

HOLINESS VOLUME 2 (2016) ISSUE 2

Holiness & Scripture

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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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‘Vex the devil’: Scripture, God-talk and holiness at Villa Road

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This article gives a critical account of the engagement with Scripture among a group of women and men from the Villa Road Methodist Church, Handsworth, Birmingham, UK. It presents research done in community during 2004/05 for the unpublished thesis, ‘Mary in the Kitchen, Martha in the Pew: Patterns of Holiness in a Methodist Church’ (MPhil., Birmingham, 2006), updated to include critical engagement with contemporary scholarship in Black British theology, womanist and feminist theology, holiness teaching and hermeneutics, and congregational studies. Working from ethnographic research, the article considers three clusters of emphasis, or creative tensions, in the use of Scripture: gender and God, thanksgiving/resistance in response to evil, and displacement/home-coming. The article argues that these themes specially concern the negotiation of identity and relationship between self, God, Scripture and context.

SCRIPTURE • HOLINESS • BLACK BRITISH THEOLOGY • FEMINIST WOMANIST THEOLOGY • CONGREGATIONAL STUDIES • ORDINARY HERMENEUTICS

Introduction

The Methodist Church ‘... ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith ...’¹

... it’s like a h’urge, like a something you must do, a habit that you can’t break. A good habit, a good habit that you can’t break. You got to get involved!²

British Methodism claims for its purpose the extension of something John Wesley called ‘scriptural holiness’: a quality of increasing sacredness, the growing association of a person with God and the ways of Jesus Christ that shows as a change in both behaviour and motive. The woman quoted above is a lifelong Methodist, Jamaican-born, who arrived in the United Kingdom in the early 1960s. That day she had settled me in the steaming warm kitchen of her terraced house just off the Soho Road in Handsworth, Birmingham, sitting me at the table with my digital recorder and a cup of tea. We had known each other for more than a year: I attended her church first on placement as a student minister, and then as a formally invited ‘participant-observer’ worshipping at Villa Road. She and other members of the church council and women’s fellowship had agreed to work with me on a ‘mutual theological enquiry’ about scriptural holiness, to help train me for the ordained ministry. On that afternoon I had come to interview her in preparation for a group discussion; I had asked her what scriptural holiness meant.

Her description of holiness as a ‘h’urge ... a something you must do’, chimes with that of recent theologians like Thomas Noble and indeed John Wesley, as ‘habitual patterns of motivation that build up over time until they come to shape our character’, as well as actions.³ Scriptural holiness in Methodist, let alone wider Christian, tradition has been used as a portmanteau for diverse agendas in the evolution of Christian witness.⁴ From the methodological perspective of congregational studies, Douglas J. Davies observes that ‘holy status is invoked as and when it is related to the generation of meaning, morality, or identity’.⁵ It is about who one is and who/how one is becoming identified with the sacred. Accounts of scriptural holiness taken together show a number of creative tensions, not least between how holiness shows and from where it comes: holiness has been taken to show in both ethics/behaviour and internal attitude, and has involved wilful intention while at the same time being

a free gift of God's initiative, graft and gift. And as John Rogerson has rightly noted, 'its meaning depends on the contexts in which it is used and the interests of those who use it'.⁶ This is as true for the woman in her terraced house kitchen and me, as for any working theologian or Methodist divine.

But my host took me abruptly back to the topic a few minutes later when I moved on too quickly to ask her opinion of holiness, claiming her own reflective space alongside my abstractions. 'Yeah, it like an illness but it a good illness. [Laughter.] Yeah it's a illness but it's something good. Illness is supposed to be something bad, but it a good illness.'⁷ She may have laughed at her own paradoxical use of illness as a metaphor for something healthy, but she clarified specifically that as a metaphor for scriptural holiness it pointed to a negotiation of meaning that was not just dynamic, but contested. The negotiation at the heart of scriptural holiness might not at first sight look harmless, even though she claimed it wholeheartedly as a good thing. It was in the context of this subtly developed and clarified image that we sought space for her immediate community to reflect on its engagement with Scripture, among other projects.

My purpose in this article is not to offer a full account of what scriptural holiness is, for the group of diverse Methodist folk white and black with whom I worked at Villa Road, nor to develop a full account of the hermeneutics of that community. The former project I have addressed in longer unpublished work which considered not only Scripture and related God-talk, but patterns of behaviour in worship, church life, personal devotion, physical objects, service, care, and denominational identity as part of a more fulsome account.⁸ This article offers a window into a very few themes in the use of Scripture among the folk of Villa Road: after some attention to methodology and context, and place and purpose of Scripture, the article will consider three clusters of emphasis in engagement with Scripture. The first is around issues of gender and God, the second thanksgiving and resistance to evil, and the third to do with displacement and home-coming. The three clusters of emphasis in the use of Scripture represented here all concern the negotiation of identity and relationship between self, God, Scripture and context, and show some of the creative tensions present in accounts of scriptural holiness within them. However, the themes are not exhaustive nor are they intended to be. They are simply three approaches to the contested, lively devotional attention my kitchen host, and others in her community, gave to Scripture together, individually and with me.

This article thus seeks to represent engagement with Scripture as a richly textured event (place, persons, vernacular, relationships) by which a group or individual engages with a scriptural motif, story or actual passage of Scripture, telling and retelling it, arguing to negotiate its meaning. In suggesting this definition I am extending Chris Shannahan's observation in relation to Scripture, that 'meaning rests not within the text or the interpretative community, but in the relationship between reader and scripture.'⁹ I am further responding to the challenge offered by Anthony Reddie in relation to Black British engagement with Scripture, to recognise the authority of hermeneutics in which people 'become part of a process that allows them to enter into the performance of theological activity and bring their lived experiences into the very heart of the biblical text.'¹⁰ In response I posit that where God-talk takes place, what happens, who is there, what if any food is eaten, what is said, who is silent, and the whole context is a potential part of the meaning arrived at. For example, in contrast to the warm kitchen off the Soho Road, one senior local preacher (a man already accredited as a lay preacher when he came from St Kitts in 1955, and widely invited as a guest, but discouraged from offering for the ordained ministry) chose to meet me in a church office and sat behind a desk in an authoritative position. He told me of a previous occasion where he had not known that a researcher was writing things down, and was then surprised to see someone else making a name out of his insights.¹¹ The geography of this network of historical and present relationships must be part of the meaning we arrive at. This article treats the record of these thematic patterns as a series of richly textured events, setting them in critical conversation with other theological voices as appropriate. I am convinced that as shared group moments these encounters with Scripture are part of the process of scriptural holiness in this place, but what we say here serves only to open that conversation.

Methodology and context

Over the past fifty years to 2004, Villa Road had become a black-majority church as its white members had moved away and/or died, and the generation of Afro-Caribbean migrants who renewed the membership lists in the 1950s and 1960s aged.¹² In the words of one member, herself coming to Villa Road in the 1960s after leaving another Methodist church because of racial prejudice, 'They see coloured people going there – out they come, out they come, out they come. And white people they trickle out ... [smiles ruefully] so that's how it goes, that's

how it comes down there, to call it a black church now, innit?'¹³ 'Black church' as a label came from outside the Villa Road church itself. I was told the congregation was struggling, and in numerical and immediate physical terms it was: they had sold their building in November 2003 with the promise of rented worship space within it, only to have the transitional time lag from months to years. As of May 2005, the congregation still worshipped in a borrowed room in the adjacent school's athletics building, using a kitchenette for a vestry. It has since moved back into leased space within the church building, including an unheated basement fellowship room and kitchen.

I was introduced to members at Villa Road as part of my training for ordained ministry in the Methodist Church in Spring 2003. This meant that I was identified from the outset as an authoritative person in the community, privileged by education and vocation. I am also middle class and from the USA: I was readily identifiable to all in the congregation as one of three regular white congregants among 40–50 people present most Sundays, and one of the only congregants under the age of 40. In September 2004 I had permission from the minister and church council to join the church as a participant-observer until June 2005, with the goal of undertaking a shared enquiry into the meaning of 'scriptural holiness' in the life of the congregation, and to write an account of our work for a research degree and later publication. A small group of seven self-nominated women met five times for recorded 'themed discussion' after the women's fellowship, which I facilitated. I conducted up to three semi-structured interviews each with ten individual members, eight women and two men, over the course of the nine months (17 in total, lasting one to one and a half hours each). I gave the whole congregation feedback in the context of worship, at Pentecost. The discussion group was majority Jamaican-born, with one Ghanaian and one Nigerian woman and included other occasional participants. Of the interviewees, three were White British, the others Jamaican, Ghanaian, Nigerian and from St Kitts. In the group and in individual interviews, I used a digital recorder and revisited people to ask them to reflect further on comments that interested them or me especially, to test my initial understanding. I have not quoted specific comments made to me 'off the cuff', for example during car journeys or after worship, except with specific permission, though these have certainly informed my understanding. Only one interviewee asked that I not record her, nor quote her specific comments.

During the research, I attended weekly worship and all other social and business meetings of the church, the weekly women's fellowship, and other occasional discipleship events. As people got to know me, I was called on for

lifts in my small blue hatchback to and from church, as well as occasional help in transport for medical or other appointments, and also invited to family and other social gatherings at church members' homes. The Villa Road community expected to care for me physically and to help me grow; I put on half a stone (seven pounds) in weight during the course of the research, not entirely unrelated to its progress! Their interest in me was and has remained warm and proprietary – I felt taken in as 'their' student and they were more than free with strong advice on everything from sermons to hair style. Some ten years later I am still in regular contact with one of the participants individually, the women's fellowship group collectively, and their (now retired) minister. The work was done with the ethical oversight of the Department of Theology at Birmingham University, supplemented by strong theological supervision and reflection offered by staff of the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, to whom I was accountable in my formation for ministry.

I am conscious of the position of trust I occupy, especially the necessity of representing my status as an evolving insider and outsider with integrity, in the finished record of research.¹⁴ But, beyond that, I remain acutely aware of my power as a white person, minister and researcher: representing those less powerful or less present in academic circles in its very fact may fulfil and reinforce expectations of their own inadequacies as self-advocates. American womanist bell hooks has written:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak yourself. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own ... I am still the coloniser, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.¹⁵

The awareness of myself as an inevitable coloniser remains a continuing goad, a tension which should not be resolved. And yet, this community also exercised authority over me, and largely scoffed at or brushed aside times when I directly expressed disquiet about representing them. They helped to set the agenda for our meetings, and changed it when it did not suit. If I did not write about something when they told me it was important, and with as much integrity as I could muster, then why were they bothering? That does not make the reality of the sin of white-skin privilege, education privilege and community status for the ordained any less real as part of my presence with them, but it is a no less real part of our power exchange.

The tensions presented by my situation as a participant-observer were themselves formative in preparing me to exercise authority in the presbyteral role I hold now. In both situations full reflexive practice and supervision are essential to negotiate an inevitable tension between the abuse of power and the abdication of power. The Villa Road community was explicitly aware of exercising a general authority over my formation as a minister and a specific authority in relation to the research, over the 'texts' I chose to represent and how to represent them, as this record will show. Many layers of meaning may be drawn from any story or talk about ourselves and God, Scripture or the Church: all may be valid, but must be honestly negotiated amid and mediated by the historic power inequalities we inherit. To paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, 'How long, O Lord, will your people listen but not comprehend, look but not understand?'¹⁶ This lament describes to me my own limitations in hearing the breadth and depth of meaning in the spoken reflection at Villa Road.

Place and purpose of Scripture

'And I don't leave out, my everyday my breakfast, is Psalm 27,' said one woman of her everyday scriptural 'food', in addition to her 'daily list'. '[E]very morning I get up I do it, that's my comfort, I read the Psalms and I don't do without it.'¹⁷ This kind of talk dominated people's descriptions of the Bible in their daily devotions. I asked a standard question about where folk kept their Bible: the most common answers were on the nightstand or kitchen table, with favourite passages read and reread for material comfort. Individuals talked about Scripture as food, comfort or salve, and about repeating specific passages from memory on their own as a way of re-orienting themselves in a moment of difficulty. Significantly, this re-orientation touched much more than attitude: said one woman with bad arthritis, 'Some of these days, you feel like you can't move ... you take your Bible, you read a few verses, it will comfort, it bring healing.'¹⁸ The way she spoke of the Bible in healing was anything but abstract: her legs felt less stiff and her pain immediately reduced. After a fellowship meeting another woman asked me privately if I thought reading special verses would protect against the effects of sugary foods (she was an insulin-dependent diabetic); I answered no. Other women took up the refrain, telling her to keep with the insulin and medical advice.¹⁹ However, the exchange confirmed for me that the accepted positions of Scripture in authorised church life (personal devotion, worship, study) were only one part of the 'where' and 'when' of Scripture's importance in people's lives.

For formal worship, the church used the *Good News* translation of the Bible, but the words on people's lips in conversation and prayer tended towards the language of the Authorised Version. Almost without exception whenever someone read or quoted a passage, whether in a group or in formal worship, others in the group would pick up the words and finish the phrase out loud together to signal their assent to the point being made. So for instance, when during a sermon a visiting minister referred to Psalm 27:14, 'be strong, and take heart, wait for the Lord', the whole congregation recited the verse with her. In group discussions, people often slipped into recitation to show their conclusion, or to add scriptural depth to an image of God. The speaker might twist a phrase or verse ever so slightly to make a theological point, often with sharp humour. In one example a woman stood up during discussion and shook her finger at all of us. 'God says, "My peace I give unto you ...' [the group began to speak along with her, with increasing speed and emphasis; they had heard this recitation before] '... And my peace I expect to find when I get back!'²⁰ In fact John 14:27 is specific that the 'peace of God' is not given 'as the world gives', but is without condition. Laughing, I challenged her about this: she said she was not intending to disagree with the verse, but just wanted to be clear that she thought we also had responsibilities. There was much laughter and repetition of her version, it clearly appealed to the people present.

Theme one: God, gender and Scripture

It is no surprise that self-identified Christian women (and men) should use Scripture to 'counteract negative stereotyping which at times has been used to justify their marginalization'.²¹ But at the same time, as Anthony Reddie has observed and the woman of the 'h'urge' whose words began this article implied, the negotiation of scriptural meaning may include both reading 'against a text and with it, depending upon how the text aligns itself with the popular imagination of Black people from within a wider framework of Diasporan African cultures and the often troubled and stunted humanity residing within such socio-religious settings'.²² Reddie's research shows that there are moments in Black British engagement with Scripture 'in which a contradictory, liberative/anti-liberative dialectic is played out', especially (but not exclusively) seen in a contradiction between 'liberationist and subversive' readings to do with slavery or race, and 'conservative or reactionary' readings to do with gender.²³

An argument broke out just at the end of one small-group meeting, as I was putting things away. Using language from John 20:17 (Jesus saith unto her, 'Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to the Father ...'), two women argued about the legitimacy of expecting intimacy from Jesus, and more generally with what obedient submission from women would look like in church.²⁴ One woman illustrated a warning not to put oneself 'forward' as a woman by singing a chorus from childhood: 'Woman no touch me, woman no touch me. Woman no touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the father ...' Waiting somewhat impatiently for the chorus to finish, the other responded in heated tones that 'woman been worthy enough to see the resurrection!', and by implication should be worthy enough to lead the Church.²⁵ They agreed that 'man is the head', but in a metaphor offered by a third woman by way of reconciling the divide, '... woman the ground, the earth ... the source of everything.'²⁶ Thus I heard a mixing of scriptural language about gender and God with the negotiated gender balance in their own lives, and an intense theological disquiet about how much support any one of them might expect from Jesus in challenging traditional patterns of privilege for men.

Although addressing a North American context, Jacquelyn Grant has observed that black women often articulated their own liberative Christologies.²⁷ Yet there was a present tension in the corporate account of who Jesus was, mirrored in a tension between how much present patterns of gender and race power structures should be challenged and changed. The tension about where a woman (or any other 'moaning sinner') sat in relation to Jesus was not resolved among the members at Villa Road.²⁸ The heat in the argument at the end of that session showed that more than a few of these women were unwilling to give up the Jesus who defended them in all ways, but especially as women, in a world where men had more domestic and economic privilege. But this was a contested reading, resonating with Anthony Reddie's observation of a 'contradictory ... liberative/anti-liberative dialectic' in the interpretation of Scripture among some Black British communities.

Theme two: thanksgiving, Scripture and resistance

The two women who had argued over closeness to Jesus agreed that cheerful endurance in evil circumstance was an act of positive resistance. By their reasoning, if one gave thanks and suffered cheerfully amid ongoing difficulty, 'it vex the devil so, he hop around like Rumpelstiltsken!'²⁹ The conversation that culminated in this repeated statement happened not at one of our

research group meetings, but at an ecumenical Lent Bible study on 1 Thessalonians, led by their minister. The two women were responding to the verse at 1 Thessalonians 5:18, 'In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.'³⁰ They were fully aware that their minister favoured the immediate challenge of injustice by tangible pastoral, political and economic means. It was not that they disagreed with what the minister was teaching, but they returned again and again to the motif of cheerful thanksgiving in suffering to 'vex the devil', teasing her good-naturedly and with increasing seriousness.

As these women talked about it, giving praise and thanks to God in the face of suffering was not a passive acceptance of the status quo but a mode of active resistance to evil. Those working from a hard liberation perspective might dismiss their view as false consciousness; the minister did not. She understood and adapted the 'official' account to include 'vexing the devil' as the Bible study continued, at the same time teasing the two women back that the community might need more than just thanksgiving. There is resonance between the use of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to authorise thanksgiving as 'resistance' (vex the devil) and the theory of atonement articulated by womanist theologian Delores Williams, who has equated salvation with survival.³¹ Williams has argued that some liberation theories do not adequately include the experience of women of colour in post-slavery, western culture, in which finding spiritual and physical energy to resource endurance is anything but simple. For the two women in that Bible study, the account of 'vexing the devil' was a way of resourcing and giving purpose to an endurance in the face of racism, sexism, displacement and class bias, among other hardships. Where an 'official' view of Scripture did not equip these women adequately, they were theologically subtle and socially adept at negotiating space for their own language and imagery about God, while preserving a respectful relationship with their minister.

There were instances where members at Villa Road did actively 'read against' (using Reddie's language) the text of Scripture to resist oppressive mistreatment of people. Realising that my original scheme of group exercises did not have enough space for reflection about the use of Scripture, I swapped in a group activity I hoped would draw out discussion comparing different ways of regarding the Bible. The training material in the course then used by lay preachers in the Methodist Church included a section on becoming self-conscious in one's own scriptural hermeneutic. The prospective preacher was asked to rank for herself four sources of authority: reason, Scripture, tradition and experience. Later in the course, she was asked to identify herself with one

or more of seven distinct camps of scriptural authority. With some subtlety of overlap, these camps ranged from a position of assumed literal inerrancy of the text and absolute authority for Christian living to an approach saying that the Bible is an interesting anthology one might dip into along with other resources, but without significant ethical authority.³² I planned to ask the five women in attendance that day to do both exercises. In what became one of the most memorable and instructive sessions of theological reflection with that group (unrecorded, happening before my 'exercise'), another woman pre-empted my exercise asking if we could instead study a passage that had been troubling her: 2 Kings 10:18–32. The discussion that followed gave me a clear lesson on how to read the Bible with absolute authority, but against the recommended culture of present-day leaders in and out of church and in support of those without power.

In the passage, the King Jehu affects a conversion to Baal worship, then rounds up (on pain of death) all the Baal worshippers in the land, declares a festival of sacrifice and worship and packs them into Baal's temple. After professing his fealty to Baal, he asks if there are any followers of the Lord there. No one comes forward; he orders that they search for any non-Baal worshippers, and there are none in the temple. As the worship begins, he has his guards rush in and massacre the whole congregation; afterwards God expresses pleasure that Jehu has done 'what was right in my eyes', by eradicating Baal worship from the land. Despite his own idolatry, Jehu is rewarded with the throne of Israel for four generations of his descendants.

There was silence in the group, broken by the angry declaration of our leader: 'It a trick! ... the point is he trick them ... So I say, those might have turn up who you know, scared.'³³ I pointed out that the text clearly stated that there were no 'followers of the Lord' in the temple: we might argue with the premise of killing them, but the text said that all who had died had been Baal worshippers. She was unconvinced: 'I have my doubts ... According to the threatening that he done to them, I don't know, maybe I would have been caught up in the massacre as well, through no fault of my own. You know ... those poor people, they were scared, you see. They have to be a martyr.' I asked what she would say to God about the blessing of Jehu's actions. The vehement response, after considered pause: 'I say, "Are you sure?"'

