "O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of God to you, confirming the To-

rah that was revealed previously and bearing good news of a Messenger coming after me whose name is Ahmad [i.e. the Prophet Muhammad]". Following on from this, Muslims frequently interpret Jesus' promise of the 'Comforter' or 'Advocate' (*paraclete*) in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; and 16:7 to refer to the Prophet Muhammad, not the Holy Spirit as Christians understand it. Similarly, Muslims have taken numerous texts from the Hebrew Bible to be predictions of Muhammad's coming, as in Deuteronomy 18:15 where Moses promises, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people.' Some Muslims have also claimed that Muhammad's name appears explicitly in Habakkuk 3:3 and 3:9.

It has often been observed that upholding the corruption of the Bible is incompatible with using it to prove the coming of Muhammad. If the Bible is corrupt, how can we know that its predictions of his prophethood are reliable? The fourteenth century theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) neatly resolves this dilemma by maintaining that God preserved the predictions of Muhammad from corruption at the hands of Jews

and Christians but not the rest of the text.

A third but less common Muslim strategy for dealing with the Bible is to give it an Islamic interpretation. This approach allows that the biblical text may not have been corrupted, but claims that Jews and Christians have misinterpreted it. In this manner, the medieval scholar Najm al-Din al-Tufi (d. 1316) wrote an extensive commentary on various parts of Genesis, the prophetic books and the four Gospels in order to 'correct' Christian interpretations. For example, al-Tufi considers the expression 'God is with us', found in the birth narrative of Christ in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 1:23, quoting Isa. 7:14). Al-Tufi accuses Christians of taking 'God is with us' literally, to refer to Jesus Christ as God incarnate, when they should rather read it metaphorically. The sense in which God was 'with' us in Christ was in Christ's performing miracles and in his commanding and prohibiting what God commanded and prohibited; God was with us inasmuch as his messenger was with us. Al-Tufi notes a parallel with the interpretation of the Qur'an verse 'God is with you wherever you are' (Q. 57:4) which, according to al-Tufi, means

A fourth and perhaps more recent Muslim strategy for making sense of the Bible is to treat it as one form of revelation among the many in which the one God has revealed the truths of divine unity and transcendence.

that God is our helper and protector, not that God in his very being is literally right next to us.

A fourth and perhaps more recent Muslim strategy for making sense of the Bible is to treat it as one form of revelation among the many in which the one God has revealed the truths of divine unity and transcendence. This approach is found among some Sufis, and a prominent proponent is Seyyed Hossain Nasr (b. 1933), for whom the diverse religions vary in their outward forms but are one in their inner meaning. Thus, the fact that the Bible and the Qur'an differ and even contradict each other in their particulars simply reflects God's choice to manifest the single inner truth in diverse forms. There is no substantive difference between the various religions and revelations.

The four Muslim strategies just surveyed share the same aim of giving biblical texts an Islamic reading, in order to blunt and replace Jewish and Christian interpretations that do not accord with Islamic doctrine. However, Muslims have not only read the Bible to neutralize antithetical interpretations of the text. They have also, on rare occasions, turned to the Bible as an ally in their pursuit of Islamic religious learning and even as a kind of independent sacred text.

Perhaps most noteworthy in this regard is the eccentric medieval scholar al-Biqā'i (d. 1480) who provoked considerable controversy in Cairo by quoting the Bible in

his massive Qur'an commentary. The Bible is not quite canonical for al-Biqā'i, and he maintains the authority of the Qur'an over the Bible in case of difference. However, he quotes long passages from the Hebrew Bible and the four Gospels to elucidate parallel texts in the Qur'an, often to the exclusion of more traditional Islamic exegetical materials such as the biblical lore mentioned earlier and the traditions from the Prophet Muhammad. For example, when the Qur'an first mentions the creation of Adam, al-Biqā'i quotes the first three chapters of Genesis. Al-Biqā'i elaborates the long qur'anic narrative of Joseph by copying in the biblical story of Joseph as well. He even uses the Bible as a source for ascertaining what Jews believe, and he is fond of quoting the Ten Commandments, as self-evidently divine revelation.

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), a prolific theologian from Damascus, provides a different but equally unusual instance of a Muslim finding an ally in Bible. In a treatise on God's creation of the world, he turns to Genesis 1:1-2 to show that his theological position enjoys support well beyond the Muslim community. After citing the first verse of Genesis—'In the beginning of the matter, God created the heavens and the earth'—Ibn Taymiyya emphasises that when God began to create the heavens and the earth 'water was [already] covering over the earth, and the wind was blowing over the water' (Gen. 1:2). As Ibn Taymiyya saw it, God did not create the world from nothing. The world as we now know it was created out of something else that existed beforehand.

That God created the world out of primeval chaos is a common interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2 among biblical scholars today, but in medieval times it was rare among both Muslim and Christian theologians. Christians from the early centuries

of the church argued that God's creative activity had a beginning—it was impossible that the world extended back in time infinitely—and the Fourth Lateran Council enshrined this view as an article of faith in 1215. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) did allow that a good rational case could be made for the eternity of the world as well, but he ultimately found reason inadequate to decide the matter. It must be taken on the authority of Genesis 1:1 that the world had a beginning. Most Muslim theologians reasoned to the same conclusion, and some even condemned Muslim philosophers who argued for the eternity of the world as heretics. Along the way, though, occasional voices wondered whether the Qur'an really said clearly that the world had a beginning. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210), one of the sharpest minds the Islamic tradition has ever known, concluded that neither reason nor revealed texts could decide the matter. The only thing that could be known for sure was that the world depended on God for its existence.

Ibn Taymiyya was not so sceptical. The Damascene Muslim scholar quotes Genesis 1:1-2 to buttress a position on creation that he had already come to on the basis of qur'anic verses, such as '[God] created the heavens and the earth in six days, and His Throne was on the water' (Q. 11:7). To Ibn Taymiyya this verse indicates the existence of water and God's Throne prior to the creation of this world; there is, furthermore, nothing irrational or unscriptural about believing in creation without beginning. In fact, according to Ibn Taymiyya it is profoundly rational that God should create perpetually from eternity. A God who only started to create at some point in the past would have been imperfect prior to that. Rather, the Qur'an speaks of creativity as essential to God's perfection, 'Is He who creates like

one who does not create?!' (Q. 16:17).

Ibn Taymiyya turns to the Bible to corroborate his views on creation and does so with the intention of showing the unity of the three major monotheistic confessions—or at least their Scriptures—in affirming God's continuous creation of the world from eternity to eternity. This was to resist the far more common view among Ibn Taymiyya's Muslim theological competitors that the world had a beginning.

To sum up, the Islamic tradition has usually discouraged or even banned reading the Bible, but Muslims have nonetheless found reason to engage it. The most obvious reason has been to appropriate the Bible into an Islamic frame of reference, so as to take the edge off Jewish and Christian readings of the text and firm up an alternative Muslim doctrinal identity. Yet Muslims also turn to the Bible occasionally to nurture their faith and support their doctrine. Even though the Muslim relationship to the Bible is deeply ambivalent, the Bible does matter for Muslims and the study of Islam, for without the Bible, it would be difficult to understand what the Qur'an and generations of Muslim scholars have been responding to and seeking to set straight. Islam claims to be a correction of corrupted biblical religion, and, without the Bible, Islam would lose a major constituent of its reason for being.

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Why The Bible Matt

Over the past decades the concept of “Abrahamic religions” has gained significant traction, and Abraham is now presented as the spiritual forefather and symbol for the elements that unite, rather than divide Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. New programs, chairs, and publications were called to life, as a growing community has rallied around the ecumenical symbolism of Abraham. Critical voices, of course, have also illustrated how easy it is to dismantle this concept. The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Abrahams are such distinct characters that any meaningful attempt to give a precise definition of the term “Abrahamic” always excludes at least one of the main groups under consideration.

Nevertheless, ‘Abraham’ serves as a powerful symbol. Like ‘the Torah’ or ‘Jesus’, Abraham is a key symbol for each of these religious traditions, allowing us to perceive their internal coherence. In sharing the biblical stories about Abraham—his departure from the idols of his father, the near-sacrifice of his son, his role as a forefather of the community—the three Abrahamic religions have at least agreed on what to disagree on: the importance, and even the outline, of the biblical narrative.

The Abrahamic debate is by no means new; deep disagreements about Abraham existed already in Late Antiquity (a period covering the first to seventh centuries CE). True, Abraham is a figure that divides Muslims, Jews, and Christians from each other, as least as much as he unites them. Yet, rather than discarding the idea of ‘Abrahamic religions’, these disagreements reflect a deeper agreement—an interpretive framework, which may matter at least as much as the idea of any doctrinal overlap. This framework, to put it simply, is that the Bible matters.

