



Editorial

Janet Morley

Perhaps not surprisingly, this issue begins and ends with articles that deal with the Wesleyan call to 'scriptural holiness'. Many readers will detect a real resonance across the centuries between the earnest desire of John Wesley, that we should so read and meditate on Scripture that we should have 'the mind of Christ' (Morna Hooker-Stacey, p. 259) and the description offered by a member of the black women's group in Villa Road Methodist Church: 'It's like a h'urge, like a something you must do, a habit that you can't break' (Jennifer Smith, p. 144).

The theme of the issue was consciously chosen as 'Scripture' and not 'the Bible', so as to call forth articles that would examine the relationship which engaged readers and Christian communities have or have had (or have increasingly lost) with the biblical text, within a wider contemporary culture where 'scriptures' may be regarded with suspicion or set aside as irrelevant. What emerges is a wide diversity of perceptions, both within the Church and beyond it. Ed Mackenzie's article on *lectio continua* (p. 165) and Neil Richardson's on *lectio divina* (p. 235) both bear witness to a steep decline in regular Bible reading among many British Methodists, whatever may be the continuing cultural echoes of biblical themes and narratives. Yet Jennifer Smith's exploration of the 'God-talk' of the women at Villa Road makes it clear that in some parts of contemporary Methodism, a wide knowledge of Scripture, which is not only applied to everyday life but is thoroughly inhabited as essential to identity and even survival, is an absolute given.

At the same time, in a secular university seminar examining religious cultures in a more distant way, and including mature students with and without Christian affiliation, Clive Marsh (p. 225) discovers that the very word 'scripture' is deeply off-putting to many, who may nevertheless be able to respond to the word 'canon' as a way of thinking about the Bible. They are familiar with the

idea of a canon, or list of authoritative material, because it allows them to reflect on what cultural influences have in fact shaped their identity.

Some of the articles explore scriptures that have shaped not only individual lives, but cultural movements or struggles. Stephen Plant, in his article 'The temptations of politics', examines the case study of John Milton. Setting him in his context as the chief theological apologist for the Cromwellian revolution, but whose hopes of a Puritan kingdom of God on earth had to be revised with its defeat and the restoration of the monarchy, he looks at how the elderly Milton works with the gospel narratives of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in *Paradise Regained*, and he draws out implications for political theology today. There are interesting resonances between this study and that of the scholarly exchange between John Coffey and Mark Noll (p. 211) as they discuss some of the key themes in Coffey's influential book, *Exodus and Liberation*. It is not necessary to have read this book – though the reader will probably be keen to consult it after reading this exchange – to appreciate the questions raised by charting how frequently the story of the Exodus has been claimed as the defining narrative of a popular movement (though the identification of the modern 'Moses' or 'Pharaoh' may change with bewildering speed).

One of the issues raised by Noll is how far a literal belief in the narrative events influences the sense of deliverance that is perceived in the more contemporary struggle, and indeed the impact of biblical criticism on the scriptural faith of Christians is explored by several of the writers. Coffey points out that 'the Exodus story has loomed largest for those least troubled by modern critical scholarship, especially for African Americans', and it is noticeable that the black respondents in Jennifer Smith's study tend to define themselves as close to a literal understanding of the Bible. Nevertheless, her lively representation of their engagement with a deeply problematic Old Testament passage about Jehu (p. 153) shows that this self-definition can coexist with a willingness to 'read against' the text of Scripture to resist oppressive mistreatment of people.

Familiarity with the text, and an intention to inhabit Scripture as a living word that should shape our lives, do seem to be necessary if we are serious about the Wesleyan tradition – and that can and should involve arguing with the text. Both Ed Mackenzie and Neil Richardson propose practices that could go some way to restoring an understanding of the sweep of whole biblical books, or that invite deep meditation without ignoring what critical scholarship offers. The world of the Bible perhaps needs to be registered as 'strange' before entry into a second naivety is possible.

Sue North-Coombes' article on Godly Play recalls us to the resources that are available to initiate the younger generation into the narratives of Scripture: not just the attractive visual and tactile playthings that help the stories come alive and create 'sacred space', but the all-important recognition of the priority of the Spirit in the hearts and minds of those who have not forgotten how to play freely.

Janet Morley, Commissioning Editor
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