In relation to the seven categories of scriptural authority that Methodism identified, this woman put herself close to claiming the literal inerrancy of the Bible.³⁴ But the official Methodist exercise I offered, and the women eventually

undertook, measured only an incomplete part of that woman's reading and appropriation of the text to her life. She described a sad commonplace from her own experience of needing to look carefully that those in leadership were not setting out to trick folks lower down the power stakes, using them for their own ends. As such she resisted a literal reading of the text (which said clearly that there were no 'followers of the Lord', only Baal worshippers) specifically because she was reading the text as a real historical event, and it did not equate with her experience, in which there might be people who had gone along because they were scared not to. When I asked her about this later, she repeated her assertions and challenge to God, 'Are you sure?' Her use of the Scripture resonates strongly with Anthony Reddie's observation that 'The apparent literal meaning of the text cannot constrain the prevenient spirit within the black self – our dialectical spiritualities – which speak of an ongoing reality and revelation of God that goes beyond the limited ethic of the Bible.'³⁵

Lively discussion followed about whether other members of the group would have gone to the temple or not and pretended Baal worship: the lesson finally agreed was that 'if you hold fast to your faith no matter what, and don't be afraid, God will protect you'. One who said she would not under any circumstances deny her faith was more explicitly challenged: 'You say, if Jen axe you – [turning to speak directly to me] no offence – if Liz [their minister] axe you, you still wouldn't go?'³⁶ The women here worked from their experience to 'read between the lines' (the leader's phrase) of the text to get at its 'true' meaning. Scriptural holiness is associated in womanist or black liberation context as beginning with a process of conscientisation: people can only grow in holiness if they learn to name their oppression and oppressor. One way this happens is through a rereading of Scripture on behalf of oneself and one's own cultural experience: part of what holiness does as an acquired identity, built in part from this kind of reading of Scripture, is to resource for the resisting of representation by others with their own agendas.³⁷

Certainly there was some of this conscientisation gently present in our study of Jehu. However, in the discussion of King Jehu there was unresolved conflict between the counter-claims of simple endurance, showing as non-resistance to (if not respect for) present leaders, laid against the promise that God would favour the less powerful. That this conflict played out in the context of talk about Scripture showed how important such talk is as part of the continuing re-formation of community identity. I would describe my own reading of Scripture as showing a 'chastened historical critical approach', I would represent what I saw operating in talk about the text at Villa Road as 'wary obedience.'³⁸

The study of the Jehu story is not the only example I could use to represent the out-working of scriptural authority in this place, but it showed the variety, conflict, and commitment to arriving at consensus in talk about the Bible.

George Mulrain has written of a distinctive 'hermeneutics within a Caribbean context'. He suggests that a specifically Caribbean scriptural hermeneutics is characterised firstly by a world-view that takes seriously the presence of an unknown but populated spirit world. In relation to the members at Villa Road, this recognises there is a real 'devil' to be vexed. Secondly, Mulrain identifies the expectation that God understands the oppression of the readers' forebears and sides with them in suffering. Thirdly, by his account this Caribbean hermeneutics acknowledges a multi-faith context in the way it reads texts. Finally, he identifies a 'preference for texts that deal with liberation from forms of oppression'.³⁹ I am interested to expand this account of biblical interpretation with the particular insights about the culture of black elders (especially women) who moved to Britain and have lived there for the better part of their adult lives, which Anthony Reddie offers in his account *Faith Stories, and the Experience of Black Elders*.⁴⁰ Several layers of hermeneutical emphasis operated among the women and men at Villa Road, black and white. Certainly, the expectation that Scripture would reveal a God involved on their side against racism, poverty, illness, displacement, neglect and other forms of suffering was present in the treatment of King Jehu. Certainly there was a 'preference' for texts associated with liberation, like Psalm 27. And certainly I saw models of talking about and interpreting the Bible that expected it to make the world a better place for the impoverished and underprivileged.

However, there was not universal agreement about the lessons of Scripture or the way it should be used among the people at Villa Road and I am wary of representing the way their fellowship positioned and spoke of the Bible in such a tidy package as Mulrain's scheme suggests. Present in their conflicts about the meaning of texts, I heard conflicts about how to respond to the present and past legacy of racism within the Church and without. I heard conflict about what place race, and their particular culture in Handsworth, should play as part of Christian identity: should the Church be challenged? And if so, in what way and to what degree? Or was race less important than Baptism as part of Christian identity, racism an embarrassment for victim as much as perpetrator and thus best forgiven and forgotten? For myself I hope that the Bible and talk about Scripture might be part of an identity I call holiness, serving to resist oppressive denigration on the basis of race, sex, illness, age or other category. As told at Villa Road, the Bible and use of Scripture did become this means.

However, it was also the ground over which these women were negotiating the conflict between a more or less useful, more or less oppressive identity for God and self, Church and world.

Theme three: Scripture, home-coming and the person of Jesus

Feeling rejected in a foreign culture and keeping a secret sense of home alive was a theme that recurred in multiple conversations about Scripture and how to use it. The pain of displacement from home was real, and acknowledged: take for example one woman's explicit link between low-level cultural hostility of the early years of her time in the United Kingdom, and the development of a secret spiritual identity, the song 'behind the teeth'. Telling me about 'the things you cannot do in England,' she explained that she had had to learn not to sing hymns in public after getting odd looks in the street, and how different this was from the Jamaica of her girlhood. 'Now I keeps the song behind the teeth,' she said, smiling broadly and laughing to show me.⁴¹ To resist the daily cost of fitting in to avoid hostility, she spoke of developing a second self 'behind the teeth' of her smile, where she could sing and pray and be at home. I was able to meet that woman only once for an individual interview, and she preferred not to be recorded; in the moment, I responded with silence. I wish after the silence I had thought to open Psalm 137: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion ... for there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'⁴² These verses were favourites among the discussion group, quoted and requoted as part of the general vernacular imagery in conversation. In retrospect I find in the woman's description a specific echo of the 'required mirth' of the exile, as she described her smile and the song it had restrained over the years. I do not know if she would have claimed the specific association with her song 'behind the teeth', or not.

In the way many spoke about Jesus, he represented the secret self of home or home-coming, associated with Old Testament stories of the suffering of exile and abandonment by the world. The Jesus of the Gospels (prefigured in Old Testament texts) at Villa Road was not an abstract Christ or saviour, but an intimate co-sufferer who had triumphed over all the things that troubled people in this place and life. Even when not explicitly scriptural, the cadence

of psalms and lament helped build a scriptural vernacular about Jesus as shared story became group text. Consider the following exchange from the first recorded group session, in which I had asked if there were times in life when people had been especially aware of God's presence. After a pause, one woman recited the story of her mother's deathbed, as others around the table encouraged her, and told me to pay attention:

When my mother was dying I can remember this.
She called me by her bedside, and she said ...
'I am going home to Jesus ...
[another woman makes an aside to me: 'Aw, ain't that nice ...'],
... and 'Take care me Jesus now.'
But the most important and the most shocking thing to me ...
'Lord Jesus, my name is Viola Rice!
I am coming home Lord Jesus.'

It was the most sincere thing I ever heard, it was so touching to me.
And then she saying,
'Yes Lord, Yes Lord here am I Lord,
I am coming I am coming.'
And she says to me ...
'Jesus is coming, He is coming,'
and she says 'My name Lord is Viola Rice!
My name is Viola Rice, I am coming,'
and touch me, and up to now,

And I'm saying, 'Lord, will I hope to say what my mother said?'
And that lived with me for the rest of my life.

[Other woman, to me: 'That's a good thing for your book, that's a good verse, good thing for your writing, that is nice, very nice ...']⁴³

The comments in brackets were interjections made directly to me by another woman; her spoken approval recommended the story highly, over others, as one she wanted to exemplify God's activity and their individual and group response. I was not to miss the point that this story was owned as a family jewel among them, a formative text. The group had heard this story before, and joined in to say the repeated phrases together by way of affirmation. Viola's daughter told the story with poetic cadence and emphasis, a recitation in what was almost a singing voice.

God was intimately present in the day-to-day conversations and banter among the research group, but this story stood out as an illustration of that usual reference spilling over into a profound sense of the numinous presence, Jesus' coming and coming to him and home at the moment of death. In the telling and hearing of this story there might be a variety of richly layered meanings, but its point was explicitly catechetical: 'Lord, will I hope to say what my mother said?' Viola's daughter made her mother's experience of naming herself to Jesus into a lesson to instruct not only about who God is, but about how we should all hope to respond, naming ourselves in God's presence and coming to him. Treating this not only as a personal anecdote but as a group-owned text (a 'verse', as the other woman described it), what lessons do I draw from the story about who God is, in the lives of the women present?

Telling the story of Scripture to emphasise naming oneself before Jesus seemed to me an antidote to public anonymity or 'nobodyness' in much of ordinary life. Viola Rice's naming herself to Jesus in her daughter's presence taught others that they could, should, name themselves to Jesus: and perhaps in the here and now. This resonated with Jacquelyn Grant's argument that for black women ignored by the mainstream of the cultures in which they lived, Jesus was the person who would know you, when the world does not. Writing about the differences in black and white women's understanding of Jesus, Grant has talked of black women's Christology emerging from the reality of the convergence of racism, sexism and classism to 'convey to their children that in spite of the world's denial of you, Jesus (God) affirms you'. This she called a 'theology of somebodyness'.⁴⁴ But why, then, did Viola Rice need to name herself? According to the group, Jesus knew her already: this was about saying her own name out loud in the world, a sign to demonstrate her presence and coming home to Jesus, over and again.

Conclusion

As I said in the introduction to this article, my purpose here is not to offer a full account of what scriptural holiness is at the Villa Road Methodist Church, nor how it is 'spread'. That project would require wider reference to worship and sacrament, fellowship and pastoral life, music, denominational identity and the physical spaces and artefacts of church life, among other themes. These are of course negotiated in relation to each other and to the use of Scripture and scriptural vernacular, but move well beyond the conversations represented

here. Nonetheless this article does highlight three emphases within the hermeneutics of the Villa Road community which are significant in the formation of holy identity. These three emphases are worthy conversation partners with the voices of Black British, and womanist, theologies, and congregational studies, both as they challenge, and confirm, the insights of those disciplines. Neither the clusters of emphasis I have identified here, nor the conversation partners included, is exhaustive. That said, negotiating expectations of gender justice, thanksgiving/resistance, and homecoming/identity are significant areas where people I worked with at Villa Road used Scripture to resource themselves for particular purposes. I observe that they built identity using Scripture as a powerful and authoritative dialogue partner to serve purposes presented by the particular historical and cultural context.

Not all of the community's purposes nor mine show in this article, but the hope is that what is represented here will provoke further questions about how we create space in congregations for reflexive practice about the use of Scripture, especially among black and ethnic minority people in congregations. This question becomes far more layered when we move to include a wider generational spread of people, and come to reflect on the multiple ethnic and cultural identities many of us own, in relation to faith formation. I also hope that the powerful humour among many of those represented here is evident as a tool not just in relation to engaging Scripture, but also for engaging those in power. I would be pleased for others to ask critical questions about the character and use of that humour in this and other specific pastoral contexts.

In the introduction I set the particular clusters of emphasis about the use of Scripture at Villa Road in the context of a wider conversation about scriptural holiness as a process of identity formation. My first host, quoted at the outset of this article, identified that process of identity change as a wholly good thing – 'an h'urges, like a something you have to do' – and also as an illness, if a 'good illness'. Clearly, the ground of what it means to be and become Christian is and always has been contested ground. I am convinced that as shared group moments, the encounters with Scripture which I have represented here are part of the process of scriptural holiness, being formed gradually into an identity in Christ that helps to resist the evils of racism, sexism, displacement and other hardships. Scriptural holiness can be reclaimed as a positive theme in Christian apologetics, despite its wildly diverse content in different contexts: I hope this article contributes to that ongoing project.

Notes

1. Paragraph 4, 'Doctrine', 'Deed of Union of the Methodist Church', *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 2004, Vol. II, p. 213.
2. ED, 20 January 2005, 3:00ff. Quotes from taped interviews or group work will be referenced with the speaker's initials, date of recording and time tag on mp3 file. Where a quote comes from an untaped interview, it will be referenced by initials of speaker and date, with indication of whether it is an exact quote or paraphrase.
3. T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People – A Theology of Christian Perfecting*, Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2013, p. 106. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777).
4. See, for example, Stanley Hauerwas' (1998) collection of essays concerning topics as diverse as the ethics of disability and gay liberation within Christian communities, the nature of truth-telling in relation to the Decalogue, and role of narrative in theology. For a critical account of the different strands of holiness in British Methodist tradition, see Jones 2004.
5. Douglas J. Davies, 'The Sociology of Holiness: The Power of Being Good', in Barton 2003, p. 51.
6. John Rogerson, 'What is holiness?' in Barton 2003, p. 3.
7. ED, 20 January 2005, 5:20ff.
8. Smith 2006.
9. Shannahan 2014, p. 158.
10. Reddie 2008, p. 163.
11. HS, 21 April 2005, paraphrase comment, unrecorded at end of 1.05 hour recorded interview.
12. Of 81 members, 77 are black; I observed no white occasional worshippers between September 2004 and May 2005. The majority of the black members are Jamaican, with one native Ghanaian and one Nigerian. Of the white members, two are long-time local residents, the other two joined in 1987 and have kept their membership despite moving some 15 miles away in 1998.
13. VC, 26 January 2005, 5:30ff.
14. Many criticise an assumed dichotomy between insider and outsider in ethnographic research, rejecting these categories in favour of opening the relationship itself (of whatever degree of participation) to reflection instead as a text for research. See, for example, Eleanor Nesbitt, who argues that written research should 'interrogate the evolving relationship between researcher and community' instead of negotiating insider/outsider status. 'Quaker Ethnography: A Reflexive Approach', in Arweck and Stringer 2002, p. 135. Lowell Livesey echoes Nesbitt, arguing that 'we are almost always both insiders and outsiders, albeit in a variety of respects and dimensions, in different degrees, and in a partly negotiated balance between the two.' 'Epilogue: Ethnography and the Quest for Meaning', in Arweck and Stringer 2002, p. 157.
15. bell hooks 1990, pp. 151–152.
16. Paraphrase, Isaiah 6:9–11.

17. VC, 26 January 2005, 31.30ff.
18. LW, 31 January 2005, Group Exercise, 14.34ff.
19. RT, 6 December 2005, Group Exercise, untaped comment.
20. VC, untaped banter, 22 November 2004.
21. Henry-Robinson 2014, p. 59.
22. Reddie 2008, p. 170.
23. Reddie 2008, pp. 170–175.
24. John 20:17, Authorised Version.
25. LW, ED, 7 February 2004, 0.45ff.
26. MP, 7 February 2004, untaped.
27. Grant 1989, p. x.
28. LW, Group Exercise, 31 January 2005, 15.22ff. LW here was talking about the necessity of giving thanks and praise, arguing that 'moaning' in suffering demonstrated contempt for God.
29. ED, 2 May 2005, untaped comment in response to 1 Thessalonians 5:18. Also quoted in article title.
30. 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Authorised Version.
31. Williams 1996.
32. *Faith and Worship* 2003, Unit 5.
33. ED, Group Exercise, 31 January 2005, untaped.
34. *Faith and Worship* 2003, Unit 5.
35. Reddie 2008, p. 174.
36. ED to LW, Group Exercise, 31 January 2005, untaped.
37. See hooks 1994; also Ela 1986, and Kanyoro 2001, pp. 101–113.
38. I borrow the first phrase from John Muddiman and John Barton's description of their editorial approach in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). In relation to my own approach to Scripture, I take 'chastened historical critical' to mean that I read the Bible as edited faithfully into one book and expect the Word of God to become present in the words of text, with historical critical methods as one but not the only aid.
39. George Mulrain 1999, pp. 123–124.
40. Reddie 2001.
41. LW, untaped comment, 22 November 2005.
42. Psalm 137:1–4, Authorised Version.
43. MP, Group Exercise, 22 November 2005, 8.22ff. Bracketed asides, VC.
44. Grant 1989, p. ix.

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Lectio continua and biblical literacy within the Methodist Church

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Lectio continua – preaching through a single biblical book – tends to be less prominent in British Methodism than following a lectionary or a thematic series. In a context of declining biblical literacy, however, lectio continua is a fruitful way of encouraging engagement with Scripture. Following a discussion of the challenges of biblical illiteracy, this article argues that lectio continua can promote biblical literacy through its focus on whole books of Scripture, its consideration of the context of biblical passages, and its invitation to close readings of biblical texts – all key skills for reading the Bible well. A case study demonstrates how such an approach could be applied to preaching through 1 John.

BIBLE • BIBLICAL LITERACY • EDUCATION • HERMENEUTICS • HOMILETICS • PEDAGOGY • PREACHING • SCRIPTURE • 1 JOHN

Introduction

For John Wesley, the ‘man of one book’, ‘searching the Scriptures’ was a key means of grace. Such engagement with Scripture involved three key practices: hearing the Bible, reading the Bible and meditating on the Bible. Each practice allowed Christians to encounter God’s presence and grace.¹

While Methodists today hold a wide range of views on the Bible, the Methodist Church continues to prioritise the importance of biblical literacy and engagement.² The report *A Lamp to my Feet, a Light to my Path* explains that ‘the Holy Spirit speaks through the Scriptures to awaken and nurture faith and provide ethical direction for the Christian community’.³ In a further report, the Faith and Order Committee called for people at all levels of the Church to promote the ‘*reading, study and practical use of the Bible*’.⁴

While biblical engagement remains a key focus within the Methodist Church, a decline in biblical literacy has affected those outside the Church as well as those within it. Finding ways to help people engage more deeply with Scripture, then, is important missiologically as well as in helping disciples grow.

In this article, I will argue that the practice of *lectio continua* – preaching sequentially through a single book of the Bible – is a helpful way of raising biblical literacy within the Church. Following a discussion of biblical illiteracy and its challenges, I will explore three ways in which *lectio continua* can help to promote biblical engagement: by focusing on biblical books rather than single passages, by attending to the context of Scripture, and by promoting a focused engagement with the text. The value of such an approach will be demonstrated through a case study of how *lectio continua* could shape preaching through 1 John. In conclusion, I will suggest that circuits and churches consider the occasional use of *lectio continua* as a way of helping Methodists engage more deeply with the Bible.

The challenge of biblical illiteracy

Biblical illiteracy – a lack of familiarity with the Bible’s stories, characters and teachings – is a characteristic feature of the contemporary British post-Christian context.⁵ As Martyn Atkins has noted, ‘the Bible remains for increasing numbers of people today an unknown book with unknown teaching and worst of all, an unknown God in Christ’.⁶ The lack of familiarity with the Bible represents a

cultural loss as well as a missiological challenge, with even Richard Dawkins lamenting the demise of the King James Version within the culture.⁷ Biblical illiteracy and a lack of engagement is also an issue within the Church, with fewer and fewer Christians familiar with the Bible or regularly reading it. If the Bible remains a 'means of grace' for God's people, as Methodism continues to hold that it is, then a lack of knowledge and engagement with Scripture is surely a problem for the Church. Helping people read and engage the Bible more deeply is a spiritual, as much as a pedagogical, issue.

Evidence of the decline in biblical literacy comes from a variety of sources. In a national biblical literacy survey in 2008, CODEC noted that knowledge of key Bible stories has been lost within British culture, and revealed that many found the Bible difficult to understand, boring or irrelevant. The same survey found that only 18 per cent of those who described themselves as Christian had read their Bible in the previous week.⁸ A 2013 survey of Bible-reading habits of British parents similarly pointed to 'an undeniable decline in our Bible literacy across the generations';⁹ and showed that knowledge of key Bible stories had been lost within British culture.

In contrast to this picture, a recent collection of essays – *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* – offers a variety of perspectives that problematise the assertion that the Bible is becoming less significant within society.¹⁰ A number of essays explore echoes of biblical stories in popular culture that reflect different kinds of 'biblical literacies'.¹¹ Even where 'echoes' of the Bible exist in popular culture, however, people are less and less able to recognise them. The loss of such recognition reflects a loss of biblical literacy – in terms of knowledge about the Bible – rather than its reconfiguration.

Evangelical Christians, traditionally a constituency that has valued scriptural engagement, are also reading the Bible less.¹² John Grayston suggests a number of reasons are to blame, including a loss of biblical credibility and authority, a lack of relevance, and reaction against legalistic approaches to reading the Bible.¹³ While there is little specific evidence of how levels of biblical literacy among Methodists compares to the wider Christian population, there is no reason to expect that it would differ markedly from the general decline.

We might pause at this point and explore further why promoting biblical literacy is so important. In the midst of so many other demands on our churches and communities, why focus on helping Methodists read and better understand the Bible? A full response to such a question would require more space than a single article, but we might simply point here to the commitment

of the Church – historically and today – to see Scripture as a key means by which God addresses and shapes us. As the Methodist Catechism puts it, 'The Bible is the record of God's self-revelation, supremely in Jesus Christ, and is a means through which he still reveals himself, by the Holy Spirit.'¹⁴ The Deed of Union also speaks of the providence of God, by which 'Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith.'¹⁵ It is precisely through engaging with Scripture that we discern what holiness – and living discipleship – actually entails.¹⁶

Given the classic role of Scripture in spiritual formation, it is not surprising that works on discipleship and spirituality point to biblical engagement as key for the life of faith.¹⁷ It is also significant that one of the greatest works on discipleship – Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* – includes an extended meditation and reflection on a text of Scripture, the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁸ In the Wesleyan tradition, Philip Meadows suggests that searching the Scriptures is significant since it involves 'entering into a life-giving conversation with God, whose word of command and promise has the power to change our lives.'¹⁹

Research also shows that biblical engagement leads to spiritual growth. Reporting on an American survey that explored spiritual growth among 1,000 churches, the authors conclude that encouraging biblical engagement is the one practice that would help people at every stage of maturity to grow in faith.²⁰ Again in the American context, research on small groups similarly highlights the importance of scriptural engagement for growing as a disciple.²¹

Lectio continua as a response to biblical illiteracy

While there are a number of responses to biblical illiteracy, one promising avenue for helping Methodists engage more deeply with the Bible is through *lectio continua*, preaching sequentially through a single book of the Bible.²² While preaching through a lectionary is a more well-known approach to engaging the Bible, *lectio continua* was found among many leaders of the early Church, including John Chrysostom, Origen and Augustine. It was also an approach favoured by the Reformers since it so clearly allows the biblical text to set the agenda for preaching.²³

By following the biblical text across a number of sermons, *lectio continua* differs from lectionary preaching as well as from topical preaching. While the lectionary is an excellent resource for exposing congregations to the breadth

of Scripture, it misses certain passages, and the priority it gives to the Gospels can lead preachers to neglect other biblical texts. Topical preaching is a helpful way to tackle particular issues in the life of the Church, but its tendency to use Scripture selectively means that it is less likely to engage deeply with a biblical book. In contrast to both approaches, *lectio continua* is characterised by a sustained engagement with a *single* biblical book, and in so doing can focus on the character, flow and story of that particular part of the canon. This does not mean that *lectio continua* is the 'ideal' way to construct sermons, but it does mean that it is well suited for promoting greater knowledge and understanding of the Bible.