The Qur’an and the Religion of Abraham

Let us first have a very brief look at what Abraham meant in late antique interreligious discourse. The Qur’an provides a good starting point, as it marks the first reference to *millat ’ibrāhīm*, the ‘creed’ or ‘religion of Abraham’ (Q 2:135). Here and elsewhere, the Qur’an predicates Abra-

ham’s universal relevance on the notion that he was ‘neither a Jew nor a Christian, rather he was a *ḥanīf*, a *muslim*’ (Q 3:67). The passage is not arguing that Judaism and Christianity would necessarily be incompatible with Abraham’s religion, but pointing out that the Israelites—and thereby the Jews and the Christians—came after Abraham. At the same time, the Qur’an places itself into Abraham’s heritage. The rabbis and the church fathers had turned

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Abraham into a rabbinic and a gentile Christian figure, respectively; the Qur'an's alternative was to return to the biblical Abraham. Although the precise meanings of *hanīf* and *muslim* are debated, *muslim* seems to have developed from anyone who 'submitted to God' to someone accepting the prophethood of Muhammad, while *hanīf* likely designates a monotheist who is neither Jew nor Christian: a pious person whose religious practice predates and transcends the historically contingent sectarian strife of Jews and Christians. The Qur'anic Abraham is an attempt to transcend the rifts among his followers.

Perhaps as the result of its wording, as well as later development of the concept of the 'religion of Abraham', this 'ecumenical' attempt has not yet come to fruition. In contrast to the contemporary 'Abrahamic religions', the

Qur'an's 'Abrahamic religion' remains in the singular—though this should not be understood as exclusivist. Elsewhere the *Sūrat al-Baqarah* emphasizes that Jews and Christians will find God's favour (Q. 2:62). The historical result of the Qur'an's ecumenical impetus, however, was not the end of the divide between Jews and Christians but the formation of a new—or, in its own terms, the revival of a very old—religion: a religion that came to be partially predicated on the incompatibility of the meaning of Abraham in these three traditions, in addition to being open to further, internal schism.

Paul and the Faith of Abraham

The Qur'an was not the first to define an 'Abrahamic religion', nor the first to suggest that the faith of Abraham included, or

even transcended, previous forms of worship. In fact, the Qur'an quite closely follows the Apostle Paul. In

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his letter to the Romans, Paul interprets the biblical promise to Abraham ('I have made you father of many nations', Gen. 17:4) inclusively, emphasizing that this promise temporally as well as causally predated the patriarch's circumcision (which is shorthand for his legal observance). Paul argues, in fact, that Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had had, by faith alone, while he was still uncircumcised (Rom. 4:11). Paul's Abraham, crucially, is a man of faith *before* he becomes a man of legal observance.

Paul's emphasis on Abraham's faith is based on his reading of Genesis 15:6, quoted in Romans 4:3: 'For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."' Genesis, it may seem, puts more emphasis on faith than on circumcision. Yet neither historians of ancient Judaism nor all ancient Jews would have agreed with this reading.

Paul's reading reflects the Greek Septuagint's translation of a Hebrew term designating 'trust' (*mn*) with the Greek *pistis*, 'faith'. The translation is not wrong, as such, but introducing the Greek concept of 'faith' into the world of Judaism was at least as much of a change as was the claim that the Messiah had arrived. For the rabbis, *mn* designated trust and contractual

Judaism that the later rabbis endorsed—though even these rabbis will agree to the terms of the debate, with scriptural argumentation focused on Abraham. In using Scripture and Abraham as the ultimate arbiters of truth, Paul remains fundamentally 'Abrahamic' in the modern sense.

Paul's argumentation from the Bible and his focus on Abraham mirror the Qur'an. And, just like the Qur'an, Paul seeks a kind of universalism, promising salvation to both Jews and to gentiles—seeking to establish a place for non-Jewish believers in Jesus alongside the law-observing Jews. As with Islam, however, Paul's inclusivism did not quite translate into practice: rather, it led to the development of a gentile Christian religion that in most instances sought to exclude practising Jews from its ranks. Soon the church fathers argued that the only way to follow Abraham was to leave behind Judaism altogether; the Christian Abraham, just like the Muslim one, transformed from a symbol of inclusion into one of exclusion.

The Talmud and the Law of Abraham

The rabbis duly responded. As we have seen, Paul emphasized that the promise to Abraham was given because of his faith, not his adherence to the law. The exclusivist reading of Paul's language permeated the Greek and Syriac (Aramaic) patristic discussions of late antiquity, to which the rabbis were clearly exposed. The rabbis, however, read Genesis differently than Paul, pointing out that—regardless of the time of his circumcision—God states quite clearly that he made his promise to Abraham, 'because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my Torah' (Gen. 26:5). By empha-



Introducing the Greek concept of 'faith' into the world of Judaism was at least as much of a change as was the claim that the Messiah had arrived.

agreement, as it did in the Bible; the concept of 'faith' only gained (limited) significance much later. Despite its biblical foundation, then, Paul's emphasis on Abraham's 'faith' is a departure from the practice-focused

sizing the Torah, the rabbis de-emphasize 'faith' without having to deny or even name the concept explicitly. Though they do not deny the value of faith, observance is more important. For them, Abraham was a rabbinic Jew. The Babylonian Talmudic scholar Rav is reported to have read the verse from Genesis as indicating that 'our father Abraham kept the whole Torah' (Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Yoma*, folio 28b), while Rava, one of the most prominent scholars evoked by the Babylonian Talmud, took the interpretation even further, interpreting the verse to mean that Abraham kept not only the laws promulgated in the written Torah, but even those formulated by the rabbis themselves—the legal tradition called 'the oral Torah' (which retained its name despite the fact that its results were eventually committed to writing).

The disagreement between Christians and Jews is unmistakable: the Talmud teaches precisely the opposite of what the Christians taught, and both parties introduce Late Antique concepts into their reading of Genesis. Muslims were of course equally prone to such hermeneutics, yet it is hard to disagree with the Qur'an's charge that both Jews and Christians were (mis-)reading Abraham in light of what divided them, neglecting their shared biblical basis in the process. Yet the apparent disagreement hides their underlying agreement: the rabbis, their Christian contemporaries and the Qur'an (which was beginning to circulate right after the final edition of the Babylonian Talmud) all share a scriptural hermeneutical framework. Like Paul and the Qur'an, the Talmud sees Abraham as a central founding figure, whose actions should guide the adherents of any Abrahamic religion. In contrast to Saint Paul and the Qur'an, however, whose inclusivist arguments for an *oikumene* of Jews and gentiles faded in subsequent generations,

The rabbis, their Christian contemporaries and the Qur'an all share a Scriptural hermeneutic framework. Like Paul and the Qur'an, the Talmud sees Abraham as a central founding figure.

the rabbis seem to begin with an explicit exclusivism, squarely focused on God's promise to Abraham and to his law-abiding Jewish and rabbinic descendants.

Christians and the Bible in the Talmud

Do these rabbis thus deny the shared concept of an Abrahamic tradition? They do and they do not. The Tannaitic rabbis whose words were recorded in the second and third century CE saw a real potential for the salvation for all humankind, as long as the gentiles kept a few simple, 'Noahide' commandments. This openness slowly diminished among the Amoraic and later rabbis, whose words were recorded from the fourth century CE onwards, and who shaped the Talmudic Judaism normative in the Middle Ages. Yet, just as anti-Islamic, anti-Christian, and certainly anti-Jewish exclusivism was (and remains) a potential consequence of the universalism in the Christian and Muslim Scriptures, the potential for interreligious debate—the agreement on what to disagree on—remains a potential implication of the Talmudic rabbis' exclusivism.

As with the other Abrahamic religions, Scripture was the basis on which these rabbis engaged with contemporary Christians, just as it was the basis on which later Jews would engage with Muslims. For the rabbis, then, the Bible matters. Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud—with exquisite iro-

ny—teaches that the Bible mattered *more* for those rabbis living under Christian rule in Late Roman Palestine than for the rabbis of Mesopotamia who authored the Babylonian Talmud. In the Tractate *Avodah Zarah*, folio 4a, this Talmud tells the following story, touching on Jewish-Christian relations, the difference between rabbinic learning and knowledge of scriptural interpretation, and the difference between Palestinian and Babylonian Judaism:

‘R(abbi) Abbahu praised R(av) Saфра to the heretics, as if he were a great man. They exempted him from paying taxes for thirteen years.

One day, [the heretics] found him [i.e. Rav Saфра]. They said to him:

“It is written: ‘You only have I known from all the families of the earth; therefore I will visit upon you all your iniquities’ (Amos 3:2). Does one who has a vicious horse make it attack his friend?”

But [Rav Saфра] was silent and could give them no answer; [the heretics] wound a scarf round his neck and tormented him. They said: “Give us the taxes for thirteen years!”

R. Abbahu came and found him (i.e. Rav Saфра). He said to [the heretics] “Why do you torment him?”

They said: “And have you not told us that he is a great man? He cannot explain to us the meaning of this verse!”

He said: “I may have told you [that he was learned] in Tannaitic teaching; did I tell you [he was learned] in Scripture?”

They said: “How is it then that you [pl.] know it?”

He said: “We [i.e. the Palestinian rabbis], who find ourselves in your [pl.] midst [i.e. among the heretics], set ourselves the task of studying it thoroughly, but they [i.e. the Babylonian rabbis]

do not study it carefully.”

They said: “Will you then tell us [the meaning of the verse]?”