While many Methodist churches follow the lectionary,²⁴ there is no reason why they could not also adopt *lectio continua* for a limited period within the church year. Methodism makes allowance for churches to hold special Sundays with readings that depart from the lectionary,²⁵ and a similar principle would be at work for the use of *lectio continua*. This would, of course, require obtaining the appropriate approval from church councils and circuit superintendents.

A possible criticism of such an approach might be that helping people engage with the Bible is part of Christian education rather than part of preaching or worship.²⁶ The practice of *lectio continua*, however, has a strong historical pedigree, and some forms of preaching have always had a more educative role than others.²⁷ Restricting biblical engagement to 'Christian education' also unhelpfully contrasts an 'educative' approach to Scripture with the 'encounter' that takes place through preaching. A careful reading of the text, however, is precisely a means through which we come to encounter God.²⁸ As Peterson notes, 'the long and broad consensus in the community of God's people has always insisted on a vigorous and meticulous exegesis: give long and close and learned attention to this text!'²⁹

Before exploring the ways in which *lectio continua* can promote biblical literacy and engagement, it is worth noting that at least some empirical evidence points to its value for biblical literacy. The North Yorkshire Dales Biblical Literacy project, for example, found that one of the most effective ways to promote biblical literacy was through leading a preaching series based on a biblical book or character.³⁰

More recently, a Bible Month pilot project run by the Methodist Church Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (DMLN) found that preaching through a single biblical book over a series of four weeks significantly impacted the engagement of congregations with the Bible.³¹ Questionnaires sent to the

four churches that took part in the project found that 61 per cent of those who responded had been encouraged to read the Bible more frequently and 59 per cent felt better equipped to read the Bible for themselves.³²

In the remainder of this article, I will explore three ways in which *lectio continua* can help Methodists engage with Scripture. My argument will be based not so much on empirical studies – though it will highlight further work to be done in this area – but rather on homiletical and pedagogical considerations. *Lectio continua* can promote biblical literacy by immersing congregations in whole books rather than single texts of Scripture, by highlighting the importance of context in the act of biblical interpretation, and by modelling a focused reading of particular texts. Such an approach can also be demonstrated through a case study of how adopting *lectio continua* could shape preaching through 1 John.

Lectio continua and reading whole texts

The first advantage of *lectio continua* is that it helps congregations engage with biblical books rather than isolated texts.³³ Rather than focusing on single passages, *lectio continua* sets biblical stories and passages within the context of the book in which they appear.³⁴ Such an approach also encourages auditors to recognise the way in which biblical books communicate through specific genres.

On the first point, *lectio continua* encourages preachers to attune auditors to the ‘narrative’ carried by each biblical book. As biblical scholars and narrative theologians have particularly emphasised, Scripture is ‘story-shaped’, and even non-narrative portions of Scripture – such as the letters of Paul – assume and invoke a particular ‘story’ of God’s action with humanity.³⁵ Through paying attention to the story carried by each biblical book, *lectio continua* can remedy the tendency to sideline the wider biblical and redemptive contexts of particular passages. The prevalence of this tendency within British Methodism has been noted by Paul Kybird, who argues that many Methodists seek inspiration in ‘micro-narratives’ of particular Scriptures, leading to an emphasis on the ‘inspirational moment’ of encountering Scripture over a greater understanding of its broader context.³⁶ *Lectio continua*, in contrast, encourages auditors to allow the biblical book to frame the meaning of any particular passage.

Lectio continua also exposes auditors to the distinctive contributions of biblical genres. Apocalypses, letters and Gospels – to take just three examples – function in markedly distinct ways, with the genre of each text shaping the way in which it communicates.³⁷ John Goldingay has proposed that the various biblical genres highlight different ‘models’ of Scripture, and this affects how they are preached as well as interpreted. Scripture as ‘Witnessing Tradition’ is the best model for the narrative portions of Scripture; ‘Authoritative Canon’ for the Law; ‘Inspired Word’ for the prophetic literature, and ‘Experienced Revelation’ for the apocalypses, Psalms, wisdom literature and the letters.³⁸ *Lectio continua* can allow congregations to engage fully with these diverse ways in which God speaks through Scripture. Such an approach can demonstrate how the form of Scripture shapes its content and revelatory impact within the congregation.

Lectio continua also raises the question for auditors of how a particular biblical work fits within the canonical symphony as a whole, and so can open up fresh avenues for exploring biblical theology.³⁹ By wrestling with the particular ‘word’ of a biblical book – both in terms of its genre and its content – sermons can begin to tease out its connections with other canonical voices. Wesley advised preachers to ‘interpret Scripture by Scripture’, drawing on similar passages across the canon, and recent developments in biblical theology encourage a nuanced attentiveness to how Scripture as a whole fits together.⁴⁰

The advantage of preaching through a whole book like Galatians, for example, is that a passage such as Paul’s treatment of justification by grace through faith – the heart of the letter in Galatians 2:15–21 – is situated within a broader context of the revelation of God’s grace to Paul (Galatians 1:11–16), scriptural support for God’s redemptive grace (3:1—5:1), and Paul’s exhortation that those ‘in Christ’ live out their freedom by walking in the Spirit (5:2—6:10). The preacher might well be daunted by the apostle’s complex and scripturally rich argument, and – indeed – a glance at recent commentaries might not assuage their anxiety,⁴¹ but it is only by engaging with the breadth of Paul’s argument *in the letter as a whole* that auditors can fully appreciate the particular point Paul makes in 2:15–21.⁴² *Lectio continua* can make it clear – for example – that Paul’s trust in God’s radical grace had its roots both in Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ *and* his prayerful reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures. It can also reveal to auditors that – in Wesley’s terms – ‘justification’ and ‘new birth’ always go together; God’s grace to those who do not deserve it (2:15–21) is always accompanied by the gift of the Spirit that makes all things new (3:1–5; 5:16–21).⁴³

Through allowing congregations to immerse themselves in whole biblical books, *lectio continua* encourages auditors to think in terms of books and not simply single passages. It also offers an education into the way in which genre and form shape meaning. In so doing, it serves biblical literacy by modelling the way that the Bible 'works' while also encouraging readers to engage with texts by attending to the biblical book in which they occur.

Lectio continua and the context of Scripture

The second way in which *lectio continua* promotes biblical literacy is through highlighting the significance of the various contexts within which the book was produced. Both the historical context and the literary context of any particular passage are addressed through *lectio continua*, and this allows auditors to recognise the importance of such contexts in their own reading and engagement with Scripture.

The significance of understanding context in understanding texts is, of course, a basic axiom of hermeneutical theory. Taking account of context provides parameters for approaching the 'best reading' of a text, and such a reading will take account of where the text is placed – both in historical and literary terms.⁴⁴ In contrast, a text removed from its original context can be co-opted into a meaning that radically reverses or negates what one scholar calls the 'communicative intention' of the text.⁴⁵ Rather than encouraging an approach to the text where readers are free to entirely construct its meaning, attending to the text *within context* respects the text as a distinct voice that addresses the reader or auditor from its own perspective.⁴⁶

The historical context of any particular book within Scripture can also be addressed in more detail through *lectio continua* than that which is possible in other forms of the sermon. Since the preacher and the congregation will 'take time' with the text, there is space for exploring the ways in which the text was situated in a particular time and place and addressed to specific circumstances. While drawing attention to the historical distance between text and reader may seem to detach the text from its relevance for the present, it can also be a way of drawing the reader into the 'strange new world of the Bible'.⁴⁷ A skilled preacher will be able to draw parallels between ancient context and today, while also helping auditors to cultivate attention to where and when the text emerged.

While the very act of preaching through a single biblical book raises issues of literary context, *lectio continua* is also an opportunity for preachers to draw attention to the *immediate* literary contexts of a text. Good exegetes will always note what precedes and follows any particular text, and good preachers can do the same as they follow the flow of a particular biblical book. In a context where biblical literacy was high and Christians were aware of the context of preached texts, auditors may have been implicitly aware of such links. When biblical literacy is low, however, *lectio continua* is an opportunity to educate auditors in how texts work across paragraphs and chapters, while encouraging an encounter with the living Christ who speaks through the whole of Scripture.⁴⁸

A preacher on Micah might be tempted to dwell on the prophecy of a ruler from Bethlehem (5:2–5), or on the famous explanation of what the Lord requires: ‘to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God’ (6:8). *Lectio continua*, however, will allow preachers to place such texts in context, noting the historical context of eighth-century Judah and Micah’s place among the biblical prophets. In terms of the literary context, a preacher might note that the book as a whole falls into three key sections, each of which begins with punishment and ends with the promise of restoration (1–2; 3–5; 6–7).⁴⁹ Hence, the prophecy of the ruler from Bethlehem (5:2–5) comes as part of a series of restoration oracles (4:1–5:15), all of which follow the critique of Judah’s rulers in chapter 3. The description of what the Lord requires in 6:8, in contrast, is part of a broader lament within Micah that explains how God’s people are precisely *not* those who fulfil God’s calling (6:1–16), and so sets the scene for the promise of divine restoration in 7:8–20. Such restoration relies wholly on divine compassion and the willingness of God to shepherd his people and forgive their sins (7:14–19). The understanding of a particular text is enriched by placing it within the wider context of the work.⁵⁰

Lectio continua can promote biblical literacy among the congregation, then, by modelling to auditors the importance of attending to the contexts of biblical passages. By hearing the preacher address the way a passage is rooted historically and in its literary setting, auditors can be encouraged to take account of such contexts in their own reading of Scripture. Preaching through a biblical book will still, of course, provide an opportunity to encounter and hear God, but *lectio continua* allows this to take place in the midst of a contextual engagement with the biblical text.

Lectio continua and engaging the text

A third advantage of *lectio continua* is that it encourages the preacher and auditors to remain focused on the text as the primary locus of meaning within the preaching event. Such focus lends itself to a close and careful reading of biblical passages and encourages auditors to cultivate similarly attentive readings of Scripture. It can also lead preachers to model ways of addressing difficult or seemingly pedestrian texts within the biblical canon.

The priority of the Bible in preaching has been called for by a number of different preachers and theologians. This was, of course, a key emphasis in the theology of Karl Barth, who explained that ‘the preacher’s task is to cause the testimony presented in the text to be heard ... preaching is good if it brings to life in this present age the testimony of the prophets and the apostles.’⁵¹ In the Methodist Church, the Conference report *Called to Love and Praise* proposes that one of the characteristics of a church community will be ‘preaching which engages with contemporary life and with the Bible at depth and with integrity.’⁵² Neil Richardson has also argued that the renewal of the Church is always associated with ‘biblical preaching’. Such preaching will prioritise the biblical text, and acts as an invitation ‘not only to immerse ourselves in the Bible, but to live, breathe and be transformed by it.’⁵³ The UMC Bishop William Willimon similarly notes that ‘Preaching is Christian only when it is biblical, when it is obviously derivative of, submissive to, and controlled by the biblical word.’⁵⁴ While *lectio continua* is not the only means to achieve such ‘biblical preaching’, it is at least one way in which engagement with Scripture is prioritised for the congregation as a whole.

By engaging with the same biblical book over a number of sermons, *lectio continua* promotes a close and careful reading of biblical texts. The preacher’s immersion in the text,⁵⁵ and the sermons preached on it, can nurture the auditor’s own engagement and understanding of Scripture. Such an approach would give careful attention to the ‘rhetoric’ of the text, which Walter Brueggemann describes as the first step in biblical interpretation.⁵⁶ Attending to the rhetoric requires careful observation of the literary features of the text, such as key words, repetitions and parallel expressions. Close reading will also allow the particular features and content of the text to come to light within the broader contexts already addressed.⁵⁷ *Lectio continua* is not a context for the preacher to ‘show off’ exegetical skill or acumen, but it is an opportunity for showing how a close reading of the text yields up the riches of the biblical word.⁵⁸

Lectio continua requires that preachers explore every passage within a biblical book. This includes 'problem passages', which, in their very distance from the contemporary world, encourage auditors and readers to wrestle more deeply with the biblical word.⁵⁹ The preacher will also encounter apparently 'pedestrian texts' that nonetheless have a role within the formative power of Scripture. A preacher addressing a text such as 1 Timothy 5:3–16 might be struck by the historical and cultural difference between widows in the first century and widows today, and might wonder what to make of the 'list' for older widows and the instructions to young widows to remarry (5:14). Such a text will seem irrelevant to some and fairly problematic to others. *Lectio continua* requires that such texts receive attention, and gives preachers an opportunity to model a 'hermeneutics of trust' that reveals the sweetness of the word even in unexpected places.

Engaging the Bible through *lectio continua* serves biblical literacy, then, by highlighting the centrality of Scripture and modelling a close reading of the text through the preaching event. *Lectio continua* can also lead to sermons on passages that are difficult or seemingly pedestrian, and so models and encourages auditors to engage with such texts in their own 'searching of the Scriptures'.

Lectio continua and 1 John: a test case

My argument so far has been that *lectio continua* can help promote biblical literacy within the Methodist Church. It can do so by encouraging preachers to focus on whole books of the Bible, draw attention to literary and historical contexts in understanding texts, and prioritise close readings of biblical books. While other forms of preaching need not exclude such emphases within the sermon, *lectio continua* is particularly well suited to focusing on the distinct voices of different biblical books.

Such a way of preaching the Bible models how to read Scripture well, and it is this that promotes biblical literacy. *Lectio continua* helps auditors to enter the world of Scripture and, through engaging with a single biblical book, to better hear and appreciate particular canonical voices. It shows the rewards of attending closely to each part of the Bible and so can encourage auditors in their own reading of Scripture.

To reiterate a point made earlier, this does not mean that sermons become lectures in exegetical method, or that those seeking the bread of divine encounter are given the stone of human learning. It is, however, to recognise that hearing God's word requires attentiveness to the shape and scope of the stories and arguments the Bible tells.

While brief examples of how this might affect preaching have been included above, it may be helpful at this point to explore how *lectio continua* might affect the preparation and delivery of a series of sermons on a single biblical book, such as 1 John. As a fairly short book – and a favourite of John Wesley's⁶⁰ – 1 John seems a suitable test case. Rather than offering examples of what a series of sermons on 1 John might look like, I will focus here on how *lectio continua* can *shape* the delivery of sermons on this first-century letter and so model the importance of reading the Bible well.

Lectio continua would allow a preacher to pay attention, first, to the way in which the biblical book of 1 John works as a whole, and would allow each sermon to be framed in light of the purpose and theme of the overall letter. The preacher could explain that 1 John is a book concerned both with 'right belief' about Christ, since by knowing Christ rightly we know the Father (2:22–25), and also with 'right living', since loving others is a response to God's love displayed so radically in the Cross (4:7–11).⁶¹

A preacher could also explore the rhetorical and literary 'shape' of 1 John, the way in which its form shapes its content: 1 John is a letter – albeit a fairly homiletical letter⁶² – that was written to a particular community with specific concerns.⁶³ The letter also reflects the literary style of the Johannine literature. Whereas Paul's arguments develop step by step, the letter of 1 John continually revisits and develops its key concerns. The preacher might point out that a particular passage receives development later in the letter, such as the call to love in 1:10 seeing further expansion in 4:7–21.

The historical context of 1 John would also be addressed through *lectio continua*. A preacher could note that the writer addresses a community threatened by false teachers who advocated an inadequate view of Jesus and failed to love others (1 John 2:7–11, 18–25). They had, in fact, departed from the author's community (1 John 2:18–19). While the author's Christology and admonitions of love are directed to such a context, a preacher can draw parallels with the present, such that the biblical word speaks to the contemporary questions of faith and practice.⁶⁴ What are the challenges to 'right belief' and 'right living' today?

Lectio continua can also provide an opportunity for the preacher to acknowledge the literary context of particular passages. A text such as 1 John 3:4–10 – and its declaration that ‘no one who abides in him sins’ – can be read alongside the earlier acknowledgement that those who *do* sin receive forgiveness (1 John 1:5—2:2). The letter as a whole provides parameters for understanding the meaning of its particular sections, but also – in this instance – raises the issue of how holiness and forgiveness relate to one another throughout the Bible. Such a reading of Scripture is related to the broader question of ‘entire sanctification’ within Methodist theology, and here, as elsewhere, wrestling with a biblical text leads to issues of wider theological importance.

Finally, as *lectio continua* allows the preacher (or team of preachers) to move from text to text, they can spend time delving into the rhetorical impact and meaning of particular passages. A close rhetorical reading of 1 John 2:23–29, for instance, would note the way in which the whole text is set within the context of the ‘last hour’ (2:18), an eschatological reference that a preacher could choose to unpack.⁶⁵ More significantly, the focus on what the antichrists ‘deny’ (2:22), where the verb (Gk: *arneomai*) occurs three times, points to the need to think *rightly* about Christ (or accept the *true* Christ, cf., 5:20) that energises the letter as a whole. The most significant word in this short passage, however, is the verb ‘remain’ (Gk: *menō*), occurring five times here and twenty-four times in 1 John as a whole, while also being a key term within the wider Johannine literature.⁶⁶ This passage suggests that ‘remaining’ in Christ is inseparable from ‘remaining’ in the truth that has been received (2:24). Such a passage could challenge the contemporary tendency to separate spirituality and doctrine.

While 1 John 2:23–29 is far from pedestrian, its warning of antichrists and its obscure references to christological error may make it offensive to modern readers. When it occurs in the lectionary, a preacher could easily avoid the issues it raises in favour of a reading more amenable and accessible to the congregation. Yet it is precisely here where *lectio continua* challenges preachers and congregations to wrestle with the *whole* of Scripture, and to recognise each canonical voice – even the difficult ones – as a vehicle for God’s grace within the gathered community.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that *lectio continua* is particularly well suited for promoting biblical literacy within the Church. It allows preachers to model a close and careful reading of Scripture through the sermon, and so helps auditors to learn what it means to listen carefully to the distinctive voice of different parts of Scripture. Those who hear such sermons can be encouraged to read the Bible equally attentively in personal devotion or small-group settings.

While *lectio continua* is not the only approach to encouraging biblical literacy, it can be a helpful addition to other ways in which Methodists are encouraged to engage with Scripture. It can also supplement other forms of preaching, such as the use of the lectionary or topical preaching. The value of such an approach to biblical literacy could also be usefully explored through empirical study.

Lectio continua is good for biblical literacy because it prioritises the biblical book as the broader context for every biblical text. Auditors will be encouraged to think in terms of books rather than passages, and so will more likely keep in mind the whole biblical book while reading Scripture in personal devotion or in small groups.

Lectio continua also promotes biblical literacy by drawing attention to the historical and literary contexts of particular texts. While good preachers will not ignore these contexts in any approach, *lectio continua* provides an opportunity to explicitly relate particular scriptural passages to the history of the text and to the surrounding passages.

Finally, *lectio continua* is good for biblical literacy because it emphasises that the Bible is central for sermons, and that even difficult or seemingly mundane texts form part of the scriptural word. By signalling the priority the Church gives to Scripture, *lectio continua* encourages auditors to 'take up and read' texts for themselves.

For Methodist churches, circuits and districts seeking to engage people more deeply with Scripture, *lectio continua* should be considered as an approach to preaching that can serve this end. This need not displace the use of the lectionary, but can occasionally be adopted as part of an intentional focus on helping congregations engage with Scripture.

Preaching *lectio continua* within a church or across a circuit will of course need to be approved by the superintendent and addressed within the local preachers' meeting. Forward planning would clearly be required, and a team of preachers might need to work together to prepare a series of sermons focused on the same biblical book. The DMLN Bible Month pilot project, however, shows that it is possible for such a model to work, and the experience can be rewarding for preachers as much as for congregations.⁶⁷

Adopting *lectio continua* as an occasional approach within the circuit preaching plan would not only promote better biblical engagement but also allow preachers to develop their own engagement with the text. It will allow auditors and readers to say again with the Psalmist, 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!' (Psalm 119:103).

Notes

1. For Wesley's view of the Bible, see Maddox 2012.
2. In this article, biblical literacy refers to an individual's knowledge of the biblical text while biblical engagement refers to the regular 'searching of the Scriptures' encouraged so strongly by Wesley. Killingray's contention (1997, p. 3) that biblical literacy is also a 'matter of the knowledge of the God revealed in the Bible's pages' confuses transformation by the God of Scripture with knowledge of Scripture itself, although – of course – the two should always be connected.
3. The Methodist Church 1998, p. 34.
4. Available at www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-the-nature-of-authority-2001.pdf. Accessed 1 October 2015. Italics original.
5. While biblical illiteracy refers to the lack of *explicit* knowledge of the Bible, it is – of course – intimately connected to a lack of biblical engagement. Those who read the Bible regularly will have a greater knowledge of it than those who do not.
6. Atkins 2010, p. 38.
7. www.theguardian.com/science/2012/may/19/richard-dawkins-king-james-bible. Accessed 1 October 2015.
8. For details, see the 'Briefing Sheet #2: The National Biblical Literacy Survey' (2011) available at www.dur.ac.uk/resources/cblc/BriefingSheet2.pdf. Accessed 15 September 2015.
9. See the Bible Society's Report, *Pass it On* (2013) at www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/projects/Bible-Society-Report_030214_final_.pdf. Accessed 15 August 2015.
10. Edwards 2015.
11. Edwards uses the phrase 'biblical literacies' in her Introduction, and notes that the volume includes a variety of perspectives, Edwards 2015, pp. ix–x. The first essay, for example, adopts a conventional approach to biblical literacy to argue for its loss in the Republic of Ireland (Byrne 2015).