He said: “I will tell you a parable. To what can this be compared? To a man who is the creditor of two persons, one of them he loves, and one of them he hates; of the one he loves he will accept payment little by little, whereas of the one he hates he will exact payment in one sum!”

One rabbi (the Palestinian Rabbi Abbahu) has commended the learning of another rabbi (the visiting Babylonian Rav Saфра) to certain ‘heretics’, who hold the power of taxation. In recognition of his learning, the heretics exempt Saфра from taxes. But, after finding out that he cannot answer a basic scriptural question, these heretics begin to torment Rav Saфра. Abbahu then explains that he had commended Saфра because he knows (Tannaitic) rabbinic teaching—not because he knows the Bible. Abbahu then explains the scriptural verse himself; since he lives among the heretics, he has studied the Bible and knows how to explain this-worldly suffering as a sign of divine favour and vice versa.

It is not difficult to discern the identity of the ‘heretics’: the story presupposes an advanced stage in the Christianization of Roman Palestine, after Constantine the Great. The story portrays these Christian ‘heretics’ as pursuing an Abrahamic line of reasoning: they exempt a Jewish rabbi from taxes because he purportedly knows Scripture. Yet this inclusivism comes to a sudden halt when this investment fails to yield a return, that is, knowledge of the Torah.

But why does this episode from the Talmud portray the Babylonian rabbis, its own sages, as deficient in Scripture? The answer to this question—and a fuller appreciation of the story—lies in its historical context.

The Talmud in Context

The Babylonian Talmud was edited between the fifth and seventh century CE in 'Babylonia' (the rabbis' name for Sasanian Persia), in the area around modern Baghdad. Although it preserves older traditions, recent scholarship privileges its editorial and decidedly Persian context for its interpretation. So, while this story is set in Palestine at the turn of the fourth century CE, it is much more reflective of a later time, after the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

The story's perspective is that of the Babylonian exile. Babylonian Jews largely kept to themselves, without interacting on a daily basis with the large Christian communities of Mesopotamia. By contrast, the Jews of Palestine were increasingly confronted with the reality of the ongoing Christianization of the Roman Empire. The Palestinian rabbis lived, as it were, in

the midst of the 'heretics'. (The Aramaic word employed by the Babylonian Talmud for 'heretic' was originally used to designate several groups deviating from rabbinic teaching, but after Constantine it developed to designate Christians more specifically.) At the time when the Babylonian Talmud was edited, then, it was the Christians who were responsible for taxation in Roman Palestine and it was the Christians who had the power to torment a visiting Babylonian rabbi who did not share their definition of Abrahamic religious learning. Whatever the immediate historical value of the story's narrative, it shows us that the Babylonian rabbis knew that Christians ruled Palestine, that these Christians interacted with rabbinical Jews, and that they engaged in scriptural hermeneutics. The story's Christians, and the Talmud in which they appear, identify the Bible as the shared terrain on which these groups meet.



This detail from the Menorah in front of the knesset in Jerusalem shows the Torah accompanying her people into exile.

A Literary Analysis of the Story

The Talmud's sense of the influence of geo-political and cultural factors on the rabbis and on their religious practice can feel almost postmodern. Its way of expressing itself, however, remains decidedly Talmudic. As is common in this literature, the story is marked by the repetition of keywords, in this case, 'to find'. The story starts out with a Palestinian rabbi securing an apparent privilege (exemption from taxation) by fostering interreligious dialogue. Then, however, the Christians 'find' Rav Safra and question him—and the plot takes a turn for the worse. Abbahu then 'finds' Safra under duress—and things begin to improve. In the denouement, Abbahu explains that the Palestinian rabbis 'find themselves' amongst the Christians and therefore must learn Scripture; he uses his learning to justify Jewish suffering in history. With all this 'finding', the story acknowledges the historical and geographical situatedness that defines rabbinic Judaism, pointing to the remarkable variance between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic learning: Babylonian rabbis exclusively study Talmud, whereas Palestinian rabbis also study Scripture. Between the lines, the story thus manages to combine a polemic against the Christians with a reflection on the status of Scripture in Judaism.

The story's polemic is straightforward. The Christians are portrayed as the aggressors, asking Rav Safra about Amos 3:2. In the Bible, this verse occurs amidst a series of warnings, in which Amos prophesies the Israelites' impending punishment. While the historical Amos mainly addressed the northern kingdom of Israel, later Jews and Christians understood

these prophecies to be pertinent to Jews of later times. In Amos, God warns the Israelites that their privileged relationship with him comes with heightened responsibility, with punishment should they transgress. The Christians' citation of the verse is anything but innocent: they are asking the rabbi what this privilege is actually worth, if it only leads to punishment ('one who has a vicious horse, does he let it attack his friend?'). The charge is common throughout Late Antiquity; for example, the Qur'an (in Q 5:18) levels it against both Jews and Christians. In the Talmud, the Christians ask why God would let disasters—such as the destruction of the First and especially of the Second Temple—befall the Jews if they were his 'friends'? Their implicit answer is that the Mosaic covenant has ceased to matter (even that it may not have been worth much to begin with). To this, Safra—even though his name ironically evokes the heavenly *sefer*, the holy Book—has no answer and, in order to drive home their point about Jewish suffering and Christian triumphalism, the Christians demonstrate the meaning of Christian power and Jewish impotence by tormenting the rabbi. Safra's 'scarf' is a distinctly Babylonian headdress reserved for distinguished scholars; in our story the scarf marks Safra's ethnic identity even in the satorial realm—now turned into a symbolic element of torture. The episode, with remarkable audacity and openness, thus portrays a Babylonian rabbi as not only failing but as entirely incapable of meeting the challenged posed by Christian scriptural hermeneutics. Is not the Christians' success a sign of divine approval? Many church fathers, and many Christians, surely saw it thus.

The story's dramatic effect, of course, begins rather than ends here. Abbahu intervenes by explaining that Palestini-

an rabbis (like himself) are well versed in Scripture, because they are frequently faced with similar Christian challenges—unlike Babylonian rabbis like Rav Safra. Abbahu then explains the verse from Genesis through a simile, a narrative device as common in the Talmud as it is in the New Testament and in later Christian, Jewish, and Muslim literature. The story's use of "debt" imagery, moreover, may ironically invert Jesus' simile about debt in Luke 7:40-50. Abbahu, in his simile, uses one of the core arguments of Talmudic theodicy: that the righteous (those whom God 'loves') suffer in this world so as to do penance for any of their minor transgressions. They are the ones from whom the creditor recalls its loan 'little by little'—and they will then stand blameless on judgment day. The wicked (those whom God 'hates'), by contrast, are made to enjoy the fruits of this world, in order to reward them for their minor (or even accidental) acts of kindness. Already repaid for their good deeds in this world, they will stand entirely guilty on judgment day, when their debt is recalled 'in one sum'. For Abbahu the Jews, loved by God, will have paid their debts,

“ *For Abbahu the Jews, loved by God, will have paid their debts, whereas the Christians, distracted by their Roman triumphalism yet hated by God, will be faced with painful judgment. The Christians are mistaken, both in their anti-Jewish reading of Scripture and in their naïve equation of historical reality with divine intent. The Talmud develops this interreligious argument on the basis of the very scriptural hermeneutics it shares with its Christian opponents.*

whereas the Christians, distracted by their Roman triumphalism yet hated by God, will be faced with painful judgement. The Christians are mistaken, both in their anti-Jewish reading of Scripture and in their naïve equation of historical reality with divine intent. The Talmud develops this interreligious argument on the basis of the very scriptural hermeneutics it shares with its Christian opponents. At the surface, then, the story is as 'Abrahamic' as it is polemical.

Yet that is not all there is. Beneath the surface, there is a truly Abrahamic acknowledgement of the value of Scripture and thereby of the Jewish-Christian encounter. This is present in the story in a more underhand way; it is harder to assess than the polemical surface.

To the Western and Christian eye, the Talmud's portrayal of Rav Safra may already seem self-critical: he represents the 'Eastern', Babylonian rabbinic tradition not only to the world of Christian Palestine but also to 'Western', Palestinian Judaism. His failure seems to portray the Babylonian rabbinic academy in a poor light. The Babylonian Talmud is indeed capable of self-criticism,



The Cave of Machpelah in Hebron - the traditional burial place of the Patriarchs. Initially built by Herod the Great, the building over the caves has served as a synagogue, mosque, and church.

yet its self-criticism is doubly mitigated — it concerns the Talmud itself, rather than Rav Safra. This self-criticism is also coated in interreligious polemics; the Christians may read the Bible, but this will not help them on judgement day. Rav Safra's lack of ability, on the other hand, has to be understood in the context of Babylonian rabbinic culture, in which study of the Torah is generally ranked far lower than study of the rabbinic tradition.

Rav Safra is thus anything but a buffoon. To the contrary, his learning is fit for the heavenly academy — simply not for the needs of survival in Late Roman Palestine. Rabbi Abbahu's scriptural teachings have their value in interreligious polemics, but matter less in the pure realm of the Babylonian rabbinic academy. The Talmud thus acknowledges that living amongst Christians will shift the emphasis of Jewish learning towards the Bible, but in

general terms it does not clearly endorse this 'scriptural turn' as religiously meaningful, or even desirable: while the study of the Bible may unearth some theological truths about judgement day or about Jewish-Christian relations and God's proclivities, the study of the Talmud remains paramount.