12. Grayston 2002. See also the more recent research of the Evangelical Alliance 2011, p. 14, which shows that Christians in older age brackets are more likely to read or listen to the Bible daily.
13. Grayston 2002. For a similar list of reasons, see Killingray 1997, pp. 5–7.
14. The Methodist Church 2010, p. 28; Question 52.
15. The Methodist Church 2015, p. 213.
16. On this point, see Atkins 2010, pp 36–37. As Atkins puts it, Scripture is ‘God’s manual for Christian disciples’, p. 36.
17. See, for example, the extended engagement with Scripture in book 3 of Eugene Peterson’s *Spiritual Theology*, Peterson 2006.
18. Bonhoeffer 1948. In his treatise *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer also called for the reading and meditation of Scripture to be central, and encourages the practice of *lectio continua* within community! Bonhoeffer 1954, pp. 35–37.
19. Meadows 2013, p. 7.
20. Hawkins and Parkinson 2011, p. 19.
21. Bible engagement is identified as one of eight ‘areas’ of discipleship that help Christians grow by Stetzer and Geiger 2014, p. 39. Roger Walton’s research among church small groups in the north-east of England does not directly address the role of Scripture, but does show how such groups focused on personal growth and mutual support, and so are rarely ‘missional’, Walton 2011. In my view, an equally significant concern is the way that such groups encourage a privatised view of faith such that there is ‘little stomach for debating truth claims or doctrine’ (Walton 2011, p. 110). For a helpful overview of small groups within history and today – and some theological reflections on their status – see Walton 2014, pp. 67–156.
22. For a brief discussion of *lectio continua* alongside other approaches to the sermon – and a discussion of its advantages and drawbacks – see Farris 1998, pp. 45–51, and Long 2005, pp. 69–75.
23. While it is Zwingli who is the strongest advocate for *lectio continua* among the mainstream Reformers, Luther and Calvin also adopted *lectio continua* as one of their approaches. For a discussion of *lectio continua* among the Reformers, see the relevant sections in Old 2002, pp. 1–157. On Zwingli in particular, see Old 2002, pp. 46–47.
24. For a brief discussion on the use of the lectionary, see the discussion in Dixon 2003, pp. 225–226.
25. For examples of such Sundays, see www.methodist.org.uk/prayer-and-worship/methodist-special-sundays. Accessed 15 January 2016. While some ‘special Sundays’ do follow the lectionary, others – such as Refugee Week – select readings specific to the theme.
26. This might be a possible reading of Roger Walton’s description of ‘Christian education’ as a set of activities that serve the ‘primary energies’ of discipleship which Walton identifies as ‘worship’, ‘community’ and ‘mission’ (2014, especially pp. 41–61). See also Stephen Wright, who argues that sermons should be primarily about encounter rather than ‘education’ into the meaning of the faith, since such education can take place in other ways (2010, pp. 165–166).

27. Stephen Wright, for example, describes the 'teaching sermon' as an approach that is particularly good at allowing for the 'greater development of ideas' (2010, p. 148). Other sermons can be described as 'liturgical', 'evangelistic' or 'street' sermons, although Wright acknowledges that the distinctions between these are sometimes blurry (2010, pp. 141–152).
28. See Bonhoeffer's critique of those who would see learning the Scriptures as 'too profane a purpose' for worship (1954, p. 36).
29. Peterson 2006, p. 50. Peterson means by 'exegesis' a careful and close reading of the text rather than a specialist skill reserved for the experts.
30. Wood 2013, p. 23.
31. The pilot project took place in 2014, and a (unpublished) report is available from Ed Mackenzie, Discipleship Development Officer, Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network (mackenziee@methodistchurch.org.uk).
32. Significantly, the report also indicates that 80 per cent of those surveyed wanted their church to hold a similar 'Bible Month' at a future date.
33. The *Community Bible Experience*, a *Biblica* initiative that encourages reading through the Scriptures in community, suggests three reasons for the decline in biblical engagement: 'reading the Bible out of context', 'reading the Bible in fragments' and 'reading the Bible in isolation'. All of these reasons are addressed through *lectio continua*, but the Community Bible Experience is also a commendable attempt to encourage reading Scripture together. See www.biblicaeurope.com/why-community-bible-experience. Accessed 15 October 2015.
34. For a similar plea that passages be read in the contexts in which they occur, see Thomas 1987, p. 47. Thomas recommends the use of the lectionary as a way to expose congregations to the whole of Scripture, although the argument for *lectio continua* is that it allows a more focused engagement with a single biblical book.
35. In Pauline studies, one classic demonstration of this point is Richard B. Hays's seminal study (Hays 1983). On the importance of the 'story' of Scripture, see N. T. Wright 1991; 2005, pp. 17–20; Brueggemann 1997, pp. 24–37; 2009, pp. 1–11; Peterson 2006, pp. 37–58.
36. Kybird 2012. Peterson describes such 'privatising' of Scripture as one way Scripture becomes distorted (2006, p. 46). On such a tendency within small groups, see Walton 2014, pp. 108–122, and Withrow 2003. Withrow suggests that linking the small-group discussion to the biblical narrative is one way to avoid such privatised approaches to faith.
37. On the general importance of biblical genres and a brief overview, see Brown 2007, pp. 139–165.
38. In an initial volume, Goldingay (1994) introduces these different models of Scripture. In a second volume (1995), he focuses on different ways to interpret – and then preach – the biblical books associated with each model.
39. For the importance of this task, see Scobie 2004.
40. For the way in which Wesley read Scripture 'comparatively' with other texts in the canon, as well as alongside scholarly tools and within other contexts, see Maddox 2012.
41. Exegetical discussions are legion on issues such as the meaning of 'justification',

- 'works of the law', 'faith in/of Jesus Christ', and Paul's seemingly peculiar interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures. For a recent commentary to Galatians that engages helpfully with some of the key debates, see Oakes 2015.
42. *Lectio continua* also allows the preacher to reflect on the way in which the letter form shapes the content while also reflecting Paul's personal – and apostolic – relationship with the first readers of the text.
 43. This could then lead to an exploration of the same twin dynamics within Scripture. For Wesley, 'justification' and the 'new birth' were the central features of Christian faith – see especially his sermon on 'The New Birth' (sermon 45), available at wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-45-the-new-birth. Accessed 1 October 2015.
 44. Brown 2007, pp. 189–231; N. T. Wright 2005, pp. 93–95. The 'canonical context' is also a particular concern of biblical theology (Scobie 2004).
 45. Brown 2007, pp. 79–99. Brown's approach to the 'communicative intention' of scriptural texts acknowledges both that texts are 'complex' and that they are also 'determinate' so that it is possible to judge between good and bad readings. For a 'critical realistic' approach to Scripture that similarly affirms the possibility of hearing 'rightly' while also acknowledging the difficulties, see N. T. Wright 1992, pp. 47–80. As Briggs also notes, reading Scripture on its own terms opens us up to God's agenda (2007, p. 176).
 46. Contemporary hermeneutics acknowledges that the reader will have some role in 'constructing' the meaning, but there is a danger if such an acknowledgement is treated as a warrant to project one's own agenda on to the text. On the importance of allowing the text to speak for itself, see Briggs 2007. See also Hay's (1997) qualified critique of a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' in favour of a 'hermeneutic of trust' that is open to God speaking through the Scriptures.
 47. The phrase comes originally from Karl Barth (1995).
 48. As noted earlier, a dichotomy between a sermon as 'educative' and a sermon as leading to 'encounter' with God can be unhelpful. A sermon should not, of course, be an exegetical lecture, but good preachers can nonetheless draw auditors into the flow of a text through noting some of the obvious connections between passages.
 49. For a discussion of this structure, see Waltke 2007, pp. 13–16.
 50. While churches often adopt a 'folk canon' that is selective in the texts that are preached – so, for example, prioritising well-loved passages such as Micah 6:8 – this can lead preachers and auditors to ignore the wider context of the text. For a similar concern and a plea for churches to engage with the *whole* canon (and especially the Old Testament), see Thomas 1987.
 51. Barth 1964, p. 105. While Barth develops this idea in far more detail in the *Church Dogmatics*, he explains in his little book on preaching that 'the views expressed there [in the *Church Dogmatics*] are essentially the same as those of this earlier work, though argued and formulated in slightly different terms' (p. 64).
 52. The Methodist Church 1999, p. 31.
 53. Richardson 2011, p. 41.
 54. Willimon 2005, p. 33.

55. For the importance of such immersion in the text, see Barth 1964, pp. 101–104.
56. Brueggemann 2009, pp. 30–52. For Brueggemann, such rhetorical analysis takes priority over issues such as historical interpretation. See also Brown 2007, pp. 139–165.
57. Peterson's reflections on the importance of 'exegesis' for the spiritual life are again apposite here (2006, pp. 49–58).
58. Brown notes that while readings can be 'determinate' they are never 'exhaustive', and so a close reading of the text can always lead to new discoveries (2007, pp. 83–88).
59. On this point, see Briggs (2007), who claims that problem passages help readers listen to Scripture *on its own terms*. 'Problem passages' refers to those texts that present ethical, moral or theological difficulties for contemporary readers (eg, texts dealing with Israel's slaughter of the Canaanites).
60. According to Maddox (2012, pp. 11–12), Wesley preached more on this text than any other.
61. For a fuller exploration of 1 John, including its key theological themes, see Lieu 1991, and the relevant sections of Kruse 2000 and Yarbrough 2008. For a particular rich treatment of Johannine theology that includes reference to 1 John, see Rainbow 2014.
62. The particular genre of 1 John continues to be discussed, but Kruse offers a persuasive recent defence of 1 John as a (circular) letter (2010, pp. 28–29).
63. In Goldingay's terms, 1 John represents 'experienced revelation' within the canon, and so needs to read differently than a law book (although it includes instruction, as in 4:7–12) or a narrative (although it appeals to story, such as in 1:1–3).
64. On the task of 'contextualising' the biblical message for today, see the helpful discussion of Brown 2007, pp. 232–272.
65. For an exegesis of this text – and the significance of the 'last hour' – see Yarbrough 2008, pp. 141–145.
66. On the significance of 'abiding' (or 'remaining') in Christ within the Johannine literature, see Rainbow 2014, pp. 313–350. As Rainbow points out, for the Johannine literature, '[t]o abide in Christ is the basic mode of Christian existence and discipleship' (p. 323).
67. Building on the pilot project mentioned above, the DMLN is exploring the development of resources to help churches interested in running 'Bible Months' focused on particular biblical books.

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The temptations of politics: Jesus' temptation and ours in John Milton's *Paradise Regained*

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This paper aims to shed light on the ways in which politics can be a site of temptation for Christians. In the first part, it explores the circumstances in which John Milton wrote Paradise Regained, printed in 1671. The poem may be understood, in part, as Milton's reflection on the failed politics of the Republic in which he had played a leading role as a civil servant and one of the Republic's chief propagandists. The second part of the argument offers a reading of Milton's poetic account of the story of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, which interprets Jesus' temptations politically as a series of attempts by Satan to deflect Jesus' messianic identity, revealed at his Baptism, from its true course.

KINGDOM OF GOD • JOHN MILTON • POLITICS • SATAN • TEMPTATION

Introduction

Churches in the Holiness tradition from the outset placed a premium on extending the reach of the gospel into politics. For the most part, the motivation for political campaigns by Methodists, Salvationists and others was pastoral and moral; but good intentions were often not enough to keep Christians from making a hash of political engagement. For example, Methodists played a lead role in the Temperance movement that led, in 1919, to the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which prohibited the manufacture and sale of intoxicating beverages; the amendment remained in place until 1933. One may plausibly claim that Prohibition was ‘the high water mark of Methodist national influence [in the USA]. Methodism led the legislative campaign and effectively, if temporarily, imposed a distinctively Methodist moral absolute on the entire nation.’¹

One theologically acute outside observer noted in 1939 that Methodists in particular and others too had had to learn the painful lesson from the failure of Prohibition that ‘the imposition of Christian principles on the life of the state led to catastrophic collapse ... A “Christian” law had brought disaster for the state and had to be rescinded – with the consent of the churches.’²

Similar examples from Holiness churches in several countries can be given, but the story is often uncannily similar in each case.³ Holiness churches, in each generation and context, have had to learn again the lesson that politics lays temptation in the path of even the best-intentioned Christian. Holiness traditions are particularly exposed because of their conviction that holiness is to be worked out socially.

The first step in resisting any temptation is properly to identify it. In this paper I aim to offer some help in identifying political temptation in dialogue with an unexpected source: John Milton’s poetic exploration of the story of Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the wilderness in *Paradise Regained*. This story has exerted a powerful influence on the literary imagination. In both Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Last Temptation of Christ*⁴ and Jim Crace’s *Quarantine*,⁵ the temptation story is the lens through which the identity of their respective Christs is focused. However, in both these cases, under the persistent influence of Freud, the story revolves around sexual desire as the underlying cause of all human pathologies. In Milton we find an older, even more compelling, *political* interpretation of Jesus’ temptations. Read with Milton, the story of Jesus’ wilderness temptation is less a moral primer on personal temptation and more

a profound lesson in how to avoid political temptations; less about individual bodily frailties than about potential collective failures when churches engage with the body politic. Politics, for the purposes of this essay, include the science and practice of government, but extend outwards to encompass also the life of society in its broadest sense and reflective engagement in shaping social organisms.

It might be possible to make a case for the importance of Milton to the political temptations faced by Methodists and others by pointing out the importance of Milton to John Wesley, who often cited *Paradise Lost* in his letters and even, though rarely, *Samson Agonistes*. One might also make a case for Milton's importance as an exemplar of a Dissenting theology that would come, a century after his death, to make up one of several theological streams flowing into the Methodist river. However, I doubt whether either case can be made very strongly. Neither do I want to suggest that the political challenges faced by Milton and others in the middle of the seventeenth century bear any striking likeness to those faced by Christians today that make them especially instructive. As will become plain in what follows, Milton's context was very particular. My own aims are rather simple. I want, first, to take account of the historical and political context of *Paradise Regained* in order to support a claim that in the poem Milton is reflecting in dialogue with the Bible on his own experience of political temptation. Having sketched in this context, I want to approach Milton's poem as a particularly acute and poignant reflection on Jesus' temptation, one that seeks to apprehend Jesus' identity and vocation in political terms that – as one among several aims in a complex poetic text – serves to provoke Christians to think theologically and spiritually before they act politically. Milton's poem cannot tell a contemporary Christian what to do in exercising her political calling. Not only is it foolish to imagine that Milton could have anticipated every new circumstance Christians have subsequently faced; for all its power, *Paradise Regained* does not have the theological authority of the gospel on which it draws. But by shedding light on the temptations that Jesus faced, Milton can also illuminate the temptations a contemporary Christian faces in politics.

The context of Milton's *Paradise Regained*

To help a shortsighted Church properly identify the nature of political temptation, I am proposing, then, that we follow a blind guide. Written

between 1667 and 1670, *Paradise Regained* is one of the most profound treatments of the temptation of Jesus in any language or genre. It was the last poem John Milton published, and some knowledge of the circumstances in which it was written is essential to understanding its content.⁶ Milton became blind sometime around 1652,⁷ which meant *Paradise Regained* was dictated to an amanuensis. Milton's blindness proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as he noted in Sonnet XVI on his blindness, his eyes' spent light meant his 'one talent which is death to hide' – that is, his talent for words – 'Lodged with me useless'.⁸ On the other hand, following the restoration of the monarchy to England in 1660 it may have been Milton's blindness that saved him from a long spell in prison – or even worse.

For a substantial portion of his working life Milton was not a poet but a civil servant at the centre of national political life. In March 1649 the new republican Council of State offered Milton the post of Secretary for the Foreign Tongues.⁹ In this role Milton played a key part in the Commonwealth's dealings with foreign powers. Milton's reputation as one of the finest scholars in England was certainly one reason why he was suddenly in demand. His fluency in Latin – the international diplomatic language – was a useful tool for a regime keen to placate neighbouring monarchies that might give succour to the Royalist cause in Britain and Ireland. But the Council of State also recognised in Milton a committed partisan in its cause, someone with an established record as a first-class polemicist and apologist able to represent the republic to European monarchs with good reason to be suspicious of English radicalism.

The heady mix of religion and politics that had brought the new English Republic into being had long been Milton's chief concern. He had involved himself early on in these unfolding disputes by becoming a pamphleteer opposing episcopacy and supporting the Parliamentary cause. Episcopacy as a form of Church government, he thought, encouraged clergy to pursue high office for mercenary reasons or for reasons of personal vanity. Milton's suspicions about 'prelatical episcopacy' in the Church were of a piece with his suspicions about monarchical rule in the State and it was on his own initiative, though in his official role, that Milton undertook in 1649 to write a defence of regicide, his *Eikonoklastes*,¹⁰ which was printed just two weeks after King Charles I had been beheaded. In the 42-page pamphlet he avoided mentioning Charles by name, since he thought the King's guilt or innocence was for others to decide. Instead, as William Parker puts it, Milton's 'own concern was to justify the judging'.¹¹ Milton, then, was not merely a hired pen of the Republic but its principled supporter. He began his service believing in the possibility that, in

the Commonwealth, he was helping to build God's kingdom on earth. Yet, over the course of his many years' unflinching service to the Republic and subsequently to Oliver Cromwell as its Lord Protector, Milton's optimism drained out of him slowly but surely like sap from an injured tree. In 1641, as Christopher Hill points out, Milton was full of millenarian hope and wrote of Christ's return in terms of a 'shortly expected king'. In 1649 he was still writing of a 'kingdom which we pray incessantly may come soon'. Yet by 1651, with growing experience of the realities of political office, his hopes were diminishing and he now merely 'looked for' the coming of Christ. Eight years later with Oliver Cromwell unexpectedly in his grave and rumours circulating of an earthly monarch's imminent return, Milton's millenarian aspirations were replaced by the more muted conviction that Christ's 'spiritual kingdom' is 'able, without worldly force, to subdue all the powers and kingdoms of this world, which are upheld by outward force only'.¹²

Any hope Milton had that the Commonwealth would establish God's kingdom died the death of a thousand cuts in the mundane realities of political office, its compromises and retreats, its petty jealousies, its ideological failures, and the human frailties of its leaders. He learned to recognise that if paradise were to be regained it would not come at the hands of generals and politicians but from the hands of God alone. Milton came to the story of Christ's temptations in light of the failure of Christians – himself included – to resist political temptation. This failure had catastrophic consequences for the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland and all the blood spilt came to nothing with the restoration of King Charles II to the throne. This outcome also came with considerable personal danger. On 8 May 1660 Charles II was proclaimed King. Prominent republicans quickly made themselves scarce.¹³ Blind as he was, Milton followed their example. On 14 May the arrest was ordered of all those present at the court that had condemned Charles I to death. Milton had not been a member of the court but had been the official apologist of the court's right to judge a king; but still, his name did not appear on any arrest warrant. Behind the scenes, Milton's friends worked cautiously on his behalf and now his blindness proved helpful. In a placard published in London, Milton was listed among examples 'of God's Judgments on some Eminent Engagers against Kingly Government': he had, its authors claimed, been 'struck totally blind' for writing the *Eikonoklastes*. Milton's friends were able to argue that those whom God has punished need no further human justice enacted upon them. Among those working on his behalf was the poet Andrew Marvel, who sat for the constituency of Hull in the House of Commons and was able to use his access

to the corridors of power to help keep Milton from the scaffold. In September, Milton reappeared in London; but he had returned too soon: he was arrested and jailed. But Marvel and others had done their work well; Milton was released after only a couple of weeks and, on 15 December, his *annus horribilis* concluded with his inclusion on the indemnity bill, which had the force of a royal pardon. 'What', William Parker asks,

... did Milton learn? What did twenty years of struggle, crowned so tragically, teach him about God and man? The answer of course is contained in the great poems, and if one wishes to know that answer in its subtlety and its totality, there is no substitute for thoughtful reading of Milton's words.¹⁴