Nevertheless, the story has the potential to challenge the Talmud's preference for rabbinic learning. Reading the story in its broader literary context shows that the *sugya* (the legal-literary dispute in which we find the story) in its entirety is a reflection on the relationship of the Torah to non-Jews, with a special emphasis on judgement day. This story functions as the fulcrum of the entire *sugya*; reading it in this context allows us better to assess the story — and perhaps to conclude by acknowledging Abbahu's 'Abrahamic' debt to the heretics, after all.

The Story's Literary Context

The Talmud is, by and large, a commentary on the Mishna (the rabbis' legal code dating from the early third century CE). We find our story on the fourth folio of the Talmud's tractate *Avodah Zarah* ('Foreign [Idolatrous] Worship'), and this literary context should guide our reading. The law under discussion when our story is told treats commercial interactions with pagans in the three days preceding one of their festivals. The issue is that such transactions might brighten the pagans' mood at the festival, leaving the Jew who has dealt with them guilty of supporting their idolatrous activity. The Talmud's subsequent discussions are broadly reflective of the topic of idolatry—and idolatry is of course the ultimate charge against Christianity. Yet Talmudic discussions meander like a river, proceeding by topical association as much as systematic legal inquiry. The lens through which this *sugya* reflects on the pagans is their relationship to the Torah, discussing the merits of 'busying oneself with the Torah'—encompassing both the

study and keeping of the Torah—for both Jews and gentiles. Its main image is that of God, 'the Holy One, blessed be He', who 'will take a scroll of the Torah in His embrace and proclaim: "Let him who has occupied himself with her [the Torah] come and take his reward"' (*Avodah Zarah* 2a). Had the gentiles accepted the Torah, their reward would have (at least in theory) been high: 'a worshipper of stars [i.e., a pagan] who studies the Torah is equal to a High Priest' (*Avodah Zarah* 3a). But the pagans never did accept the Torah. The subsequent discussion depicts the tension between idolatry and Torah study, paralleling in broad outline the topics of our story about 'Roman' Christianity. One passage depicts how the Roman and the Persian Empire—the two nations whose 'reign will last till the coming of the Messiah' (*Avodah Zarah* 2b)—will be judged at the end of time. Both nations claim that their urban development and even their military exploits have been 'only for the sake of Israel, that they might occupy themselves with the study of the Torah', but God rejects this ludicrous defence, first from the Romans and then from the Persians.

The destruction of the Temple—and thereby the question of Jewish suffering and theodicy—is never far from the mind of the *sugya*'s rabbinic 'authors'. Wondering why the Persians would pursue the same weak line of argumentation as the Romans, after having seen them fail, the Talmud explains that the Persians 'will say to themselves: "The Romans have destroyed the Temple, whereas we have built it"' (*Avodah Zarah* 2b). The *sugya* here ostensibly speaks about pagan Rome—but does it also consider the christianized Roman Empire, the Romans' 'Abrahamic turn', as our story does? The question of how much the Talmud reflects the Christianization of the Roman Empire is hotly debated—we will return to this question momentarily.

After claiming unsuccessfully to have helped Israel study Torah, the nations shift their defence, declaring that they were not given the Torah and thus they could not keep it. But the *sugya* rejects this claim, illustrating, by way of biblical prooftexts, that the nations were offered the Torah but declined it—and, moreover, that they failed to keep even the most basic commandments, whereas Israel (by and large) kept

the Torah. (In stark contrast, the Christians in our story *have* accepted the Torah—a crucial point to which we will return.) Finally

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Though the Talmud does not idealize Israel's actions, it emphasizes God's indulgence towards its people. The theme of divine punishment eventually leads to a discussion of Israel's piecemeal punishment already in this world.

and most pertinent for our story, we learn that God himself studies Torah daily—even before judging the world:

Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: ‘The day consists of twelve hours; during the first three hours the Holy One, blessed be He, sits down and occupies Himself with the Torah, during the second three He sits in judgment on the whole world, and when He sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, He transfers Himself from the seat of Justice to the seat of Mercy.

This passage, then, paints a slightly different picture of the image of God sitting in the heavenly study house and discussing law with the rabbis: God ‘busies himself with Torah’, the study of His own ‘written’ Scripture, at least as much as with the ‘oral’ Torah of the rabbis. The Talmud’s general emphasis on rabbinic learning of course comprises the study of the Torah itself.

The *sugya* then further considers the value of ‘busying oneself with the Torah’, which leads to the topic of how Israel and the nations will be judged. The guiding line here is that the punishment of the nations will be immediate, swift, and complete, whereas Israel’s punishment will be

piecemeal. God is said to put it in the following words:

“When I judge Israel, I do not judge them as I do the idolaters concerning whom it is said, *I will overturn, overturn, overturn it* (Ezek. 21:32) but I only exact payment from them as the hen does her picking.” Another explanation: “Even if Israel does before Me but few good deeds at a time, like hens picking in a rubbish heap, I will make it accumulate to a large sum, as it is said, *though they pick little they are saved* (Job 30:24).”

Remarkably, God compares first himself to a hen, when he metes out punishment, then Israel—likening their good deeds to the few morsels of food a hen manages to find in a heap of rubbish. The rubbish pile is Israel’s evil deeds: though the Talmud does not idealize Israel’s actions, it emphasizes God’s indulgence towards its people. The theme of divine punishment eventually leads to a discussion of Israel’s piecemeal punishment already in this world. This is the context in which the *sugya* finally tells the story of Rabbi Abbahu and the heretics.

Our story’s literary context, then, is a discussion of the value of busying oneself with the Torah. This closely reflects the topic treated in our story, with the story—especially Abbahu’s interpretation—thus functioning as a fulcrum of the entire *sugya*, encapsulating and recasting its overarching message: Israel is punished incrementally, while the gentiles are punished all at once.

This highlights the one blatant discrepancy between the story and its context: whereas the pagans in the *sugya* have rejected the Torah, the Christian heretics in the story have accepted it. The *sugya* is not coy in depicting the doom that awaits the Romans at the end of times, with its explicit depictions continuing a rabbinic discourse established

well before the Christianization of the Empire. But how are we to understand this, if the Romans have accepted the Torah in the meantime—even if not quite in a manner acceptable to the rabbis?

The *sugya*'s ambivalence towards Rome reflects the rabbis' ambivalence towards the Christianization of the Roman Empire—an ambivalence which is expressed in quite Abrahamic terms. On the one hand, the *sugya* as a whole continues to depict Rome as pagan (a charge also reflected in Byzantine patristic polemics against the continuities between pagan and Christian Roman practice). On the other hand, the story very much presupposes that the Roman Christians 'busy themselves with Torah' and are eager to learn its meaning. This challenges the entirety of the *sugya*'s arguments about Rome! It seems that for the Talmud, the Christians are heretics not only in name: the presence of this story in this *sugya* implies that there is a real difference between pagan and Christian Rome.

The *sugya* as a whole undoubtedly emphasizes scriptural learning more than other passages in the Talmud—and it does so in a specifically Abrahamic exchange. It would be too much to claim that the phenomena are co-dependent; we cannot say that the appreciation of Scripture here is a direct result of reflections on the Roman turn to Scripture. Yet we can say the shared hermeneutical basis of Christians and Jews—and later also Muslims—constitutes a remarkable platform of interreligious debate.

What might we learn from all this? We may state that the value of such debates is always determined by the goals of the participants; the history of Jews, Christians and Muslims strongly suggests that religious and cultural proximity do not necessarily translate into mutual appreciation. This was as true in Late Antiquity as it is now; the

vitriol in certain contemporary 'scriptural' discussions, on the internet and in public, far exceeds that of Late Antiquity. None of the texts discussed openly advocates the ideal of a true co-existence of Abrahamic religions. Yet, the Qur'an, Paul's letter to the Romans and the early rabbinic literature all point to the possibility of co-existence, and all contain teachings that can easily be developed into a more inclusive approach that goes further than simply defining the rules of engagement. Even the Talmud, the most openly exclusivist of the texts here discussed, contains much that remains relevant to the contemporary Abrahamic impulse. In the Talmud's appreciation of Christian scriptural learning—however mitigated, underhand, and reluctant—we can still see the basis for a fundamental acceptance by the rabbis that both they and the Christians had decided that disagreeing on Scripture is what would henceforth bind the two traditions to each other. This link has become only stronger, as a third scriptural tradition has joined the fray—and the family.

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The Bible And E

When the orphaned child, Jane Eyre, is interviewed by the alarming Anglican cleric, Mr Brocklehurst, he tests her religious knowledge:

“Do you read your Bible?”

“Sometimes.”

“With pleasure? Are you fond of it?”

“I like Revelations, and the Book of Daniel, and Genesis, and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job and Jonah.”

“And the Psalms? I hope you like them?”

“No, sir.”

“No? Oh, shocking! I have a little boy, younger than you, who knows six Psalms by heart: and when you ask him which he would rather have, a ginger-bread-nut to eat, or a verse of a Psalm to learn, he says: “Oh! The verse of a Psalm! Angels sing Psalms,” says he; “I wish to be a little angel here below.” He then gets two nuts in recompense for his infant piety.”

“Psalms are not interesting,” I remarked.¹

In 1847, when Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* was first published, the child Jane’s biblical knowledge—shown here as so extensive—was quite normal. Jane would have been made to learn whole chapters off by heart and her entire worldview would have been shaped by the biblical stories. Indeed, she prefers the narrative sections of the Old Testament and the most exciting, not to mention gory stories: Daniel in

the lion’s den, Jonah swallowed by the whale, the many adventures of King David in the historical book 1 Samuel. The only book in the New Testament she enjoys is that technicolour vision of a cosmic battle in the Revelation of St John. With this love of exciting story, it is not surprising that for a nine year old the psalmic hymns are just not interesting. The irony of this is that when the adult Jane faces the fact that her in-

terrupted marriage would have been bigamous, as her husband has a mad wife locked up in the attic, it is to the Psalms that she has recourse to express her agony of mind and sense of desolation: ‘the waters came into my soul; I sank in deep mire: I felt no standing; I came into deep waters; the floods overflowed me’.² She quotes freely here from Psalm 69:2.

From *Jane Eyre* we can begin to see how and why the

English Literature

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MEET THE AUTHOR

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Bible matters for literary productions. Jane sees her whole life as shaped by biblical stories such as the Exodus, in which the Jewish people escape slavery in Egypt. In the same way, Jane will escape Mrs Reed's domestic tyranny. Like Joseph escaping the embrace of Potiphar's wife in Genesis, Jane will flee the adulterous arms of a seducer. She will be tried like poor, long-suffering Job and have a wilderness experience, fasting like Elijah, before finally being fed by God's grace. Even the Psalms, attributed to David, offer a narrative that shapes her life-story—from despair to hope and praise. The Bible, moreover, is ordered by Jewish and later Christian arrangement to pattern an over-

arching narrative itself—from creation in Genesis, through the history of the Jewish people, to prophecy, then in the New Testament to the life of Christ and the adventures of his followers, concluding with the end of time in Revelation and the creation of a new heaven and earth. Jane's own story moves like this meta-narrative, so that Revelation structures the final chapters of the novel. Her cousin, St John Rivers, is a kind of John the Divine, who not only preaches from Revelation 21 and 22's descent of the heavenly bride and the establishing of a New Jerusalem, but calls Jane to make it come true by travelling with him to be a missionary in India. She refuses his loveless marriage

and finds Rochester again, now blinded by his attempt to save his mad wife, chastened and widowed. Revelation becomes the key text in which the characters at this point contest the relation of body to soul. St John wants only the soul; Rochester earlier had seemed to desire a sinful, purely bodily union. Now, tempered by suffering, Jane and Rochester enjoy an anticipation of the union of body and soul in the New Jerusalem on earth. So it all comes full circle, as the adult woman and the young Jane both privilege 'Revelation'.

Most literary critics miss this contestation of biblical interpretation in *Jane Eyre*, because they do not inhabit the Bible as Brontë's Victorian readers would have done. In the nineteenth century readers were soaked in biblical narrative, alert to even the most indirect reference. Indeed, the novel form developed in the eighteenth century as itself a kind of secularized Scripture. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1679) had taken the idea of a journey to the heavenly city by the believer and turned the Bible into a topography through which the protagonist, Christian, must travel. Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd,' provides the central geographical features of 'green pastures,' 'still waters' and 'the valley of the shadow of death' through which Christian must journey. That seductive but illusory market of desires, the 'Vanity Fair,' is an actualization of the 'all is vanity' of the wisdom books, such as Ecclesiastes. Christian too must face a hill like Golgotha where Christ was crucified.

What *Pilgrim's Progress* achieved was a unified biblical narrative, which merged different books and centred on the life of an individual. Every literate home would have had a copy and there were also versions for children, including one by the BBC's 'Uncle Mac' as late as the 1950s. There were also wall charts and even board games, for

the Sundays when ordinary games were not played in devout homes! Novels right up to Cormac McCarthy's post-catastrophe novel, *The Road* (2000), depend implicitly on this internalization of the biblical journey. Certainly it lies behind Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)—who is captured, shipwrecked, and then saved from despair by his discovery of a whole pile of Bibles in the hold of the wrecked ship. Victorian novels often quote from *Pilgrim's Progress* overtly, such as Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838), which is even subtitled, in imitation of Bunyan, as 'The Parish Boy's Progress'.

One can therefore understand the novel as a sort of continuation of the biblical story, in the life of a later follower of Christ seeking to imitate his story—as is appropriate for a faith based on the person of Jesus. Christian belief is itself expressed in the form of a narrative: the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which begin with the glory of the life of the Godhead and the act of Creation, followed by the story of the Son's taking on human existence, dying and rising to new life, culminating in his return to heaven. Just as the Jewish believer is formed as it were by the story of Exodus, recalled yearly at Passover, so the Christian performs, albeit imperfectly, the life of Christ—descending into the deathly waters of baptism to be reborn and united to the Saviour.

The Bible for Christians therefore is a kind of play script—so it is no accident that drama in Christian medieval Europe also develops directly out of Scripture. Medieval drama is often said to have begun in the context of worship. The Christian Eucharist (Holy Communion) is already a performance, as the last supper of Christ with his disciples is re-enacted to draw present-day worshippers into the action. On Easter morning, the gospel account of the women encountering the empty tomb of Christ came to be not just read but acted out at

Salisbury Cathedral, with various acolytes holding incense thuribles to represent the sweet-smelling oils being brought to anoint the body. What made it dramatic was the fact that they did not process in a straight line but wandered from side to side as if searching for the missing body. A cleric in a white alb acted the part of the angel at the tomb and exchanged dialogue with the 'women'. This was a continuation of the dramatic reading of the Passion story from the Gospels performed on Palm Sunday, with different monks or clerics taking the various parts of Pilate, Jesus, the crowd, and so on.

Out of these practices there developed the most lively tradition of whole communities enacting cycles of biblical plays, either in church or outside, often on carts. This can still be seen today in York or Chester, two cities whose play scripts still survive.

Such cycles began with Creation, like the Bible, and ended with the Last Judgement and Revelation. They were performed mainly by amateurs, with guilds (professional associations) taking responsibility for individual plays. So vintners, for example, might take on the Marriage at Cana from John's Gospel, in which Jesus turned water into wine, whilst carpenters enacted Noah's Ark and the crucifixion was offered by nail-makers. What is interesting is how such a practice made the work itself participate in the action and be seen as participating in the biblical story. At its best such

drama brought the stories alive, being performed by one's neighbours in contemporary dress and, like modern pantomimes, bringing the audience into the action. One can be sure that the Devil, or Herod about to massacre the Bethlehem infants, were thoroughly booed and hissed. Again, the biblical story was one in which the contemporary Christian found an interpretation of his or her own life, especially as characters were not idealized but often treated with considerable humour.

Although the Protestant Reformation put an end to these mystery plays, especially as many of them told stories of the saints, we know that they were still being performed in William Shakespeare's youth. The comic 'mechanicals' who put on the classical play of Pyramus and Thisbe with much slapstick in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1590-

7) are probably a memory

of local amateurs putting on a biblical play, in which men would play the female parts in exactly the same way that Flute plays Thisbe, with the same comic intention. Although the theatre became secular in the Elizabethan period, biblical plays remain implicit in the stage: with its upper part (formerly for God and the heavenly court), the middle stage for human action, and the opening to a pit (formerly the mouth of hell). Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604) still has guardian angels and tempting devils like the medieval

“ *The Bible for Christians therefore is a kind of play script—so it is no accident that drama in Christian medieval Europe also develops directly out of Scripture.* ”



Detail from the exterior of the Duomo in Milan depicting Jael killing Sisera (Jud. 4): the 'muscularity' of the King James translation of this passage inspired Charlotte Brontë's writing in Villette.

plays, but instead of a biblical narrative, as such, the play turns upon biblical interpretation. Faustus is a polymath who has exhausted all subjects, so he tries out theology. He picks up a Bible and reads:

The reward of sin is death: that's hard.
[Reads.]

Si peccasse negamus, fallimur, et nulla
est in nobis veritas;

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and there is no truth in us. Why, then,
belike we

must sin, and so consequently die:

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.

What doctrine call you this, Che sera,
sera,

What will be, shall be? Divinity, adieu!

From these two verses, Faustus thinks the Bible condemns him and gives up theology.

Now, at this time, Marlowe's early audience would have heard the Bible in English every Sunday and many of them could read it for themselves. Bibles were also chained to the lectern in church, so that anyone could come in and read if he had no Bible of his own. Even the illiterate would hear these words, from the First Letter of John, read at Morning Prayer on Sunday: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us'. The priest, however, would continue to verse nine: 'if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. Similarly, 'the reward of sin is death', from Romans 6:23, continues: 'but the gift of God is eternal life'.