Inevitably, the reception history of Milton's works reveals not one univocal 'thoughtful reading', but several. Before the seventeenth century was out attempts to co-opt Milton to various political causes had begun. In 1698 John Toland, for example, was claiming Milton for the radical republican cause, writing that *Paradise Lost* was intended 'to display the different Effects of Liberty and Tyranny'.¹⁵ Among Milton's most influential recent interpreters, however, Stanley Fish has advised caution about interpreting Milton's later works as interventions – subtle or not so subtle – in particular political events, preferring to understand the undoubted political aspects of the poems as reflecting Milton's interior disposition, his 'politics of being'.¹⁶ What is clear is that the strict censorship that operated under Charles II was a factor that no critic can fail to take into account. Ironically, it is to that censorship that we owe the preservation of a text that sheds considerable light on Milton's theology in general.¹⁷ In 1823 a bundle of papers written by Milton when he was Secretary of Foreign Tongues turned up in a state archive in London. Among them was a manuscript, in Latin, titled *De Doctrina Christiana*. The handwriting in the manuscript came from two hands, subsequently identified as those of Daniel Skinner and Jeremie Picard. Very soon after Milton's death in 1674, Skinner, who was Milton's pupil and friend, attempted to publish the work in Amsterdam, Europe's most tolerant city, but he did not succeed. It was handed over, therefore, to the English authorities who, nervous of its impact, buried it in the archive. Because the manuscript is not in Milton's own spidery handwriting (how could it be – he was blind), some doubt remains about the extent to which the work is Milton's and the extent to which his two amanuenses had a role in its production. But assuming *De Doctrina Christiana*¹⁸ to be completely or very largely Milton's work, the manuscript gives a very clear sense of his

mature theological views. The book, which is over 700 pages in translation, consists in two books. Book I, which at 33 chapters is the longer part, is concerned with 'the knowledge of God', while Book II, weighing in at 17 chapters, deals with 'the service of God', a classic Protestant structure. Each chapter consists largely of collections of biblical verses or passages relevant to a particular topic, accompanied by 'editorial' comments. In Book I, Chapter XXX, 'Of the Holy Scriptures', we get a clear sense of the theological understanding of the role of the Bible in Christian theology that determined the method Milton followed in the *Treatise* as a whole. Milton believed the Scriptures to have been composed by the prophets, apostles and evangelists 'under divine inspiration'.¹⁹ They were written 'for the use of the church throughout all ages, as well under the gospel as under the law',²⁰ meaning that God's intention is that they be permanently authoritative for humankind. The Bible is, however, given to any reader to interpret its meaning:

From all these passages [ie, passages cited from the Bible] it is evident, that the use of the Scriptures is prohibited to no one; but that, on the contrary, they are adapted for the daily hearing or reading of all classes and orders of men ... The Scriptures, therefore, partly by reason of their own simplicity, and partly through the divine illumination, are plain and perspicuous in all things necessary to salvation, and adapted to the instruction of the most unlearned, through the medium of diligent and constant reading.²¹

For Milton it is *not* the case, however, that each reader is authorised to 'make up' the meaning of what she reads herself; rather, each text has its plain sense and no 'passage of Scripture is to be interpreted in more than one sense'.²² As Ken Simpson has pointed out, Milton's understanding of the 'twofold scripture' of the Bible and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit was intimately connected with his ecclesiology and his literary method in *Paradise Regained*.²³

Certainly, Milton accepted that for those who would interpret the Scriptures in public, that is, those tasked with teaching and preaching, interpretation is aided by academic skills and disciplines such as

knowledge of languages; inspection of the originals [ie, original manuscripts]; examination of the context; care in distinguishing between literal and figurative expressions; consideration of cause and circumstance, of antecedents and consequents; mutual comparison of texts; and regard to the analogy of faith.²⁴

Yet in spite of a positive role for scholarly and rhetorical education, Milton iterates forcefully that '[e]very believer has a right to interpret the Scriptures for himself *inasmuch as he has the Spirit for his guide, and the mind of Christ is in him*'.²⁵ The role given by Milton to the living witness of the Spirit was crucial and preserves his use of the Bible from biblical literalism. The rule and canon of faith, that is, the only warrant possible for doctrinal statements and for Christian living, Milton concluded, is the 'twofold Scripture; one external, which is the written word, and the other internal, which is the Holy Spirit, written in the hearts of believers.'²⁶ Even so, the remarkable story of *De Doctrina Christiana* should not lead us to think that in his later poems Milton evaded the censor by excluding politics altogether. Milton's later poems 'could nevertheless carry political meaning, working allusively and indirectly.'²⁷

Paradise Regained

Milton's first and most striking creative interpretive decision was to attend to the temptation story rather than the Passion narratives as a key event in the unfolding drama of salvation. In 1667 Milton had published *Paradise Lost* (twelve books long, in contrast with the four of *Paradise Regained*), in which his stated aim was to 'assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men.'²⁸ *Paradise Lost* ended in tears, literally, with Adam and Eve walking slowly hand in hand out of Eden's garden and into the wilderness. As if it were the second half of a palindrome, therefore, *Paradise Regained* begins in the wilderness and ends with a feast. *Paradise Regained* recapitulates the plot of *Paradise Lost* just as Christ recapitulates the temptation of Adam, as Milton sets out to:

... sing
Recovered Paradise to all mankind,
By one man's firm obedience fully tried
Through all temptation, and the Tempter foiled
In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,
And Eden raised in the waste wilderness. (*PR* I:2–6)

As I have already hinted, Milton's decision to place the temptation story in the foreground of the drama of salvation was theologically atypical. More usual are understandings of redemption that emphasise either the incarnation of Jesus as a whole or that focus more narrowly on his Cross and Resurrection. The

approach taken in *Paradise Regained* was not, however, without precedent: in arguing against Marcion and other Gnostic heresies, Irenaeus too made Jesus' victory over Satan's temptation central for the economy of salvation by which Satan's victory over Adam is recapitulated and reversed in Christ's victory over temptation.²⁹ Yet while Irenaeus presents us with a cosmic drama in which a bellicose Christ emerges victorious, Milton's Jesus is consistently characterised by understatement, by his disdain for the struggle and by patience and calm.

New Testament accounts of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness³⁰

All three Synoptic Gospels report that at the beginning of his ministry Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days – a period of time that was an intentional echo of the people of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness following their Egyptian captivity. In each of the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' time in the wilderness follows an account of his Baptism by John in the River Jordan (an event also described, unlike the temptation itself, in John's Gospel). In Mark, following the Baptism, Jesus sees the Spirit descending on him as a dove and hears a voice identifying him as God's beloved Son in whom God is pleased. Both Matthew and Luke almost certainly knew and used Mark's Gospel in their accounts of the Spirit's descent and God's statement to Jesus concerning his Sonship and God's pleasure. In each account, then, Jesus is anointed by the Spirit and is made fully conscious of his identity as God's Son and of the pleasure given to God by his obedience. Luke amplifies the insight Jesus' Baptism affords into his identity by inserting Jesus' genealogy between his Baptism and temptation, while Mark and Matthew savour the drama of Jesus moving abruptly from crowded riverbank to empty wilderness. What is evident in each of the Synoptic Gospels is that the temptations follow upon the clearest possible announcement that Jesus *is* God's Son. Whatever else is going on in the Synoptic Gospels, the devil is not tempting Jesus with doubt *that* he is God's Son; he is, instead, testing the *kind* of Son Jesus will be. The test is not of Jesus' identity but of the particular pattern his vocation will follow.

In Mark's account of the wilderness temptation the bare bones of the story are all present: the role of the Spirit in driving Jesus into the wilderness, the length of time spent there, the temptation by Satan, and the concluding ministry of the angels to the hungry Jesus. In addition to Mark, Matthew and Luke share another source in which three temptations are detailed, though Luke differs

from Matthew with respect to the order of the second and third temptations. All three Synoptic Gospel writers use the same word 'peirazomenos',³¹ which may be translated 'he was tempted'. It is important to be clear about what this word would likely have meant to the first readers of the Gospels. Its gist is 'to make an attempt' or 'to test someone', a 'trial', a 'proving', an 'experiment'. The trial can be from external causes (such as a bodily condition; see Galatians 4:14) or inward; it can be a test of a person's fidelity, integrity or virtue.³² It is seldom used outside the New Testament and Christian writings. Temptation can be an enticement to sin, but that does not by any means exhaust its meaning.

The first temptation: stones to bread

Milton follows the basic structure of Luke's account of the Baptism and temptation, though omitting the genealogy. Elements include the Baptism, the Spirit's role in leading Jesus out into the wilderness, a 40-day period of fasting (that the Gospel writers certainly understood in relation to the 40 years in the wilderness of the people of Israel after leaving Egypt), the 3 temptations according to Luke's order, and the angelic ministry to Jesus. But Milton also exercised considerable freedom in his poetic re-narration of the story. For example, while Milton follows the order of the temptations in Luke's Gospel, he follows Matthew in telling us that the temptations took place at the end Jesus' 40-day fast (*PR* I:309), while Luke tells us Jesus was tempted throughout the duration of his 40-day fast. Milton also adds several new episodes. In the first of these additions, following a brief description of the Baptism by the poem's narrator, 'the Adversary' summons his 'gloomy consistory' to address the crisis that the coming of God's Son represents. The political aspect of the crisis is immediately plain in Satan's outline of it:

... well ye know
How many ages, as the years of men,
This universe we have possessed, and ruled
In manner at our will th'affairs of Earth. (*PR* I:47–50)

Unless Jesus can be deflected from his vocation he will replace the satanic council as the world's effective ruler. Milton further innovates in embellishing the first of Jesus' temptations with an account of a ruse as the devil appears in the guise of 'an aged man in rural weeds' (*PR* I:314). In spite of this added colour, the sense of the first temptation as it appears in Luke is tweaked only

slightly in *Paradise Regained*. The devil, in the guise of a swain, hints at his own material poverty before suggesting that if Jesus be the Son of God, he:

... command

That out of these hard stones be made thee bread. (*PR* I:342–343)

Milton's subtle interpolation into the gospel narratives hints that if Jesus were to perform the miracle then not only his own but the poor swain's hunger would be satisfied:

So shalt thou save thyself, and us relieve

With food, whereof we wretched seldom taste. (*PR* I:344–345)

In the first temptation, just as much as in the others, temptation to turn stones to bread is subtly linked to Jesus' messianic calling. Milton's Satan enhances the temptation that Jesus satisfy his own hunger with the promise that in doing so Jesus would selflessly satisfy the physical hunger of the poor. What Messiah would *not* want to feed the hungry poor? Satisfying hunger is one thing, but central to Milton's Jesus is that one take notice of whose hands are giving the bread we eat. When food is later offered from God at the hands of angels (*PR* IV:586–594), Jesus gladly takes it; but he will not accept food from the hands of Satan, to whom the gift does not truly belong.

To receive food but fail to be aware that God alone is the true giver of all good things is to lack something; it is to remain *spiritually* hungry. It is perhaps this that makes it so clear that the hungry peasant is the devil in disguise. Jesus has not been fooled:

Think'st thou such force in bread? Is it not written ...

Man lives not by bread only, but by each word

Proceeding from the mouth of God ... (*PR* I:347–350)

Both Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was really hungry and Milton agrees. The fact that Jesus really hungered is more than a narrative flourish; it touches on an essential question in Christology: was Jesus fully human as well as fully divine? One possibility entertained in some early Church commentary on the temptations was that Jesus used his divinity to suppress his appetite or, in some other way, was going through the motions of being tempted without being in any real danger of losing control. St John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), for

example, said that Jesus fasted in order to instruct Christians in self-discipline, taking on hunger like a wrestling teacher demonstrating technique to his pupils on the training ground.³³ Chrysostom, indeed, even suggested that God is able to nourish a man by his Word alone. The christological danger in this is that Jesus would then only *seem* to be human. But for Milton, as it appears was the case for Matthew and Luke, Jesus' hunger is real hunger. To emphasise this, Milton has Satan conjure up not bread alone but a feast that the poet describes in fabulous detail (*PR* II:337–367). Jesus' answer to the devil in Milton's account is, however, concerned not merely with physical hunger, with a fleshly desire to fill one's belly – which was another common reading of the first temptation in the early Church. Jesus' answer to the devil burrows beneath the surface of physical hunger to a deeper insight:

But now I feel I hunger; which declares
Nature hath need of what she asks; yet God
Can satisfy that need some other way,
Though hunger still remain ... (*PR* II:252–255)

For Milton Jesus' physical hunger, though it is a genuine and urgent human need, is not the only kind of hunger that matters. When Satan presses further at the level of his physical need Jesus becomes explicit about the deeper issue at stake:

'How hast thou hunger then?' Satan replied.
'Tell me, if food were now before thee set,
Wouldst thou not eat?' 'Thereafter as I like
The giver', answered Jesus ... (*PR* II:319–321)

Satan was well aware that tempting Jesus at the level of his human flesh was unlikely to be a successful strategy. Early in Book II (*PR* II:150–153) the dissolute demon Belial suggested to Satan that he 'Set women in his eye and in his walk' and was summarily dismissed. Satan knows that Jesus will not give in to his natural physical desires. Milton's understanding of the first temptation speaks directly to the deep-rooted Christian commitment to feed the hungry and fight against the complex causes of hunger. Milton sets out from the reality of hunger. Hunger is real and it really matters. Milton's Jesus at no point says that feeding a hungry person is anything but a good act. In spite of this, Jesus is not prepared to turn stones to bread if it comes at the price of forgetting that bread comes from God. Human beings have an even more basic hunger than physical

hunger, a hunger to live by the word that proceeds from the mouth of God. To be clear: this is not intended to diminish the awful horror and power of genuine famine. Famine is a dreadful evil that dehumanises those who experience it. Satisfying a hungry person's need for bread is to meet their most urgent need, but it is not to satisfy their only need or even their most basic need. Human well-being includes bread, but it cannot be reduced to it. The first temptation is, initially, a temptation to reduce human flourishing to the satisfaction of material needs.

The first temptation is also, finally, a temptation about whether it is ever right to pursue political power for the sake of the poor if that incurs a moral debt. In the poem, the background to this question is found in another of Milton's embellishments to Luke's narrative. At the beginning of Book II Milton cuts back to the newly baptised at the Jordan and listens in to their conversation. The putative disciples speak among themselves of their messianic hopes:

Our expectation? God of Israel,
Send thy Messiah forth; the time is come;
Behold the kings of the earth, how they oppress
Thy chosen ... (PR II:42–45)

The disciples' narrowly political understanding of the Messiah serves as a harsh background on which to project the harder and lonelier political path, which Jesus chooses to take. Bluntly, the disciples are looking for a political figure to drive the Romans from Israel but in Jesus they are given a very different kind of Messiah, one who is Emmanuel, God with us. Thus when, at the beginning of Book III, Satan concludes his remarks about Jesus' refusal to turn stones to bread Jesus calmly replies:

Thou neither dost persuade me to seek wealth
For empire's sake, nor empire to affect
For glory's sake, by all thy argument. (PR III:44–46)

This remark, leading away from Jesus' insistence that none of the world's material goods are Satan's to give, serves as an effective bridge to the second temptation.

The second temptation: political power

In Luke, the second temptation is Satan's offer to Jesus of all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will worship him. For the second temptation Milton's Satan abandons subterfuge and, without his unconvincing disguise, tells Jesus precisely what he will now do.

But I will bring thee where thou soon shall quit
Those rudiments, and see before thine eyes
The monarchies of the earth ... (*PR III:244–246*)

Now Milton innovates by breaking this offer into two distinct components, each with its own subtle attraction and each thoroughly political in character. The first component is to tempt Jesus in relation to the rule of one very particular kingdom: the kingdom of Israel that had once been ruled by Jesus' ancestor David. Satan points out that Jesus will be King of the Jews in name only without his, Satan's, intervention:

Endeavour, as thy father David did,
Thou never shalt obtain ...
But say thou wert possessed of David's throne
By free consent of all, none opposite,
Samaritan or Jew; how couldst thou hope
Long to enjoy it quiet and secure
Between two such enclosing enemies,
Roman and Parthian? ... (*PR III:353–362*)

If Jesus is to be king of Israel, he will need also to become ruler of an alliance of powerful nations to ensure the regional geopolitical stability necessary for peace and prosperity. But in his reply Jesus answers that the kind of kingdom of which he is king has no interest in political strategies of this kind:

Before mine eyes thou hast set, and in my ear
Vented much policy, and projects deep
Of enemies, of aids, battles, and leagues,
Plausible to the world, to me worth naught. (*PR III:390–394*)

The second component of the second temptation now enters in. Jesus is transported, at the beginning of Book IV, to Rome. There, pointing out its old

and lascivious emperor (the emperor Tiberius), Satan challenges Jesus to make Rome an altogether better place:

Might'st thou expel this monster from his throne
Now made a sty, and, in his place ascending,
A victor-people free from servile yoke! (*PR IV:100–103*)

Once more, subtly interwoven with the temptation directed to any desire Jesus might have for glory, is a temptation to accept the kingdoms of Israel and of Rome to effect a greater good in the liberation of Jews from their servile yoke. What Messiah would *not* want peace and prosperity for the Jewish people? Jesus is being tempted to be precisely the kind of Messiah for which the disciples at the beginning of Book II expressed their hope on the banks of the Jordan.

As with the first temptation, there are two distinct aspects of the temptation that Milton has Jesus resist. Jesus' response is not to deny his kingship but to redefine the nature of his kingship and to refuse to give any indication of how it will come about:

Know, therefore when my season comes to sit
On David's throne, it shall be like a tree,
Spreading and overshadowing all the earth,
Or as a stone that shall to pieces dash
All monarchies besides throughout the world
And of my kingdom there shall be no end:
Means shall there be to this; but what the means
Is not for thee to know, nor me to tell. (*PR IV:146–151*)

Taken as a whole, the second temptation is therefore *not* the temptation to rule as such – since kingship *is* Jesus' proper calling as God's Messiah – but the temptation to rule in a way that is false to the true nature of the kingdom of God. The temptation concerns the *end* proper to Jesus' calling and also the *means* to that end. Only after this conversation has taken place does Milton have Satan reveal the condition for his offer of the earthly kingdoms over which he claims authority.

On this condition, if thou wilt fall down,
And worship me as the superior Lord. (*PR IV:166–167*)

In Jesus' reply, Milton, true to his hermeneutical principles, sees no need to improve upon Luke's phrasing:

... It is written,
The first of all commandments, 'Thou shalt worship
The Lord thy God and only him shalt serve'. (*PR* IV:176–177)

In addition to the substantive temptation to rule falsely, Jesus also resists the 'abominable terms' and 'impious condition' that Satan intends to impose before he hands over the authority he claims to have. It is striking that Jesus does not dispute the fact that Satan does have genuine political power:

The kingdoms of the world [Jesus tells Satan] to thee were given!
Permitted rather, and by thee usurped (*PR* IV:182–183)

In the second temptation, then, we have two related components: the temptation to rule falsely and the temptation to pay an abominable price for political power by worshipping one who has power but no true authority. It is plain to all involved in the dialogue, to Jesus and to Satan, to Milton and to those of us who read Milton, that one may do both great harm and great good with political power. History is scattered liberally with false political idols, leaders who prove to be misleaders; but sometimes it is hard, even with hindsight, to tell saints from sinners. Take Charles Stuart: it was Charles' tyranny that led Milton to defend the right of a people to judge and kill their king, but this same king is commemorated in the liturgical calendar of the Church of England as 'Charles, King and Martyr'.

What are we to conclude from Milton's account of the second temptation? Milton does not go so far as to suggest that Christians should disengage from all politics; he does, however, point out that political power is, in the present age, given into Satan's hands. Though this is a view we need not necessarily endorse, given Milton's experience of politics it is one that is understandable. There are, I think, two distinct but related lessons we may draw out. The first is that Christians should concern themselves with the political *means* they use as well as with the political ends they seek to achieve. Means are not morally neutral in Christian ethics; ends do *not* justify the means used to achieve them – even when the end achieved is as desirable as peace and prosperity. Milton gives little guidance about how one might discern in practice which political compromises incur morally hazardous debts. International politics often deals

in compromise: amnesties from justice are given for the sake of a ceasefire; corruption is tolerated for the sake of access to a famine; petty villains are permitted to remain in power in order to keep it from someone worse; one goal is achieved at the expense of another. We do not need history to teach us that all such pacts are Faustian, pacts with a devil who will one day take that which has been promised him. Christians engaging in politics may need to exercise patience with evil and injustice if the only option available to resist them is to use false means. Christians confronting poverty and injustice may find themselves addressed with the question that Milton's Satan, in frustration, addressed to Jesus:

Since neither wealth nor honour, arms nor arts,
Kingdom nor empire, pleases thee, nor aught
By me proposed in life contemplative
Or active, tended on by glory or fame,
What dost thou in the world? (*PR IV:368–372*)

Christians will bear in mind that political authority, even when held in usurping hands as evil as Satan's, is in some dreadful and mysterious sense permitted by God. Above all, Christians engaged in politics will worship at no other altar than that of the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus.

The second lesson, therefore, is that Christians can ultimately serve only one Lord: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him' (Luke 4:8). Even love of one's neighbour is not on the same level as love of God but is, rather, an obligation and calling that depends upon and flows from the calling to love and worship God alone. Thus, when a lawyer keen to justify himself to Jesus asks what he must 'do to inherit eternal life', Jesus answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:27).