So Faustus was a bad reader of Scripture, who failed to read on and see that sin and wrath were not the end of the story. Without that biblical knowledge, the play loses

its irony for the modern reader or playgoer. The whole crux of the play is whether Faustus can repent or not: it engages debates about the freedom of the will, predestination, and the nature of God's grace—all of which depend upon interpretation of biblical texts. Without that biblical dimension, it is not really a tragedy at all and does not involve the audience. For what Faustus decides to do once he thinks there is no hope in Divinity is call up demons and attempt to gain longevity of life and power over the world that way, as well as heavenly knowledge. Towards the end of the play he also becomes an anti-Job. The biblical Job never quite curses God and his life, despite enduring appalling suffering; Faustus curses everyone and everything. The original audience would have seen a grim humour in the biblical reversal.

Similarly, Shakespeare's plays are also awash with biblical allusions and, indeed, the life of Christ becomes a model for Richard II at the very point at which he loses his crown. Shakespeare enacts a kind of passion play at this point, thus interrogating how far the monarch should be a kind of Christlike servant. *Measure for Measure* (1603-

4) takes its title from Scripture:

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and ye shall not be judged; condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned; forgive and ye shall be forgiven... for with the same measure that ye mete withal, it shall be measured to you again (Luke 6:36-38).

It is a play about justice and mercy, which also has analogies to the parable of the vineyard of Mark 12, in which a vineyard owner leaves stewards to look after his property. They misuse his property and even enact violence on his son, just as Angelo misuses his authority over Vienna's citizens in the Duke's absence. *Measure for Measure* is one of the most problematical of Shakespeare's plays, but it makes much more sense when seen in the context of the Bible as a debate about justice and mercy.

Poetry most of all is a mode of expression that loses out from an ignorance of biblical allusion. It is often so compressed that echoes are piled upon echoes. The biblically literate reader picks these up intuitively and takes them

into a rich reading and response; the reader without that knowledge reads only flatly. The very first poem we have in our literature is Caedmon's hymn, from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, which is a paraphrase of the biblical narrative of creation. From the seventeenth century metaphysical poets like Donne and Herbert to Eliot, Auden, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill today, our poetry is inflected with biblical reference. But it is easy to miss. Here, for example, is a sonnet from the *Monna Innominata* ('unknown lady') sequence of love songs by Christina Rossetti, the Victorian poet:

Thinking of you, and
all that was, and all
That might have been
and now can never be,
I feel your honour'd excellence, and see
Myself unworthy of the happier call:
For woe is me who
walk so apt to fall,
So apt to shrink afraid,
so apt to flee,
Apt to lie down and die
(ah, woe is me!)
Faithless and hopeless
turning to the wall.
And yet not hopeless
quite nor faithless
quite,
Because not loveless;
love may toil all night,
But take at morning;

wrestle till the break
Of day, but then wield power with God
and man:—
So take I heart of grace as best I can,
Ready to spend and be spent for your
sake.³

The poem is replete with biblical echoes. For example, the simple phrase, 'woe is me' is itself a biblical phrase, occurring in Job, Psalms, Jeremiah and Isaiah. Isaiah 6:5 is perhaps the most celebrated reference: 'Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' Read against this sense of unworthiness at the sight of God himself, the woman poet's distress becomes specif-

'fall', comes at what is called the 'volta' or 'turn'—when a sonnet breaks to turn back on itself in a fresh insight, here signalled by 'and yet...' in the next line. The image that follows, of the love wrestling, may seem puzzling, unless one recognises another biblical narrative: the wrestling of Jacob with the angel in Genesis 32:24-30. They fight until dawn; Jacob will not let the angel (often interpreted as God himself) go until he has been blessed by his opponent, who also gives him a new—and blessed—name: Israel. So love will fight and never give up, gaining a blessing from the struggle. Love will bring hope to the hopeless, just as God did to the fugitive Jacob (who will go on to meet and be reconciled with his brother Esau in the next chapter). The speaker's internal struggles are re-interpreted as signs of hope and blessing.

One other reason why the Bible matters for English literature is its own status as a literary work. The Authorised Version, or 'King James Bible', of 1611 was used until recently as the main Bible for worship and public declamation, as well as individual reading. It is still in extensive use among conservative Christians in the United States, as well as in Britain in services using the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. This translation kept much of the direct, homely poeticism of William Tyndale's translations of the New Testament (1526) and parts of the Old Testament (1530s). It added its own literary techniques to make a translation of incomparable dignity and beauty, particularly shaped towards public recitation. The translation revising committees would read each section aloud to each other, thinking always about balance of phrasing and length of breath, so that the reader finds the text easy to shape and find the right emphasis. The present writer recalls that primary school children found no difficulty in using the King James Bible



*So love will fight and never give up,
gaining a blessing from the struggle.
Love will bring hope to the hopeless,
just as God did to the fugitive Jacob.*

ic and expresses her sense of missing and being unfit for the 'happier call' of sexual love, which she sees as the way God is mediating himself to her life.

'Turning to the wall' has become proverbial but originates in the distress of King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20:2. When the prophet announces he is soon to die and must 'set his house in order' (another phrase that has entered common discourse), Hezekiah 'turned his face to the wall'. We use the phrase to mean giving up, which is how the poem employs it—a 'faithless and hopeless' action. And yet Hezekiah did not give up: he prayed to God and was, in fact, granted longer life. Similarly, the blankness of 'wall', rhyming inexorably with

as a text for nativity plays as late as the 1960s, whilst the Prayer Book Society still sponsors a yearly competition for children to read aloud from it.

Therefore, as well as being shaped by the stories of the Bible, the writer of the past was formed also by the style, cadences, and imagery of the King James Version. The earthy directness and muscularity of Charlotte Brontë's style is a good example. Here, a depressed and lonely English teacher in *Villette* is speaking:

I did long, achingly, then and for four and twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards. This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench: then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core.⁴

The story to which Lucy Snowe, the speaker, alludes is one of the heroic and often violent legends of the Book of Judges. Sisera had oppressed the Israelites for twenty years when he was defeated at the Battle of Mount Tabor. He fled to Jael's tent, where she first welcomed him with a bottle of milk, then killed him as the enemy of her people: she 'went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground' (Judg. 4:21). Stylistic features Brontë shares with the King James Bible are the inversion of words ('four and twenty'; 'then did'), direct, physical language (as in 'knock on the head'), and chiasmic structure (words or syllables in an *a-b-b-a* pattern as in 'temples bleed/brain thrill'). It is signif-

icant that the use of the Bible here allows a strength and violence of expression that would hardly else have been acceptable at the time.

This is true also in the present. According to Marilynne Robinson, the Bible is a huge 'well of special meaning' for literature. Her own fiction, including *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008) and the recently-published *Lila* (2014) is biblical in its rhythms, use of the present tense, and ideas. But we are all, whether we realise it or not, steeped in biblical language. 'A labour of love', for example, comes from 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 'signs of the times' from Matthew 11:3; 'by the skin of my teeth' from Job 19:20; and 'broken heart' from Psalm 34:18. Note how these phrases are descriptive and even metaphorical. Those of us who use the English language, however secular we may feel, are indebted for the way we talk and write to the Bible. Indeed, it keeps our increasingly abstract language 'earthed' in the poetic and the homely. In that sense alone, it matters—not just for poets and writers, but for us all.

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1. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Q. D. Leavis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983 [1847]), Chapter 4, 65.
 2. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Chapter 26, 324.
 3. Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose*, ed. Jan Marsh (London: Everyman, 1994), 234.
 4. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Tony Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), Chapter 12, 176.

Does the Bible M

The Bible is a text imbued with music from start to finish. Music first appears in the Hebrew Bible in Genesis 4:21 with reference to the figure of Jubal, in connection to the origins of professional music (Jubal ‘was the father of all who play stringed instruments and pipes’).¹ The significance of music is then emphatically underscored at the height of Israel’s glory within the biblical narrative. Not only are the great kings David and Solomon celebrated for their own musicianship (e.g., 1 Sam. 16:14-23; 1 Kings 4:32), but the magnificent musical traditions of Solomon’s Temple are traced back to Davidic origins (e.g., 1 Chron. 16, 25; Neh. 13:45). In addition, songs of thanksgiving to God punctuate the biblical narrative of salvation history—a fact recognised in the rabbinic tradition of listing the ten great songs of Israel’s history, beginning with the Song of Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea, celebrating redemption from Egypt (Ex. 15:1-21), and ending with the new song to be sung at the coming of the messiah (cf. Isa. 42:10ff.; Pss. 33, 40, 96, 98, 144, and 149).

Music in the Bible

The centrality of song in Israel’s tradition is also highlighted in relation to the despair of exile. In Psalm 137 the Israelites’ captors demand that they ‘sing... one of the songs of Zion’, to which they reply, ‘how could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?’ (vv. 3b-4). The very presence of the Psalter within the Hebrew Bible is testimony to the wider significance of singing within it: the Psalms demonstrate that singing has a distinctive role within the overarching biblical theme of the relationship between God and his people, even if it is not always clear how the Psalms were actually performed in historical liturgical practice.