The third temptation

The third temptation in Luke's Gospel is that Jesus should throw himself from the pinnacle (in Greek, literally 'the wings') of the Temple in Jerusalem, provoking God to save him by commanding his angels to keep him from falling. The first two temptations have established that Jesus trusts God; the devil now tempts him to put that trust to the test, a test Jesus passes by refusing to test God. One of the reasons why most contemporary

commentators are convinced that the order of the temptations in Matthew's Gospel is original is because it makes better narrative sense that the offer by Satan to Jesus of authority over all the kingdoms of the world is the climax to the temptation story. That may indeed be the case looked at in historical and literary terms, but the Temple has considerable poetic power in the Gospels. Satan has brought Jesus to the place he had, as a boy, described as 'his Father's house' (Luke 2:49); it is the building Jesus would use as an analogy for his own body (John 2:19–21). Luke's choice and Milton's to place the Temple temptation at the climax of the narrative has its own narrative power. Milton in any case deals effectively with any dramatic deficit by expanding significantly the second of Luke's temptations and by allowing the third temptation at the Temple to tell its own story with comparative brevity and simplicity. Milton again takes his lead from Luke's phrasing:

So saying, he caught him up, and, without wing
Of hippogriff, bore through the air sublime,
Over the wilderness and o'er the plain,
Till underneath them fair Jerusalem,
The holy city...
There, on the highest pinnacle, he set
The Son of God ... (PR IV:541–545, 549–550)

The content of the third temptation is that Satan challenges Jesus to put God's promises to the test. Yet in the third temptation it is as much the form the temptation takes as its content that is significant. It has long been understood that the temptation story narrated by Matthew and Luke was very deliberately set against the backdrop of Deuteronomy 6–8, from which not only the themes of the temptation but the scriptural citations are taken.³⁴ It is even likely that in addition to Jesus' recapitulation of the temptation of Adam, Luke may also see in him a recapitulation of the collective person of the people of Israel in the wilderness. It is unsurprising, then, that Satan tempts Jesus by citing passages from the Hebrew Bible or that Jesus answers by also quoting the Hebrew Scriptures. If we take our mind back to *De Doctrina Christiana*, we may recall that this text largely took the form of collections of biblical quotations on doctrinal themes, introduced and glossed by Milton's commentary. That he could write this book when blind is a testament to his deep knowledge of the Scriptures. In the third temptation it was crucial for Milton that a contrast is drawn between the way the Scriptures are read by Satan and the way they are read by Jesus. Satan speaks the words of scriptural texts that he cannot truly

understand. When Jesus reads from Scripture, however, he does not merely display acute memory and apologetic skill, his actions incarnate God's Word: Jesus does not simply speak the words of God: he *is* the Word of God made flesh (John 1:1–18). Jesus' successful out-narration of Satan in the use of the Bible had its basis not in superior intellect, in quicker wits, or in education: Jesus' ability to resist temptation rested on his simple and complete obedience to the will of the Father.

Of all the temptations it is (in Luke's order) the third that therefore most effectively probes Jesus' calling as the Christ (the Messiah) of God. The implication of the anointing by the Spirit of the Son at his Baptism is that the will of Father and Son are one. The third temptation plays on this nerve by teasing out Jesus' unique relationship with his Father. In the farewell discourses in John 13—17 the unity of the Father and the Son is both the sufficient and necessary condition of the unity of the Christian believer with God. Jesus' refusal in the third temptation to countenance the opening up of any distinction between his will and his Father's by tempting God models for the Christian how *her* will is to be conformed to the will of God. Resisting temptation means seeking the will of God; there is no deeper moral code than this in Christian ethics, no utilitarian calculation of what will achieve the most happiness, no categorical imperative, no natural law buried beneath. To be a Christian in the world is to choose freely to do God's will, and this is not less true when the forum in which one speaks and acts is the public square of politics.

After Jesus' response, Milton tells us that Satan was 'smitten with amazement' and fell precisely in the location where he had tempted Jesus to fall. Jesus is returned to the wilderness where his temptations began and, on a green bank, food fetched by angels from the Tree of Life is spread before him. This is a fine poetic touch, and one that shows great theological intelligence. In overcoming the temptations of Satan to which Adam succumbed, Jesus is returned to paradise, to the Garden from which Eve and Adam were expelled. Jesus' threefold refusal to deny God is, Milton proposes, the foundation for all that follows in the Gospel. In Luke, too, Jesus returns to Galilee 'filled with the power of the Spirit' (Luke 4:14) to begin his ministry. None of the Gospel writers place one incident in their narrative after another haphazardly: there is invariably narrative and theological intent. In Luke, Jesus' return to Galilee from the wilderness takes him immediately to the synagogue at Nazareth where, after reading from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus says calmly that the prophet's announcement of God's intention 'to bring good news to the poor ... to

proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18–19) is fulfilled in him. The calling of Jesus and of his disciples to 'bring good news to the poor' and to 'let the oppressed go free' is their calling *because* no one can live by bread alone, *because* they worship God alone and *because* they do not put God's will to the test.

Conclusion

One sure way of avoiding temptation is to do nothing. But, for the Christian, truth is not simply something one thinks but something one does, for 'those who do what is true come to the light' (John 3:21). And where the believer does truth, temptation must always follow. This is because 'the action of truth awakens falsehood from its inertia and causes it to defend itself; that is the meaning of the temptation of the saints.'³⁵

One interpretation of the three temptations Jesus faced, with which Milton was certainly familiar, was that they relate to his threefold office as the Christ of God as Prophet, Priest and King. In this interpretation, the first temptation in Luke's order related to his prophetic office, the second to his kingly office, and the third (because it took place at the Temple) to his priestly office. I have tried to show that it is possible to see *each* temptation as an increasingly intense examination of Jesus' identity as it is worked out in a widening range of social and political contexts from Israel to Rome and from the company of the disciples to the company of the angels. In the temptations, Satan seeks out the fissures between what Jesus wills and what God wills, but finds none. Milton knew that Satan continues to test Christians in the same ways: he knew it because he had experienced it. He had seen how the expected paradise of the Commonwealth had been lost, and found himself asking how it might be regained. Reading the Gospels closely, he poetically reconstructed the temptations of Jesus to show that politics, no more than temptation, can be avoided. Satan continues to use the natural human need for food, the natural human desire for peace, justice and prosperity, and the natural human desire for political certainties to test Christians. Jesus' responses to Satan's temptations show that the only way through is to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and these things will be given to you as well' (Matthew 6:33).

Notes

1. Richey et al. 2010, p. 336.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Essay about Protestantism in the United States', in Schultz and Barnett 2005, p. 456.
3. I have explored this at greater length elsewhere: see Plant 2013.
4. Kazantzakis 1960. The novel was made into a film in 1988 by Martin Scorsese, with Willem Dafoe in the role of Jesus.
5. Crace 1998. The title is a clever wordplay on '40 days'.
6. *Paradise Regained* was first published as *Paradise Regain'd. A Poem. In IV Books. To which is added Samson Agonistes*, printed by 'JM' (John Macock). It was advertised and licensed in 1670 but not printed until the following year. Ken Simpson speculates that the delay may have been the result of concerns about Milton's Nonconformity following the passing of the Second Conventicle Act in 1670 (Simpson 2007, p. 187, n. 1). All citations from Milton's poems are taken from John Carey and Alastair Fowler (eds), *The Poems of John Milton* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1968), hereafter: Milton, *Poems*. References are to page numbers and line numbers in this edition and, in the longer poems, to page, book and line numbers.
7. Milton, *Poems*, pp. 329–330. The editors take note of doubts about the date of this poem's composition, fixing on the probable date of 1652 since, according to William Parker, Milton's biographer, the poet considered himself practically blind by November 1651 (see Parker 1968).
8. Sonnet XVI, Milton, *Poems*, p. 330:3–4.
9. Parker 1968, p. 352.
10. The full title of the pamphlet was *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates: proving, that it is lawful, and hath been held so through all ages, for any, who have the power, to call to account a tyrant, or wicked king, and after due conviction, to depose, and put him to death, if the ordinary magistrate have neglected, or declined to do it. And that they, who of late, so much blame deposing, are the men who did it themselves*. See Parker 1968, p. 347.
11. Parker 1968, p. 347.
12. See Hill 1977, pp. 415–416.
13. Parker 1968, p. 568.
14. Parker 1968, p. 591.
15. The claim was made in Toland's 'Life of John Milton', prefixed to a 1698 edition of Milton's prose works; cited by Dzelzainis 2009, p. 547.
16. Fish 1998, p. iv.
17. Examples of the extensive literature on Milton's theological views include, in the order in which they were published, Empson 1965; Patrides 1966; Danielson 1982; Lieb 2006; Simpson 2007.
18. The book was translated by Charles Sumner and published as *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine Compiled from the Holy Scriptures by John Milton*; see Milton 1825.
19. Milton 1825, p. 465.

20. Milton 1825, p. 466.
21. Milton 1825, pp. 468–469.
22. Milton 1825, p. 471. Milton does allow that, in passages in the Old Testament, there is ‘sometimes a compound of the historical and the typical’, that is, a plain historical sense and an allegorical or typological sense.
23. Simpson 2007, especially pp. 54–105.
24. Milton 1825 p. 471.
25. Milton 1825, p. 472, my italics.
26. Milton 1825, p. 472.
27. Knoppers 2009, p. 584.
28. *Paradise Lost*, Book I:25–26.
29. See, eg, Roberts and Donaldson 2004, p. 549.
30. For a thorough historical-critical analysis of treatments of New Testament texts relating temptations of Jesus, see Gibson 1995, chapters 1–3. See also Carroll 2012, pp. 100–105.
31. A passive participle of *peivazō*.
32. See Thayer 1901, pp. 498–499, and Friedrich 1968, pp. 23–36.
33. Chrysostom 1975, Homily XIII on Matthew 4:1.
34. Gibson 1995, pp. 85–90.
35. Simone Weil, cited by Perrin and Thibon 2003, p. 85.

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Exodus and Liberation: an exchange

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This scholarly exchange between Christian historians is in three parts. (1) John Coffey introduces his book, Exodus and Liberation: Deliverance Politics from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr (Oxford University Press, 2014). (2) Mark Noll's review (first delivered at a 'Christianity and History Forum' in Cambridge, UK, June 2014) raises some key issues arising from its discussion of the rhetoric of deliverance grounded in biblical texts, used in particular historical struggles: the impact of a belief or otherwise in the historicity of the biblical narrative; the plasticity of such providential interpretations of history; and the problems that can arise from providentialism, such as fanaticism, self-righteousness and the demonisation of enemies. (3) John Coffey responds to each of these concerns, concluding with the suggestion that historical awareness can deepen and correct our own readings of Scripture.

EXODUS • LIBERATION THEOLOGY • PROVIDENCE • SCRIPTURE • HISTORICITY
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REVOLUTION • CIVIL RIGHTS

John Coffey: introduction

Generations of readers have been captivated by the story of the children of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage. In Christian preaching, liturgy and hymnology, Exodus has been read as spiritual typology – Israel pointed forward to the Church, Pharaoh's Egypt to enslavement by Satan, Moses to the Messiah, the Red Sea to salvation, the wilderness wanderings to earthly pilgrimage, the Promised Land to heavenly rest. For preachers and songwriters in the Methodist Holiness tradition, the Red Sea represented conversion; the wilderness the struggle with carnality; crossing the Jordan was equated to 'the second blessing' or 'entire sanctification'; and the conquest of Canaan depicted 'the victorious life'.¹

Yet there has been an almost equally venerable tradition of reading Exodus politically. It originated with Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century, who hailed the Emperor Constantine as a new Moses, deliverer of the persecuted Church. It took on new intensity with the Protestant Reformation. My own interest in the history of Protestant 'deliverance politics' originated in the early 1990s, when as a graduate student at Cambridge I read a short book by the distinguished Jewish political theorist Michael Walzer. Walzer had begun his career working on the Puritan Revolution, and in *Exodus and Revolution* (1985) he used historical examples to underscore the seminal role of the Exodus narrative within Western political culture. Around a decade ago, as I conducted my own research on England's mid-seventeenth-century revolution and the Anglo-American abolitionist movement, I was constantly reminded of Walzer's book. References to Exodus were abundant, and when Barack Obama ran for the US Presidency, his speeches showed that Exodus rhetoric continued to resonate, at least in the biblically literate culture of the United States. And so I embarked on a study of how Exodus (and the Jubilee call to 'proclaim liberty') had been deployed from the Reformation to the Civil Rights Movement, from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr.

My book begins with Luther and Calvin, not because Exodus politics was a uniquely Protestant phenomenon, but because the Reformation was defined as emancipation from 'popish bondage'. European Calvinists, in particular, identified with the oppressed children of Israel in Egypt and they celebrated national reformations in Britain and the Netherlands as a new exodus. The title page of the Geneva Bible (1560) pictured the Israelites pinned against the Red Sea by the chariots and horsemen of Pharaoh, the moment before their

deliverance. Deliverance became a keyword in Anglophone political rhetoric, a term that fused providence and liberation.

Over the coming centuries, this Protestant reading of Exodus would go through some surprising twists. The Reformers had sought deliverance from the papacy, but radical Puritans condemned intolerant Protestant clergy as 'Egyptian taskmasters'. Rhetoric that had once been trained on ecclesiastical oppression was turned against 'political slavery', as revolutionaries in 1641, 1688 and 1776 co-opted biblical narrative. For Oliver Cromwell, Israel's journey from Egypt through the wilderness towards Canaan was 'the only parallel' to the course of English revolution. For John Milton, tolerationist and republican, England's Exodus led to 'civil and religious liberty', a phrase coined in Cromwellian England. The most startling development occurred during the American Revolution, when Patriots unleashed the language of slavery and deliverance against 'the British Pharaoh', George III. The contradiction between their libertarian rhetoric and American slaveholding galvanised the nascent anti-slavery movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Black Protestants now seized upon Exodus and the language of deliverance. 'For the first time in history,' writes one historian, 'slaves had a *book* on their side.'²

African Americans inhabited the story like no other people before them. When they fled from slavery and segregation and migrated to the North, they consciously re-enacted the Exodus. In slave revolts and in the American Civil War they called on God for deliverance from Egyptian taskmasters. In the spiritual 'Go down, Moses', they reimagined the United States (or at least the Southern states) as 'Egyptland', throwing into question the biblical construction of the nation as an 'American Zion'. They sang of a deliverer who would tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go'. They celebrated the abolition of the slave trade, West Indian emancipation and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation by recalling the song of Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea.

For African Americans (as for ancient Israelites), deliverance from Egypt was followed by wilderness wanderings, and one theme of my book is the disillusionment that has often followed exultant moments of liberation, whether in the 1640s, 1830s or 1860s. Yet the main conclusion is a paradoxical one – that the Exodus narrative has been malleable and potent at the same time. On the one hand, the biblical text can seem like a nose of wax, or a helpless prisoner in the hands of its readers. All sorts of figures have been identified as Mosaic deliverers: Constantine, Savonarola, Cromwell, Charles II, George Washington, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King

Jr. The Pharaohs have been an equally motley crew, ranging from Mary Tudor to George III. The story has been put to use by Catholics and Protestants, Parliamentarians and Royalists, Hanoverians and Jacobites, revolutionaries and abolitionists, blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats. Yet the very fact that so many readers have tried to get their hands on Exodus testifies to the power of the text, its capacity to capture imaginations. Narrative, in particular, provides a frame through which readers see and interpret the world, and, as sacred narrative, Exodus has enjoyed special authority. It has echoed in the Houses of Parliament and the Houses of Congress, in Westminster Abbey and along the Underground Railroad. It has been used by Mormon prophets and Maori prophets, by American presidents and African slaves.

Above all, Exodus has carried a big idea – the idea of deliverance. British and American Protestants came to believe that God acted providentially within history to liberate peoples from ecclesiastical, political and physical slavery. The fact that concepts of redemption and deliverance were deeply embedded in biblical texts was of great significance. Without Exodus and Jubilee, the liberationist rhetoric of revolutionaries and abolitionists would have lacked the powerful sanction of Holy Scripture. Given the right conjunction of circumstances, resonant biblical phrases – Let my people go! Proclaim liberty throughout the land! Break every yoke! Deliverance to the captives! – could be invoked to create a new sense of what was humanly possible and divinely mandated. Without these texts, English-speaking Protestants would have thought differently about slavery and liberation.

Mark Noll: Exodus, liberation and the discernment of providence

John Coffey's *Exodus and Liberation* represents an entirely successful effort to document the salience of deliverance texts in British and American history from the sixteenth century to the present. In this day of ever more concentrated research on ever more narrowly defined subjects, Coffey's book should encourage other historians to tackle questions of large significance over long stretches of time. For those who also believe in the biblical narratives on which the book concentrates, there is much more.

Coffey's Introduction sets out the main argument concisely – that a rhetoric of 'deliverance' grounded in several key biblical texts has been an under-appreciated major theme of political mobilisation in Britain from the sixteenth

century through the Second World War, and in America from the colonial period to the present. In his reading, moreover, the Exodus theme has been both unusually *powerful* and unusually *malleable* in Anglo-American political history. The body of the work provides a rich survey of the manifold uses made of a coherent body of biblical 'deliverance' texts: pre-eminently, the story from the early chapters of the book of Exodus about the children of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Pharaoh's Egypt; but also the provision in Hebrew law announced in Leviticus 25 for a year of Jubilee ('proclaim liberty throughout the land'); the prophetic declarations of Isaiah 58 ('let the oppressed go free ... break every yoke') and Isaiah 61 ('proclaim liberty to the captives'); along with the inaugural proclamation from Jesus in Luke 4 that the Spirit of the Lord had come upon him to proclaim liberty to the captive and set at liberty the oppressed. The book's conclusions succinctly summarise the main findings of its survey: from the early history of Protestantism emerged 'the Reformation fusion of Providence and Liberation in the concept of Deliverance'; 'readers did not merely cite Exodus, they inhabited it'; and 'deliverance' has been a stronger, more pervasive theme in Anglo-American political history even than 'liberty'. Adding persuasively are well-selected images of medals, paintings and drawings that used scenes from Exodus to advance political or social causes.

Especially concerning how believers today might best interpret the ways that past fellow believers applied the Bible to historical events, *Exodus and Liberation* opens up several questions of great importance. A first concerns the historicity of biblical narratives, a second the plasticity of providential interpretations of history, and a third the very providentialism that underlay the political use of deliverance texts.

First is a question of how important it is to think of the Exodus story as having actually happened, the Leviticus legislation about Jubilee to have actually guided ancient Hebrew practice, and the Nazareth discourse from Luke 4 to have been actually spoken by Jesus. This question arose for me from the book's accurate statement that 'Although the black intelligentsia [at the time of Martin Luther King Jr] was increasingly secular, intellectuals recognized the prominence of Exodus in African American folk religion' (p. 190). Because of that recognition, the intelligentsia's use of biblical deliverance motifs remained extremely powerful with black audiences, and also relatively powerful with American white audiences. Given the power of these motifs among black church audiences, it is relevant that African Americans have remained the most resolutely pre-critical of all American Christian groups in their attitudes towards Scripture. ('My Lord delivered Daniel, then why not deliver me?')

Coffey's research convincingly documents the extraordinary power of biblical deliverance motifs in the political wilderness long endured by African Americans. But it also stands to reason that American blacks would only find unusual support in their struggles for civil liberty in biblical stories that they held to recount actual, rather than mythic, occurrences. Even if an increasingly secular black leadership doubted the actual occurrence of such events as described in Scripture, they relied on audiences that were convinced that the biblical events really took place.

At this point I might speculate that the difference between a language of 'deliverance' and a language of 'liberation' is a difference between viewing biblical events as actual and viewing them as mythic. 'Deliverance', with the implication of an actual outside Actor carrying out a task on behalf of the delivered, would seem to accord more obviously with a view of biblical events actually having taken place. 'Liberation', by contrast, might accord more obviously with an opinion that both the creation of biblical texts and the securing of liberation depended upon the humans who imagined biblical stories and who then exercised their own agency. A question of specific interest for a theologically conservative audience is whether the motive-power of deliverance anti-types also requires a realistic view of the biblical types.

My second question, about the plasticity of providence, responds to the many places in the book where Coffey shows how easy it was for liberated Israelites to become persecuting Egyptians. 'As usual,' he writes after describing Jacobite accounts of George II as 'the Hanoverian Pharaoh', 'Exodus was open to *various* applications, holding a special appeal for outsiders and dissidents' (p. 66, emphasis added). In this case, British monarchs whom their Protestant subjects viewed as deliverers appeared as oppressors to those still loyal to the ousted Stuart line of James II. The question is one Coffey addresses in the book's conclusion about whether any motif or trope that has been put to such wide and sometimes contradictory uses can be seen as more than the narrative self-fashioning so beloved of postmodernist critics. Coffey's conclusion on this issue seems right, that 'the malleability of Exodus says as much about its strength as its weaknesses. The story was contested so fiercely because readers needed it on their side' (p. 218). But if the 'need' of readers determined the use of the Exodus motif, was it any longer a motif coming from divine revelation, or only a literary trope exploited by communities who felt that they required divine aid? My own response would be that divine revelation, however used or abused by humans, will always be more essentially foundational for life, culture, society and civilisation than any ideology springing solely from human minds.

A third and more serious question comes from the book's repeated documentation that the force of biblical deliverance politics sprang from an underlying belief in the reality of divine providence. The seriousness of the question arises from my observation, as a believer, that historical instances of strong confidence in providence have often been marked by a host of blatantly sub-Christian attitudes and actions. The question can be put like this: is it possible to believe in providence and in the contemporary relevance of scriptural narratives for current events without falling prey to evils, as well documented in the book, like fanaticism, the demonisation of opponents, and self-righteous blindness about one's own faults? Strong reliance on deliverance tropes seems also to heighten temporal aspirations for the political betterment of my tribe, race or class so strongly as to undercut the Christian message of eternal salvation open to all. This particular failing seems to have beset Puritan revolutionaries in the 1640s as much as the less directly theological revolutions of 1688 and 1776.

If I have identified a genuine problem, it probably arises from the fact that when we talk about providence we are usually thinking about two separate, yet consistently linked, propositions: the belief that God controls the world, and the assumption that humans can ascertain accurately how and why God has acted to control a particular set of worldly events. When the second proposition prevails – that is, when humans are most confident about their ability to discern providence – then we also seem to be the most defensive, self-protecting, self-righteous, unrepentant and over-confident about our own exalted place in the universe. By contrast, an understanding of divine providence that remains keyed to God's character, instead of the human ability to discern divine activity, realises that only God is entirely righteous and that at some level God's will must remain unfathomable to human apprehension or at best be discerned only by incomplete analogy.