When we turn to the New Testament we see that it is framed by musical references in addition to the canonical backdrop of the music of the Old Testament. The announcement of the birth of Jesus is celebrated with Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55 (the ‘Magnificat’), while Revelation presents a ‘new song’ that envelops heaven and earth in praise—not only of God, but also of Christ the Lamb enthroned alongside him (Rev. 5:9-14; 14:3). This provides a key aspect of a biblical theology of music, in which singing provides a means of participation in the perfected praise of the renewed creation.

Critical study of the New Testament from the late nineteenth century onwards has demonstrated that, the closer one looks

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at various aspects of the biblical text in relation to their contemporaneous culture, the more the music of the Bible can be 'heard'. This is evident in the identification of hymnic elements within the Pauline epistles and their connection to early Christian liturgical music practices. In the case of the Old Testament, songs are very often clearly delimited from their narrative contexts even if the terminology of singing is not present (e.g., Num. 21:17; Judg. 5:1-31; 1 Sam. 2:1-10).

In the New Testament, only Luke and Revelation employ hymn-like direct speech (e.g., Luke 2:13-14; Rev. 4:8b). It is nevertheless probable on the basis of their style, syntax and vocabulary that texts such as Philippians 2:6-11 (the so-called 'Philippian hymn'), Colossians 1:15-20 and 1 Timothy 3:16 draw on traditional material, developed and passed on

in early Christian communities through the practice of liturgical singing.² Therefore, while the New Testament is somewhat reserved on the topic of the music-making of the earliest Christians—with the exception of a handful of references to musical practices such as Ephesians 5:19 (cf. Col. 3:16)—the precedent of the Jewish tradition of music, combined with the identification of hymnic fragments within the New Testament, point to the Christian community being 'born in song',³ with the singing of psalms and other songs providing a key contribution to the formulation of Christian doctrine.

Music, Worship and Theology

It may also be said that the Bible is at the heart of the musical life of both Judaism and Christianity. The

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hymns contained in the biblical text and its wider references to music-making continue to inspire the use of music within these traditions. Take, for example, the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis*, which are part of the sung liturgy of a number of Christian traditions and which draw their texts directly from the New Testament (Luke 1:46-55 and 2:29-32 respectively). These well-known musical examples provide just a glimpse of the many examples of the direct relationship between the Bible and the music of communities that hold the Bible to be sacred. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Bible matters for Christian and Jewish music!

Before I turn to the significance of the Bible for music more broadly, however, it is worth considering the fact that *music matters for the Bible*. It matters because singing provides a primary means of dissemination of and engagement—with the text among faith communities. This is an idea that finds its basis in the Bible itself, whereby the second ‘Song of Moses’ (Deut. 32:1-43) is intended to be memorised—or taken to heart—as a ‘witness’, in order that Moses’ words might be remembered and heeded by future generations (see vv. 44-47). So too in the New Testament: Paul refers to the singing of ‘psalms, hymns and spiritual songs’ (Eph. 5:19) in the context of thanksgiving to God. In a largely illiterate society—or one with limited access to texts, as was the case in first century Christianity—biblically-based hymnody had (and still has) an important role to play.

In fact, this has continued to be a significant part of ecclesiastical life. The work of the well-known hymn writers Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and Charles Wesley (1707-1788) provides good evidence of this,⁴ and their own hymnody is dependent on the ground provided by Luther’s biblical hymns, which

played an important role in the Reformation.⁵ Even today, the debate surrounding the atonement theology of the popular hymn ‘In Christ Alone’ (2002),⁶ written by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, hinges on its relation to the biblical texts.

Biblical Music beyond Worship

Beyond the liturgy of Judaism and Christianity, perhaps the most well-known use of the Bible in music is the genre of the biblical oratorio. For many, the words ‘For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth’ will evoke their setting by Handel, in the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ of his *Messiah* (1741). This most famous of choral works—which has made singers and audiences alike commit the words of the Authorised Version’s translation of Revelation 19:6 to memory—was composed for the concert hall. The *Passions* of Bach (*St John Passion* [1724] and *St Matthew Passion* [1727]) have become something of a ‘cross-over’ genre, becoming familiar works beyond their intended ecclesiastical setting, whilst other popular biblical oratorios such as Joseph Haydn’s *The Creation* (1798) and Felix Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* (1846) ensure that the words of the Bible are frequently heard in secular contexts.

The use of biblical texts in the twentieth century may be seen in the success of musicals intended for the theatre, such as Stephen Schwartz’s *Godspell* (1971) and Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s immensely popular *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1968) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970).⁷ To some extent, these are heirs of the biblical oratorio. The Bible has also been source and inspiration for a range of classical compositions, including Arthur Honegger’s *Le Roi David* (1923), Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) and Bern-

stein's *Chichester Psalms* (1965). This pattern of biblically-inspired works continues in the present day in the work of Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) and James Macmillan (b. 1959), among others.

The 'canon' of western classical music, then, includes many examples where biblical texts and themes are central, even if the music was not (explicitly) intended for religious purposes.⁸ But to what extent does the Bible *matter* in this regard? What can be said about the *significance* of the use of the Bible in the music of the theatre or concert hall?

There has been much recent discussion of playwright Tom Stoppard's expression of frustration about what he can expect of contemporary theatre audiences. Stoppard says he hesitates to use particular literary references and allusions, because he fears that theatregoers will not recognise and understand them, and even suggests that contemporary audiences are worse than their 1970s counterparts in this regard.⁹ Appreciation of various forms of art laden with biblical allusions is impoverished without a knowledge of the biblical texts. This argument is made—perhaps unexpectedly—by Richard

The Bible functions as a commonly accessible resource—in various times and places foundational for many different groups of people—that deals with the most fundamental aspects of human life.

Dawkins, in *The God Delusion*.¹⁰ So, then, the first reason that the Bible matters for music, beyond the relation between the two within religious traditions, is because the Bible has been influential for so much music. A fuller understanding and appreciation of such compositions is to be gained from becoming conversant with their underlying biblical texts; biblical illiteracy is a barrier to heightened appreciation of biblically-inspired music.

The Bible in Contemporary Popular Music

Despite the regularly lamented decline in biblical literacy, references to the Bible can still be heard in the popular music composed today.¹¹ Boney M's 'By the Rivers of Babylon' (1978) is a well-known example, with its direct citation of Psalm 137, while the use of the Bible in the songs of Bob Dylan and U2 has received much atten-

tion in theological discussion—academic and popular alike.¹² In heavy metal music there is a pervasive use of biblical imagery connected, in particular, to Satan and the Apocalypse—exemplified in Iron Maiden's 'Number of the Beast' (1982).¹³ Indeed, some of the most explicit biblical references and allusions in popular music in recent years can be found within this genre. Biblical influences are evident even in the names of bands such as Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Lamb of God, and Rotting Christ.

I am not about to argue here that these various songs and bands, which each draw in some way on the biblical texts, have the same artistic merit as the canon of classical music referred to above—that is a debate for another context! One reason *why* the Bible features in all of these types of music, however, is that the Bible functions as a commonly accessible resource—in various times and places foundational for many

different groups of people—that deals with the most fundamental aspects of human life. In the case of heavy metal, the Bible provides a developed and recognisable mythology of evil. In the case of U2, biblical texts contribute to the articulation of deeply personal experiences. It is unsurprising, for example, that the Psalms are frequently drawn on in U2's songs (e.g., 'Gloria' [1981], '40' [1983], 'The Unforgettable Fire' [1984], 'Love Rescue Me' [1988], 'Magnificent' [2009]), because they epitomise the breadth of human expression on offer in the biblical texts. As John Witvliet suggests, the Psalter conveys, "the whole range of human emotion, from despondent sorrow (Psalm 88) to ecstatic joy (Psalm 47 or 48), from ravaging guilt (Psalm 51) to profound gratitude (Psalm 136). In Calvin's famous phrase, the Psalms are 'the anatomy of the soul'."¹⁴

There is no need for the biblically literate U2 to reinvent the wheel when it comes to composing lyrics concerning war and peace, love and death. Instead they draw on the experiences of those who have gone before them, whose songs have been carefully preserved through genera-

tion after generation in the Psalter, the most famous of songbooks. In this way the Bible remains a culturally significant repository of the expression of the range of the emotions of humanity in relation to one another, as well as in relation to God.¹⁵

A Brief Case Study: Mumford and Sons

One of the most successful bands of recent years—in terms of both record sales and critical reception—exhibit a clear biblical influence on their lyrics: Mumford and Sons have risen to worldwide success on the back of their albums *Sigh No More* (2009) and *Babel* (2012), to the extent that they can be credibly labelled 'the biggest band in the world'.¹⁶ Their rapid ascent is difficult to explain on the basis of their musical style alone, which, with its folk-influenced elements, represents an unusual sound at the top of the charts (even if there has been something of a folk revival in recent years).¹⁷ It may, however, owe much to their lyrical sophistication (though, of course, the impact of mu-



Mumford and Sons performing at the Teatro Romano in Verona.

sic and lyrics cannot be so neatly divided like this in reality). Their songs are saturated with literary quotations and allusions, including John Steinbeck (e.g., 'Dust Bowl Dance') and William Shakespeare (e.g., 'Sigh No More') as well as the Bible. 'Roll Away Your Stone', for example, not only uses the biblical language of grace but does so through allusion to the famous parable



of the 'Prodigal Son' of Luke 15:11-32:

It seems that all my bridges have been burnt,
But you say that's exactly how this grace thing works,
It's not the long walk home that will change this heart,
But the welcome I receive with the re-start.