Pursuing the difference between providence focused on God's character versus providence focused on the human capacity to explain God's action provides a clue for why I found Part II of the book less theologically troubling than Part I. In Part I we read about the development of Protestant deliverance politics in the struggles that embroiled Western Christendom from the Reformation through the American Revolution. Part II, by contrast, recounts the use of deliverance texts in the campaigns against the slave trade and slavery, and then in the American Civil Rights Movement. The struggles of Part I mostly concerned contests over who should exercise dominant power over a particular nation – during the early English Reformation, in the Puritan tumults

of the mid-seventeenth century, in the deposition of James II in 1688, and then in the warfare leading to American independence. As it happens, my own opinion of much Puritan theology is quite high; I also lean towards the conclusion that the Glorious Revolution worked out decently; and in the wake of 1776 I am pleased as an American not to be singing 'God save the Queen'. Still, ideological over-reach characterised each of these political crises because participants so clearly identified their own causes with God's deliverance of ancient Israel. Calm theological judgement might even conclude that biblically derived just-war criteria for the initiation of violence had not been fully met for civil war in the 1640s, regime change in 1688, or revolution in 1776. In fact, however, the appropriation of deliverance texts contributed directly to the violence that took place. In addition, the providentialism that these episodes solidified in Anglo-American religious cultures must bear some of the responsibility for the mixed moral record of first British imperialism and then American international exceptionalism. Thus, confidence about the ability to know God's providential will led to actions that sometimes transgressed the manifest will of God.

By contrast, it is harder to find serious moral difficulties in the application of deliverance texts to the long struggle against the slave trade, slavery itself and the United States' culture of racial discrimination. Whatever the details of exegesis and application, the image of Egypt seems much more compelling as a way of describing deeply rooted racial prejudice than to describe, as an example, the American patriots' fear that they would be 'enslaved' when Parliament unilaterally reduced taxes on tea.

The difference between the sections of the book might be construed as a result of providence in Part I featuring a larger role for the human ability to discern God's actions, and in Part II more a focus on the character of God. If God disclosed his own power most dramatically through powerlessness – if, that is, the Cross is the central act of divine disclosure – then abuses of Exodus motifs would be less likely, the less directly they were applied to contests over who controlled power. To be sure, struggles against the slave trade, slavery and racial discrimination did involve the breaking of bonds. But the breaking of bonds is not the same as warfare over the establishment of a new centre of power. Perhaps that is why the providential foundation for the application of biblical deliverance texts did more good and less harm in the history described in Part II than did the providentialism featured in Part I.

Yet if that difference between Part I and Part II can be sustained, we are left with the conundrum that the positive use of Exodus for the events described in Part II (abolition and civil rights) descended organically from the questionable use of the history unfolded in Part I (warfare and regime change). John Coffey's book seems to me splendid in every respect as it treats the appropriation of biblical texts, but I am left with questions about the varied outcomes that resulted depending on the interpretations of providence held by those who appropriated the biblical record.

John Coffey: response to Mark Noll

It is an honour to respond to comments from Mark Noll. As well as being a role model for many of us who work on church history, Mark has devoted a career to critical thinking about the use of the Bible in American political history, from *The Bible in America*, edited with Nathan Hatch (1982), to his major new book, *In the Beginning was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (2015). Moreover, unusually among historians, Mark gives theological consideration to the results of historical enquiry, and he engages the normative questions that historians often sidestep. In *Exodus and Liberation*, the normative questions are always bubbling under the surface, but to cite an old historian's dictum, I wrote it as a recording angel rather than a hanging judge. I did not adjudicate between my subjects or pass judgement on their hermeneutical moves and providential claims, though my sympathies no doubt come through at various points. Elsewhere, I have reflected directly on the strengths and pitfalls of liberation theology, but Noll raises a number of specific issues that demand further consideration even if they are not amenable to easy answers.³

First, he presses me on the *problem of historicity*. The Protestants I write about were generally 'pre-critical' in their view of Scripture, and had implicit faith in the factuality of biblical narrative. Ancient Egypt really was providentially visited by Ten Plagues, the children of Israel really walked between walls of water at the Red Sea, and those walls of water literally collapsed on Pharaoh's chariots drowning an entire army. Noll wonders if the biblical narrative loses much of its power when believers come to see it as myth rather than history. I suspect there is a good deal of truth in this and in Noll's observation that the slippage from 'deliverance' language to 'liberation' language reflects a diminishing faith in a divine liberator and an increasing stress on human agents

helping themselves. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, revolutionaries and abolitionists spoke far more about 'deliverance' than 'liberation'. 'Deliverance' carried providentialist overtones and testified to the belief that the God of the Bible was 'the God of the oppressed'. The 'deliverances' of 1558, 1588, 1641, 1688, 1776, 1807, 1834 and 1863 were all celebrated in emphatically providentialist terms, as divine acts. When the black Methodist, Absalom Jones, preached on Exodus in 1808, he had no doubt that the Exodus from Egypt and the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade were analogous historical events, in which God 'came down to deliver the oppressed'.⁴

The rise of biblical criticism undermined confidence in the historicity and supernaturalism of biblical narrative. Exodus was cut down to size, and as a result liberal Protestants have had a less vivid providentialist imagination than their traditional Protestant forebears. As Noll notes, it is striking that the Exodus story has continued to loom largest for those least troubled by modern critical scholarship, especially for African Americans.

That said, there is evidence that the Exodus story can inspire and motivate even when its readers are not convinced literalists. It is not altogether clear how Martin Luther King Jr, or liberation theologians like James Cone and Gustavo Gutiérrez, construed the historicity of biblical narrative, but they were hardly pre-critical. Nor are scholar-activists like Walter Brueggemann. This is not to say that the debate over historicity is beside the point. King did speak as if the narrative had a historical core, as if God did indeed deliver the oppressed Hebrews from ancient Egypt. Indeed, as Christopher Ansberry argues, 'It is not entirely sufficient to claim that the Exodus narrative paints an ahistorical yet theologically accurate portrait of Yahweh's character and Israel's identity.' The narrative itself is not merely concerned to depict the divine character; it also testifies that God has acted within history to deliver Israel. Ansberry's own proposal seeks to move beyond the dichotomies of 'fact' and 'fiction', 'history' and 'myth', suggesting that the Exodus account should be seen as 'a conflation of history and memory' with the cultural memory of the Exodus being 'formed around an actual, historical experience and disseminated through subsequent generations' as 'the subject of continuous remembrance, reconfiguration and representation'.⁵

The second problem Noll identifies is the *problem of plasticity*. The book repeatedly shows that Exodus was twisted to fit a host of rival agendas. Its reception history can look like a case study in 'narrative self-fashioning'. So was it simply a useful literary trope adopted at will to clothe and legitimise

incompatible causes? Readers of the book will make up their own minds from the evidence presented, but I think it shows that the Exodus story carried a potentially explosive theological claim that proved hard to defuse. As the great historian of slavery, David Brion Davis, has noted, Exodus 'has conveyed the astounding message that in the past God actually heard the cries of the oppressed and was willing to free slaves from their masters.'⁶ Those who co-opted the Exodus narrative to bolster their own power frequently found that this core message was turned against them. The Puritan Parliamentarians of the 1640s soon faced charges of acting like Egyptian taskmasters towards religious minorities. The American Revolutionaries of the 1770s were soon assailed by critics who condemned unrepentant slaveholders for complaining of political slavery. 'Why is it', asked Dr Johnson, 'that the loudest yelps for liberty come from the drivers of negroes?' Thus while the Exodus story has been commandeered for a host of rival agendas, it has been difficult to control. It has forced its Christian readers to reckon with a vision of God who sides with a downtrodden and marginalised people against the empires of the ancient world. Exodus has often been invoked by the powerful (Constantine, Cromwell, Lincoln), but in such cases the powerful have had to present themselves, and even to act, as defenders of the weak. To use Exodus was to make oneself vulnerable to critique from those on the underside of history (and their defenders). As Noll notes, the Exodus story never looks as compelling as when it is wielded by the weak against the strong, as in the case of African Americans.

The third problem Noll notes is the *problem of providentialism*. Historically, he observes, 'instances of strong confidence in providence have often been marked by a host of blatantly sub-Christian attitudes and actions'. So is it possible to believe in providence without falling prey to 'fanaticism, the demonization of opponents, and self-righteous blindness about one's own faults'? Doesn't historical providentialism feed tribalism? Noll begins to answer the question himself by distinguishing between two kinds of belief about providence: the metaphysical belief that divine providence is active in the world, and the epistemological claim that humans can ascertain correctly how and why God has acted. Noll suggests that the problem of tribalism arises from the latter rather than the former – what is dangerous is our confidence in our own ability to fathom providence. It is one thing to say that an unfathomable providence was somehow at work even in the events of 9/11, another to claim (as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson did in its wake) that God was punishing America because of 'the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians'.⁷ Believers need to remember the words of Isaiah: 'For

my thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways, saith the Lord' (Isaiah 55:8). In *America's God* (2002), Noll commends Abraham Lincoln for offering the most profound theological reflection on the American Civil War, precisely because Lincoln eschewed a tribalist reading of providence.⁸

If Noll is sceptical about the providentialism of the Puritan and American revolutionaries, he has more sympathy for the providentialism of African Americans. Part I of the book (which covers 'Reformations, Revolutions and Political Slavery') shows competing factions using Exodus in their struggle to establish a new centre of power. Part II ('Abolitionists, African Americans, and Political Slavery') examines how Exodus was wielded in the long campaign against the Atlantic slave trade and the enslavement of people of black descent. Yet as Noll recognises, the activists in Part II were indebted to a tradition of Protestant deliverance politics established by reformers and revolutionaries. Furthermore, although the abolitionist campaign was largely pacific, it was aided by slave rebellions, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, and the American Civil War, a conflict more deadly than the English Civil War or the American War of Independence. Violence is not left behind when we leave Part I, and we have to face the fact that it played a critical role in securing the advance of liberty and equality through the defeat of absolutist monarchy, religious uniformity, racial slavery and fascist dictatorship. Whether we like it or not, we live in democracies whose stability and freedoms are the product of war and revolt as well as peaceful protest and high ideals. The long British campaign against slavery is a reminder that there can be a non-violent route to liberation, but even that was accelerated by the armed uprisings of Christian slaves in Demerara (1823) and Jamaica (1830), and public sympathy for the missionaries blamed for stirring discontent. Indeed, a reading of the Hebrew Scriptures suggests that in a world where the powerful oppress the weak, the violent overthrow of oppressors can be part of God's providential purpose.⁹

However, Noll maintains that we need to read the Old Testament through a crucicentric hermeneutic. Our reading of Exodus should build on the conviction that 'God disclosed his own power most dramatically through powerlessness', that 'the cross is the central act of divine disclosure'. Noll has developed this line of argument in *Adding Cross to Crown: The Political Significance of Christ's Passion* (1996) and he has been a voice of restraint and irenicism in an American evangelical culture often given to bellicose rhetoric and belligerent solutions. Reading the Old Testament through the Cross is a way of guarding against its manipulation by the powerful.

Yet we should avoid spiritualising Hebrew Scripture to the point where we deny its political challenge. As the Vatican acknowledged in its response to liberation theology, Exodus ‘has a meaning which is both religious and political’, for the God of the Exodus ‘rescues the people from hard economic, political and cultural slavery’.¹⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez had good grounds for declaring that ‘the Exodus is paradigmatic’, and he had the support of Absalom Jones for whom the abolition of the slave trade was ‘striking proof’ that the God of Exodus ‘is the same yesterday, today and forever’.

These responses only gesture towards a proper answer to Noll’s searching questions, but I want to end by stressing the value of historical awareness. ‘Reading the Bible with the dead’ is a salutary experience.¹¹ It reminds us of how easily we can domesticate Scripture, and induces us to be less presumptuous in claiming to know the mind of God and monopolise divine favour. At the same time, it highlights the profound ways in which Scripture has fired the Christian imagination and the extraordinary impact that this has had on human cultures. It is hard not to be moved by how powerfully the Exodus narrative has spoken to the enslaved, assuring them that God has seen their affliction and heard their cry.

Notes

1. See, for example, the commentaries on Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua in A. B. Simpson, *Christ in the Bible*, vols. I–III, New York: Alliance Press, 1903.
2. John Saillant, ‘Book of Exodus’, in Peter Hinks and John McKivigan (eds), *Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition*, 2 vols, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007, p. 105.
3. John Coffey, ‘“To release the oppressed”: Reclaiming a Biblical Theology of Liberation’, *Cambridge Papers* 18 (2009): <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/to-release-the-oppressed-reclaiming-a-biblical-theology-of-liberation-by-john-coffey/>
4. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York: Basic Books, 1985, pp. 145–146.
5. See Christopher B. Ansberry, ‘The Exodus: Fact, Fiction or Both?’, in Christopher Hays and Christopher Ansberry (eds), *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*, London: SPCK, 2013, ch. 3. Compare the minimalist account in Carol Redmount, ‘Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt’, in Michael Coogan (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, and the maximalist case of J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
6. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, p. 88.

7. See Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
8. Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 426–437.
9. See Herbert Butterfield's reflections on divine judgement in history: Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, London: Bell, 1949, ch. 3. On the providentialism of abolitionists, see John Coffey, "'Tremble Britannia': Fear, Providence, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807," *English Historical Review* 127 (2012), pp. 844–881.
10. For the Vatican documents of 1984 and 1986, see Alfred Hennelly SJ (ed.), *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989, pp. 393–414, 461–497.
11. See John Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis that You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.



Canons and scriptures: issues for contemporary Bible-users

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This article interacts with responses of contemporary learners studying in a university adult education context to a new taught upper-level undergraduate course, 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults'. The module provided opportunity for students to think both about the place of scriptures in contemporary British society, but also more generally about which resources prove influential and authoritative for them personally, and how society handles the question of what should be seen as valuable and worthy of study. The article reflects on the students' sometimes negative reactions to the term 'scripture' and the particular value of the concept of 'canon', and draws some conclusions for the way the Bible is considered in the contemporary West.

BIBLE • SCRIPTURE • CANON • TEXT • AUTHORITY • EXPERIENCE • CULTURE
• COMMUNITY • RELIGION • CLASSIC

During the academic year 2014–2015 I taught for the first time a module called ‘Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults’. Taught over eight weeks (one three-hour session each week) within a general BA humanities and arts programme, this was an upper-level undergraduate optional course designed to slot into the ‘religion and philosophy’ strand within the programme. Its purpose was to enable students to consider how religious texts and communities work, and to do this by exploring the broader social contexts within which people (be they religious or not) identify, discover and explore what are the most significant ‘authorities’ for them as they find or create meaning to help them deal with daily life.

Students on the programme are usually aged between 30 and 70, and two-thirds tend to be women between 35 and 60. They come from different social and ethnic backgrounds, and may or may not be (or have been) religious, for there can be no religious requirements to study on such a public programme. The BA humanities and arts programme as a whole enables students to be stretched in their thinking about Western culture, and to understand more existentially who *they* are within this culture. Where have they come from (literally, geographically speaking)? Why are they here (specifically, in Leicester, where they study, but also more metaphysically – why *are* they here, and what has shaped them to make them the people they are)? What might they be comfortable and uncomfortable about in the forces and cultures that have shaped them? Have they ever asked searching questions about their own pasts and the cultural influences upon them?

The optional modules I design, because they are to do with religion, inevitably have an existential component to them. But this existential dimension does not always surface and become educationally useful and stimulating in ways which might be expected. When studying any aspect of a religious tradition (eg, a religion’s beliefs and ideas, its scriptures, its social and ritual practices, its impact on politics, its moral outlook) such features can always to some degree be kept at arm’s length and studied as if being observed from the outside, as practices of ‘other people’. It is, of course, arguably easier to do this when the religion in question is not one’s own (if one has a religion at all). It is much harder to study one’s own because the temptation to say as a Christian, for example, ‘what Christians usually do ...’ is so great. Even though we might be aware of substantial denominational differences, and of differences between Christians down the ages, in the company of those of other faiths and none, it is much easier to lump all Christians together and refer to ‘most Christians’, even though we may in fact be speaking largely from our own experience. Existential

elements in the teaching of religion in Higher Education do, though, come to bear in other ways and become very evident, and richly resourceful, among adult learners. Here is how.

Adult learners sit on lots of life experience. In general arts and humanities courses, many students come into a programme declaring that they were 'never very good at poetry at school', 'have never liked Shakespeare' or 'aren't particularly looking forward to having to study all those old paintings'. Some also say, as part of those initial fears and reservations, that they are 'not looking forward to the religion bits'. This is very often because they were brought up religious (Christian or otherwise) but have drifted out, 'moved on', or hated it and want nothing more to do with religion. Others, whether religious or not themselves, are, of course, keen to study religion because it means something to them personally, or because they are simply baffled by what religion seems to be involved in around the world – often with negative results. In other words, there is energy and passion around the topic of religion, and while course participants are *required* to study it to some extent (and some do it willingly, some not) they are usually *emotionally involved* in the subject matter already, whether they are aware of this or not. Though it is indeed theoretically possible to study religion at arm's length (as neutrally, and in as detached a way, as possible), it really is very, very hard to do this.

For a tutor this is great news. In teaching 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults', this meant that I had a group of students who *wanted* to be there (it was an option, not a compulsory course), even if the reason why some were there was because they didn't like the others on offer! But it also meant I was working with people with a range of experience *of* or *in* religion, positive and negative, with much to offer each other. As far as the subject matter of this article and this issue of *Holiness* is concerned, I was faced in the room each week with a group of people with all sorts of ideas and experiences which were not 'at arm's length' about the Bible (as a canonical collection of texts, as scripture, as confirmation gift), which caused confusion, excitement, puzzlement, annoyance, anger, all at one and the same time.

Given this context I shall present and explore, on the basis of what this group of students told me at the end of the module about their experience of studying 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults', some insights into how the Bible is viewed today by this small cross-section of British citizens, and what their discussions mean for Christian approaches to handling the Bible in British society (and perhaps Western culture more generally).

‘Don’t mention “scripture”! (I did once, but I think I got away with it)’

The first and most direct conclusion from my teaching of the module is just how negatively the term ‘scripture’ can sound within the West today. Outside of the context of a worshipping community within which a reference to scripture may be heard as just another name for ‘sacred writings’ or ‘Bible’, with a notion that these writings carry authority for the community, the term can quickly accrue negative overtones. Most of the group were in practice more familiar with the application of the term to the Christian Bible, through their life experience as having been brought up Christian, or thinking of the Bible and scripture as interchangeable through their experience within the British education system. Hence, scripture mostly meant the Christian scriptures rather than religious or sacred writings more generally. Even though the word ‘scripture’ simply means ‘writing’, the authoritative, religious meaning of the term is clearly uppermost. Despite the fact that ‘bible’ (though simply meaning ‘books’) has come to have a more general meaning as ‘authoritative reference book’ (as in ‘gardening bible’ or ‘cooking bible’), ‘scripture’ as a term has retained its religious reference more clearly.

Because of this religion-only world, the term and concept of scripture were viewed in a more limited way than that of ‘canon’ (the meanings and flexibility of which we shall look at shortly). ‘Authoritative’ could be seen as a simply descriptive adjective of how scripture works: it *is* authoritative for a community which recognises a particular set of texts as scripture. Negative associations arise for a number of reasons, however. ‘Scripture’ raises memories of boring educational experiences, either when Religious Education lessons may have been called ‘Scripture’ as a whole, or when the Bible was studied ‘as scripture’ in such classes, that is, without any freedom or creativity to consider the Bible’s contents as *not* religiously authoritative. In other words, over two hundred years’ worth of stimulating, risk-taking study of the Bible (historical-critical, literary, sociological, and so on) had not been reflected in school education. This may, I guess, not be the case now – though nor would the word ‘scripture’ be used quite in the same way, or to the same extent (outside of church schools, perhaps).

A second reason why scripture is not viewed as a positive term is simply if a person does not stand within a religious community, or within the community of the scriptures being studied. In such a scenario ‘scripture’ instantly implies

'not for me'. While 'Bible' may have a more neutral resonance, 'scripture' pertains only to those who accept a set of writings' authority. A Bible may not be being accepted 'as scripture'. Admittedly, it can matter-of-factly be accepted that the Christian Bible has functioned authoritatively in Western culture generally, and in cultures influenced by the West, outside of the Christian community as such. But if the specifics of religious authority are not accepted, then sacred writings are seen to be used as scripture *by someone else*. Furthermore, if students are affected by media coverage of the kind which quotes 'Bible-believing Christians', that notorious, misleading shorthand for a range of conservative Christians who are likely to be fundamentalist yet may be from many different Evangelical or Pentecostal backgrounds, then religious use of the Bible 'as scripture' becomes associated with a particular set of moral positions. It is far from accurate, of course, to say that it is only the more liberal (politically and ethically speaking) who engage in university-level study. But it is inevitable, through the practice of such study, that openness to a range of viewpoints, and the acceptance that blunt, straightforward, over-simplified statements of meaning are rarely possible in the task of interpreting texts, becomes common practice. With respect to the Bible, then, the task of interpretation is recognised in the academy as a complex matter, and the religious community as only one set of readers, even if that community may be the group of people who attach most significance to their reading. As a reading context, then, the academy opens up a larger, more flexible reading space within which religious readings of biblical texts are only one form and could (even if not always wholly accurately) be deemed restrictive from the perspective of those looking in from the outside.

This second reason is accentuated by virtue of the reservations that many contemporary students of all ages have with the term 'religion' itself. 'Religion', as opposed to 'spirituality', is associated with constraint, restrictiveness, oppression. Despite (or perhaps because of!) having done a module earlier on in their BA programmes on 'Religion in the Modern World', in which current uses of the term were explored, and the global significance of the phenomenon recognised, in the wake of the process of secularisation which has particularly affected the West, reservations about the whole concept of religion remained within the student group. Hence, the association of 'scripture' with 'religion' puts together two terms that, for some, imply boundaries of the wrong kind.