Here the band's lyricist and singer, Marcus Mumford, expresses an aspect of a personal relationship in a way that creates an 'intertextual' link to Jesus' parable of for-

givenness, mercy and grace in the Gospel of Luke. This provides just a brief example of the way that the songs of Mumford and Sons have the potential to offer something to the listener that depends on the extent of their knowledge of and engagement with these biblical intertexts.

A basic definition of what gives a song value—so that it might be considered a 'good song' whether it is deemed 'high' or 'low' art, 'classical' or 'popular'—hinges on the song's ability not only to resonate with the emotions of the listener but for its words and music to facilitate new insight into the listener's own situation. This is

surely one of the reasons that the careers of Bob Dylan and U2 have extended over multiple decades. It is likely that Mumford and Sons' music will have a similarly enduring appeal, because they tackle the most profound of human themes—not in the individualistic manner of other contemporary popular music, but in relation to the repository of literary expressions of these themes available through 'canonical' literature of various types, especially the Bible.

On a more theological note, it is also possible that the popularity of Mumford

and Sons represents a thirst for music that attempts to deal with fundamental questions of humanity's purpose—even in relation to the divine—and that the 're-discovery' of biblical ideas in the context of popular music would be well received.¹⁸

On the one hand, then, the Bible continues to matter for the *appreciation* of music, but it is possible that drawing on biblical texts may offer an inspirational spark for the creation of new and profound expressions in song of age old themes, at the heart of human nature.

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1. Susan Gillingham, 'The Arts: Architecture, Music, Poetry, Psalmody,' in John Barton (ed.), *The Biblical World*, vol. 2, (London: Routledge, 2002), 53-74 [61], suggests that, '[t]he Genesis passage shows that music was considered among the most ancient of occupations in Israel, even more so before the advent of poetry and song.' Even before this aetiological reference, however, there are possible musical overtones in the very opening chapter of Genesis, which Gordon Wenham refers to as a 'hymn' (*Genesis 1-15* [Waco: Word, 1987], 10) in relation to the wider discussion of its possibly poetic nature (see e.g. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1982], 27).
 2. Note that the identification of these texts as 'hymns' (including the question of the appropriate terminology in this respect) and their relationship to the singing of the earliest Christian communities remain a topics of much debate. For contrasting viewpoints see Richard N. Longenecker, 'Christological Materials in the Early Christian Communities,' in Longenecker (ed.) *Contours of Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 47-76, and Ralph Brucker, "Songs," 'Hymns', and 'Encomia' in the New Testament?' in Clemens Leonhard and Hermut Löhr (eds.), *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).
 3. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1964), 39. This position is also supported by reference to the extra-biblical evidence of Pliny (*Epistles* 10.96) who writes in the early second (c. 112 CE) about the Christian practice of singing hymns to Christ as to a God.
 4. Take for example Watts' 'Joy to the World' (based on the 'new song' Psalm 98) or 'O God our Help' (based on Psalm 90). On Watts see e.g. Graham Beynon, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Thought* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2013); on Wesley see e.g. John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); on hymnody in general see further J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: OUP, 1999).
 5. Examples include 'Ein feste Burg' (based on Psalm 46) and 'Vom Himmel hoch' (based on Luke 2:1-20); see e.g. Christopher Boyd Brown, *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
 6. See e.g. www.christiantoday.com/article/presbyterian.church.usa.drops.in.christ.alone.from.hymnal/33599.htm
 7. Ian Bradley, *You've Got to Have a Dream: The Message of the Musical* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 28-9, refers to these as 'the mighty trinity' of biblical musicals and suggests that 'Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber have arguably done more than most priests and preachers in the last 30 years to promote biblical knowledge and awareness' inasmuch as they have 'at the very least introduced scriptural characters and themes to thousands of young people who might otherwise have largely been unaware of them.'
 8. While numerous further examples could be cited, it is worth noting that the definition of 'music' here is essentially limited to that of 'song'. It is primarily 'logocentric' music, namely music in which words are a primary component, where the relationship between the Bible and music can be seen most clearly. Nevertheless there are also a number of examples where the influence of the Bible on instrumental music in various ways is apparent, and in each case a greater knowledge and understanding of the biblical texts can lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of the piece of music. So, for example, Iain G. Matheson begins his article, 'The End of Time: A Biblical Theme Messiaen's Quator,' in Peter Hill (ed.), *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 234-48, by asking '[c]an music engage with the Bible in any way other than the mere setting of its texts and stories?' and constructs an affirmative answer in relation to Messiaen's, *Quartet for the End of Time* (*Quatuor pour la fin du temps*; 1941). Compare also James Macmillan's 2012 work *Woman of the Apocalypse* (Rev. 12), which the composer himself describes as a 'sort of tone poem ... divided into five sections, each with a title referring to some aspect of the image or narrative' (*St. John Passion* [London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2007]). For another way in which the Bible has had a significant influence on classical music, in this case opera, see Richard Bell, *Wagner's Parsifal: An Appreciation in the Light of his Theological Journey* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), e.g. 117-118: 'Wagner lived in the world of Luther... read his Bible translation and his writings, and thoroughly immersed himself in this world of God and grace.'



The Choir and Organ at Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire.

9. See www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-news/11398015/Tom-Stoppard-I-have-to-dumb-down-jokes-so-the-audience-can-understand.html.
10. Richard Dawkins, 'Religious Education as a Part of Literary Culture', in *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2007), 383–7.
11. Listen, for example to BBC Radio 4's 2011 documentary, 'Pop Goes the Bible' and see www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpopfeatures/8958436/Radio-4s-Pop-Goes-the-Bible-how-pop-found-religion.html
12. See e.g. Deane Galbraith, 'Drawing our Fish in the Sand: Secret Biblical Allusions in the Music of U2', *Biblical Interpretation* 19.2 (2011): 181–222; Christian Scharen, *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006); Michael J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan &* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); Stephen H. Webb, *Dylan Redeemed: From Highway 61 to Saved* (London: Continuum, 2007).
13. See e.g. Jonathan Cordero, 'Unveiling Satan's Wrath: Aesthetics and Ideology in Anti-Christian Heavy Metal', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21.1 (2001); Christopher Partridge and Eric Christianson (eds.), *The Lure of the Dark Side: Satan and Western Demonology in Popular Culture* (London: Equinox, 2009); Keith Kahn-Harris, 'End of the World Music: Is Extreme Metal the Sound of the Apocalypse?' in Kenneth G.C. Newport and John Walliss (eds.), *The End All Around Us: The Apocalyptic Texts and Popular Culture* (London: Equinox, 2009), 22–70.
14. John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 30; cf. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), xxxvii. For a representative popular expression of this idea see Hugh Hill, *The Heart of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2012), 166: 'It is surely no accident that the book of Psalms is placed in the centre of the Bible, for this wonderful collection of songs and prayers expresses the heart and soul of humanity. ... In them [the Psalms] the writers pour out their souls expressing the whole range of human experience, their inmost feelings, desires, fears, concerns, perplexities and uncertainties.'
15. Ironically, however, there is in effect a 'canon' of more transitory popular music that itself forms a shared cultural repository relating to the fundamental aspects of humanity. On this basis one bishop has recently called for the Beatles' lyrics (and other popular songs) to be used to explain the Bible; see www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/3223193/Beatles-songs-as-likely-to-explain-Christianity-as-the-Bible-says-bishop.html; see further Clive Marsh, 'Theology as Soundtrack': Popular Culture and Narratives of the Self', *Expository Times*, 118 (2007): 536–41; and Jean-Guy Nadeau, 'Public Theology in Pop Culture', in Elaine Graham and Anna Rowlands (eds.), *Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism; International Academy of Practical Theology, Manchester 2003*, Vol. 1. (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005): 157–70.
16. Tom Lamont, 'How Mumford and Sons Became the Biggest Band in the World', www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/15/mumford-sons-biggest-band-world.
17. www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkand-jazz/8421564/Folk-music-A-quiet-revolution.html
18. See e.g. Laura Barton, 'The Almighty Power of Mumford & Sons', www.theguardian.com/music/2010/feb/11/mumford-sons-sigh-more. Among the many and varied individual examples of the explicit exploration of such questions in popular music see e.g. Elton John's, 'If There is a God in Heaven (What's He Waiting For?)' (1976), and Regina Spektor's 'Laughing With' (2009).



In this exciting collection of articles leading scholars of the Centre for Bible, Ethics and Theology, based at the University of Nottingham, reflect on the significance of the Bible. These accessible contributions are intended to encourage and enable informed conversation about the Bible's ongoing effects on daily life—from Muslim thought to Mumford and Sons. Produced with the generous support of Bible Society, this thought-provoking volume will impact a wide readership, offering an opportunity to encounter the joys of the Bible by wrestling with the question of its contemporary relevance.