Of the making of many canons

It is, though, a *canon* of texts that functions as scripture, 'canon' here meaning 'list' and hence, by extension, list of authoritative texts. In the recent teaching experience I am exploring it became clear, however, that 'canon' proves to be a provocative, illuminating, more creative concept for current students to work with. In contrast to 'scripture', which for some implies constraint, 'canon' is a less emotive word, leaving an educator much more space to work both with canon as a concept and with different kinds of canon. The so-called 'Western canon' of literature in English, the rock music album canon, and many lists of 'classics' (of pieces of music, of films, of works of arts and literature) are able to function as reminders and case studies for exploration of why it is that some materials become authoritative resources within culture and not others.¹ The reasons why 'canons' of sacred writings exist at all suddenly become easier to understand. Freed from the assumed constraints of the concept of 'scripture', the Bible becomes one canon among others, as – to use terms offered by the students I taught – 'lists of important works', 'authorised bodies of material', 'the things that have influenced you', 'the rules that you live by' all began to take shape as the group examined what had *actually* influenced them (including sometimes the Christian Bible and other sacred writings), and what they 'knew to be important', whether or not they had read, watched or listened to the resources they listed. Especially intriguing was one person who spoke positively about materials identified as canonical as 'your boundaries'.

It could, of course, be argued that the Bible was thereby being relativised in the midst of this educational exploration. By being seen as one canon among many, the Bible's value was being played down. Though true to some extent, it is not the whole picture by any means. The Bible *has* to be seen, in any case, as one canon among many if we are to respect what Western cultural life is actually like. Though it remains the primary textual authority for the Christian Church, existing in multiple canons (eg, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and many Orthodox forms) to function as such, it does not have the same status for all Western citizens. How could it? (Hence the reservations about 'scripture'.)

That said, it is ironical that it is through consideration of the concept of canon, and the existence of, and feverish discussion about, the content of canons of all kinds, that students who may be sceptical or unsure about the concept of scripture come to understand what scripture is and how it works. Scripture is, after all, the book of a community. In the case of Christianity, the collection of books which make up the Bible is accepted as authoritative by churches, even

if in different ways. If some Christians, though not all, then attach other beliefs to the collection, ranging from inspiration through to inerrancy, then so be it.² Functionally speaking, however, the Bible is an agreed canon of texts whose worth has been established through use, continued interaction with which it is believed will be ever useful and necessary. Thus understood, the difference between 'scripture' and 'canon' as concepts is not, in fact, as great as may be supposed. Canons imply and create boundaries and indicate to their users the results of long debate about what it is (and is not!) worth spending time on. When seen in this light, the difference from how scriptures work seems more a matter of degree than kind. The background to different current perceptions of the two terms, as evidenced in the student group with which I worked, is, however, revealing nevertheless.

Canons and classics

As already hinted, one other feature of the educational exploration I was engaged in was distinguishing and relating the concepts of 'canon' and 'classic'. 'Classic' is probably one of the most sloppily used words in Western culture today. Pieces of music, sporting events, cars, journeys, buildings, websites and many other products and practices, in addition to works of art and literature, are now labelled 'classics'. Sometimes the ascription is hasty as, by definition, a 'classic' can only become so through proving its worth over time. A classic bears repeated revisiting because, to speak of how a literary classic works, it keeps on generating new meaning: it stimulates fresh thought, and not just the same thought, again and again the more it is read. The Bible is thus a religious classic because it functions in this way. It may not be a literary or aesthetic classic (though many would make a literary claim for the language of the King James Version of the English Bible), but it keeps on having religious value, even if not all its parts may be able to be considered equally valuable.

The distinction and relationship between these two concepts 'canon' and 'classic' proved helpful because via the concept of 'classic' students were able to ask themselves what works (for example, of art, music, TV series or literature) they repeatedly view, listen to or read, and why it is that they do this. Via the concept of 'canon' they were able to compile a personal list of such resources. Admittedly, I made the pedagogical mistake of beginning to speak of their 'personal canons' as, although technically possible, talking in this way does underplay the public, communal dimension which should come into play in

any discussion of both classics and canons. But talk of personal canons (which we all possess in some form) does at least highlight the existential dimension of the list of resources which have shaped us.

Both canons and classics are, though, public phenomena. They have to be disputed, argued for, agreed upon, revisited and argued about again. Even the Western Bible, though its content is not likely to change – it has not done so, after all, since the sixteenth century for both major Western Christian traditions – whether it should be added to in any way is sometimes discussed. It is also worthwhile reviewing the canonisation process, noting why, for example, some New Testament books were disputed and not others. The important point here is that books became canonical through use, and the collection as a whole may be regarded as a ‘classic’ even if individual books may not. Getting at the concept of ‘scripture’ via the route of canons and classics brought to life the process of the production of scripture, and the function of the collection for the community of faith, for the students with whom I worked.

So what?

What, though, is the value of this discussion, both for those who are not religious, and display reserve about the concept of scripture, and those who are? I suggest four things. First, it seems clear that while sacred writings known as scripture are undoubtedly given a lofty place in the lives of religious believers – whatever the detail of individual denominations’ approaches to the Christian Bible, it is still the primary text for most – this is not a practice different in kind from what goes on for all people in some way. Not all are ‘textual’ people. (Not all people can read, or choose to read much.) There is always the danger of the literate assuming that all people work in textually based ways. But all have touchstones, rely on authoritative voices, or deem particular stories or traditions as decisive. That is how cultures and groups work.³ So even for those students who were cautious about, or hostile to, the concepts of scripture and religion, the recognition that they, too, had ‘classics’ and ‘canons’ in the background of their life experience enabled them to see that while they did not have a religious practice, they were in significant respects nevertheless operating in similar ways to those who were.

Second, the exploration of how classics and canons come about and function brings scripture to life even for those who already see scripture as decisive. Reading the Bible is, as we know, a very challenging exercise. It is a shock to

discover that we, in practice, have our own 'canons within the canon' (bits that we prefer to other parts), and that these may be highly personal and distort our reading of the Bible as a whole. It may be a surprise that the denominational tradition within which we are located, or the particular lectionary or reading programme we follow, have emphases of their own, which steer our reading and understanding of the Bible in particular ways. Approaching the question of how scripture works through exploration of the concepts of canon and classic can remind us of how and why particular texts resonate, become worthy of rereading, and why a community of reading (the role of a wider public beyond our own reading habits) is important. The Church is more than just an authority standing over the task of reading. It is a collection of concrete (and increasingly virtual) communities within which reading happens, meanings are discussed (argued about!), interpretations drawn out and actions undertaken. The educational experience which my taught module became was able to draw that out for the religious people present in the group.

Third, the discussion of canons and classics reminds us that because it is always disputable what it is *worth* spending time on (reading, watching, viewing, listening to), that is, what should be regarded as a classic, and what should appear in any list of classics/canon, then the Bible itself keeps on having to fight for its place within any discussion of 'the classics of Western culture'. It is admittedly not only religious people or English literature scholars who would argue for the inclusion of the Bible in any version of a Western literary canon. At least parts of the Bible will be valued by many. The Bible's 'Greatest Hits' (some psalms, a bit of Ecclesiastes, extracts from Isaiah, Matthew 2, 5—7, Luke 2, 15, sections of a Passion narrative, John 1, 1 Corinthians 13) would be on many people's shelves. But it is going to be more and more necessary to *defend* the Bible's place in Western culture given that it has to be accepted that it contains dangerous material too.

That leads to a fourth and final observation. In the same way that the Bible has to fight its corner because it takes its place within a wide range of cultural material, so its readers – even its Christian readers – have to accept that however little or much they read biblical texts, they do so while consuming a rich range of other 'texts' (and here I mean 'texts' in the widest possible sense: journalism, Web pages, images, TV, film, visual art, advertisements, music). The Bible is always being read 'alongside', and judgements are being made all the time about what value is to be given to competing texts. Sometimes Christian readers will be (re-)reading 'classic novels', and also reading newspapers. Sometimes they will be spending much more time listening to (and repeating,

by singing along to) music lyrics than reading the Bible. The lyrics become part of them. We live in a cacophonous world of multiple voices which compete to be heard.

It would be nice to think, of course, that in this complex, sometimes overwhelming, experience of processing information, encountering media and consuming the arts that the Bible remains in the background as the primary text, and that interpretation of its contents, and the belief system to which it relates, shapes and steers all other reading. Would that it were so simple! But then, would things be so exciting? At this point, exactly as happened in 'Fans, Canons, Scriptures, Cults', our examining of the contemporary processes of reading and meaning-making open up into a much broader set of questions, not least 'Just how significant are the arts, the media and popular culture for Christian faith today?' But that must be left for another time.

Notes

1. For one scholar's version of the 'Western Canon', see Bloom 1994, pp. 531–567. The proposed canon (Appendixes A–D in the book) is also available as a separate publication. For a version of the 'Album Canon', see Shuker 2013, p. 242.
2. At this point, the range of criteria which in practice came into play in establishing the canonicity of biblical works, some being stronger than others, should be noted. In the case of the New Testament, for example, apostolic authorship, apostolic association, episcopal support, actual communal use, presence in an emerging mini-collection (gospels or letters) all functioned as reasons why texts became authoritative and pressed for inclusion.
3. Note, for example, the many studies about stories, myths and metaphors that people 'live by': Lakoff and Johnson 2003, Midgley 2003 and McAdams 2013.

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Lectio divina – a Methodist reflection

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Lectio divina is a term used particularly in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions to refer to the spiritual or devotional reading of the Bible. Methodists have practised lectio divina without calling it that. This paper addresses the challenge of sustaining this vital Christian discipline in our often uncongenial contemporary world. The paper explores Wesley's own guidance on the matter, and goes on to explore how questions and difficulties raised by recent biblical scholarship can be faced, worked through and, where appropriate, 'baptised' into a more devotional approach to Scripture. Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'a second naivety' – coming back to Scripture with a deepened simplicity which is no longer simplistic – can be helpful in this task.

DEVOTIONAL READING • BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP • WESLEY'S TEACHING •
SUSPICION • SEARCH • PAUL RICOEUR • MEDITATE • CONTEMPLATION

Many Christians today live their lives without reading the Bible regularly. Many do not have the opportunity; many more find devotional reading of the Bible difficult. Even if, in these busy days, people manage to make time for it, there is much in the Bible which is obscure, not obviously relevant and even offensive. Consequently, 'what is neglected is reading the Bible formatively, reading in order to live'.¹

In this short paper I consider how we may refresh our Bible reading and our praying by, first, relating Wesley's teaching about reading Scripture to older traditions about *lectio divina* – the spiritual reading of Scripture – and, second, reflecting on the practice of *lectio divina* in the context of the contemporary ecumenical movement and of biblical scholarship.

Lectio divina – an Introductory definition

Enzo Bianchi, founder of an ecumenical monastic community in Italy and now a confidant of Pope Francis, writes:

Lectio divina, which finds its roots in the Jewish tradition of Bible reading and the patristic hermeneutical legacy, is the art of making the transition from a biblical text to our life ... The four steps of *lectio divina* – *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*² – represent the progressive deepening of our understanding of the biblical text. Our act of reading becomes an encounter with the living Lord.³

Bianchi goes on to define *contemplatio* as follows:

[It] refers not to mystical or ecstatic experiences but to a level of communication inexpressible in words: silence, tears, the presence of the lover to the beloved, discernment of the Lord's unutterable presence.

He further adds – in words reminiscent of Wesleyan teaching – that '*contemplatio* also indicates the work accomplished in us by the Spirit ... in a word, love that overflows'.

It hardly needs to be said that Methodists from the time of Wesley onwards have practised *lectio divina* without calling it that. They have practised at least three of the essentials – reading, meditating and praying – as part of their daily

Christian discipline. (Contemplation, by its very nature, is more difficult to assess, and I return to this later on.)

Today the picture is more fragmented and patchy. Modern pressures have conspired to make more difficult the discipline of reading Scripture and praying – including the silence of contemplation. But, first, we need to examine Wesley's own legacy in this matter.

Wesleyan foundations

'All inspired scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for reformation of manners and discipline in right living' (2 Timothy 3:16, REB translation). 'Scripture' here probably means, as Wesley recognised, those writings we call 'the Old Testament'.⁴ However, from the Church Fathers onwards, it was taken to apply to the whole Bible, and for them, as a recent study notes, 'the most important term in this passage is *ophelimos*, which means "profitable" or "useful"'.⁵ So this much-discussed and variously translated text refers not so much to the authority of 'Scripture', but to its purpose.

In his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, John Wesley, aware – as we have just noted – that the writer is probably referring to the Old Testament, reasons that, if the Old Testament alone had been able to make 'Timothy' 'wise unto salvation', 'how much are the Old and New Testaments together able, in God's hand, to make us more abundantly wise unto salvation'. He has this to say about the phrase 'inspired of God': 'The Spirit of God not only inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists those that read it with earnest prayer.'⁶

The need for the help of the Spirit in reading the Bible is a recurring theme in the writings of the Wesley brothers. John, in his Preface to 'Notes to the Old Testament', observes that 'Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given'⁷. Charles, in his hymns, makes the same point. For example:

Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire,
Let us thine influence prove ...
Unlock the truth, thyself the key,
Unseal the sacred book.

Another hymn begins with a similar prayer:

Come, divine Interpreter,
Bring us eyes thy book to read ...

In his 'Notes on the Old Testament', John Wesley is characteristically down to earth in his advice on how to read the Scriptures 'most effectively'. The six points he goes on to make here represent, in effect, his method for *lectio divina*. He begins with a caustic challenge: 'It is no part of my design to save either learned or unlearned men from the trouble of thinking. On the contrary, my intention is to make them think.' He goes on: 'This is the way to understand the things of God: "meditate thereon day and night".'⁸

So what were Wesley's six guidelines? First, set aside a little time morning and evening, if possible, and read – again, if possible – a chapter each from Old and New Testaments. Next, the reader's purpose is important: 'read ... with a single eye to know the whole will of God, and a fixed resolution to do it'. To do this, the reader must have 'a constant eye to the analogy of faith' and its 'fundamental doctrines'. In other words, be rooted in Christian tradition and experience.⁹

Wesley's two remaining guidelines refer to prayer: 'serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used before we consult the oracles of God'. The reading of Scripture should also end with prayer, 'that what we read may be written in our hearts'. (I note again the similarity with the earlier definition of *contemplatio* given by Enzo Bianchi.) Finally, 'It might also be of use, if while we read we were frequently to pause and examine ourselves by what we read, both with regard to our heart and lives.'

Christians of other traditions familiar with the practice of *lectio divina* would recognise a spiritual affinity with the method of reading Scripture which Wesley advocates here. A hymn of Charles Wesley offers a valuable cameo of early Methodist practice:

'When quiet in my house I sit,
Thy Book be my companion still ...
And search the oracles divine,
Till every heartfelt word be mine.

The same teaching occurs in John Wesley's sermon 'The Means of Grace.' Wesley lists, first, prayer, 'whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures, which implies reading, hearing and meditating thereon and receiving the Lord's Supper'. So the regular practice of *lectio divina* – though not known as such as far as I am aware – was common among Methodists from the beginning. It was an individual and corporate discipline, certainly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Methodist class meetings, together with the class (ie, membership) ticket (obligations of membership printed on the back), reinforced this personal discipline.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the class meeting in the British Methodist Church declined, and, with that decline, it is likely that Methodists met together less frequently for shared Bible study. Before I turn to the contemporary scene, however, there are two important words to linger over: 'search' and 'meditate'. The phrase 'search the Scriptures' was clearly important to both the Wesley brothers. John returns to its meaning later in his sermon 'The Means of Grace'. The expression, as Wesley notes, comes from John 5:39, referring to Jewish practice. (The Hebrew equivalent for the Greek *eraunate* here was a technical term in Rabbinic Judaism for the study of Scripture.) Wesley also notes a similar expression in Acts, used of the Bereans (17:11–12), repeating his earlier explanation of 'searching' as 'reading, hearing and meditating'.¹⁰

Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* sheds some light on the context in which he offered his teaching about the reading of Scripture. He has stern words for the kind of Christian 'enthusiasm' which had led some to abandon searching the Scriptures, because they say 'God writes all the Scriptures on my heart. Therefore, I have no need to read it.'¹¹ This context of theological controversy in the eighteenth century – comparable with the combative context of John 5 – may help to explain Wesley's fondness for the phrase 'search the Scriptures'. But what did Wesley mean by the word 'meditate'?

It is difficult, naturally, to discern the nature of Wesley's inner spiritual life. Henry Rack, author of perhaps the finest biography of Wesley in recent decades, has some interesting observations. After noting the more outwardly discernible characteristics, in particular Wesley's meticulous, if not obsessive, concern with the right use of time, regular times set aside for prayer and detailed self-examinations, Rack comments: 'Most elusive of all is Wesley's inner life ... His outward practice is obvious enough ... There is every reason to suppose that, as the diaries ... show, he maintained a routine of prayer and meditation three

or four times a day.' What is most striking is the testimony, quoted by Rack, of a contemporary: 'He thought prayer to be more his business than anything else; and I have seen him come out of his closet with a serenity of countenance that was next to shining.'¹²

The quality of Wesley's prayer life can hardly be doubted. Bianchi would have recognised in Wesley one who practised *contemplatio*. It is possible, however, that this word, whether in Latin or English, is a word that Wesley shied away from. (Others far more conversant than I with the writings of Wesley may be able to tell us.) The lifelong stamp of early influences on Wesley is clear. But were there gaps in his reading, if not his experience?

From recent writers like Francis de Sales, Jeremy Taylor and William Law, Wesley drew his discipline of prayer, his rigorous use of time and, above all, the centrality of love in Christian faith and practice. Traces of Law's influence, for example, can be clearly seen. Law's chapter on prayer places great emphasis on rising early, rather than sleeping 'immoderately'. Perhaps Law's comment on the first Christians particularly appealed to Wesley; 'When you look into the writings and lives of the first Christians ... all is reality, life *and action*' (my italics).¹³

Yet we may wonder about the absence of other influences on Wesley. Gordon Wakefield notes the breadth of the 50 volumes of Wesley's *Christian Library*, but goes on to say: 'The omissions are important: no medieval mystics, no Carmelites, no great reformers, no St Anthony, St Augustine, St Anselm, St Bernard, St Thomas (except indirectly through the Puritans)'. Wakefield even ventures a criticism of Wesley: perhaps the gaps are due to 'a combination of ignorance' and 'unscholarly haste', busy man that he was. All of this 'may have bequeathed to Methodist theology a certain lack of discrimination'.¹⁴

So I end this section with an observation and a question. It is clear that Wesley practised and urged his followers to practise what earlier Christian tradition called *lectio divina*: reading, praying and meditating upon the Scriptures. It may be that, for him, 'meditation' naturally led to 'contemplation'; the testimony to his 'shining countenance' suggests that it did. My question is whether he commended 'contemplation' to his followers. Perhaps its associations with enclosed religious orders, and his fear of 'quietism', led him to avoid the word. What is more certain – and more urgent – is our need today to rediscover the practice of contemplation. But, first, we must examine the place in all this of modern biblical scholarship: its challenge and its contribution.

Lectio divina and biblical scholarship

Many Methodists continue to read the Bible regularly at home, and many value meeting with their fellow Christians for shared Bible study. More would do so, if there were the opportunity. But some have reservations about Bible study groups – for many reasons. Forty years ago, I started a house group in a church of which I had pastoral charge. The question arose of whether it would be a Bible study group. As I recall, about half the congregation said they would come if it was, and the other half said that, if it was, they wouldn't.

Many influences and changes in the so-called 'developed' world have made the Bible far less familiar to Methodist congregations than it once was. In Britain, I note the decline and near disappearance of a second Sunday service, changing patterns of worship, a growing neglect of readings from the Old Testament and epistles and the decline of biblical preaching. Cutbacks in the time ordinands spend in training have not helped. All of this – and, not least, the pace and busyness of modern life – has contributed to a steep decline in biblical literacy in the churches.

A crisis about Scripture has been creeping up on us for a long time. Much post-Enlightenment thought, theology and philosophy has resulted in the questioning of traditional tenets of Christian faith, and of older understandings of the Bible. No authority has been above question – including Holy Scripture.¹⁵

In a prophetic lecture given in the 1980s to Church leaders in the north of England, theologian David Ford warned that they should not underestimate the impact of secular influences, including the media, on Christian people. Slowly but surely, even without their realising it, a person's faith could be eroded, unless there were powerful influences – notably worship, prayer and Scripture – to counter it all. For example, how is a contemporary Christian to evaluate the accuracy of a newspaper article or TV programme about the Bible? How vigilant and discerning are we when we read those medleys of information, opinion, distortion and propaganda which we call 'newspapers'? There are searching challenges for the Christian disciple living in a post-Christian, secular and – with the dominance of neo-liberal economics – idolatrous society.

In all of this, what has been, and what might be, the contribution of biblical scholarship? What contribution can it – or must it – make to our spiritual reading of Scripture? An essay title which a colleague of mine (an Old

Testament scholar) once gave a class of Methodist ordinands expresses the situation well: 'Is biblical scholarship a help or a hindrance in reading the Bible?'

First, there is no putting the clock back. As with the theory of evolution, we cannot unsay or 'unthink' what has been said and thought. To mention only a sample of countless questions about the Bible: can we now know anything for certain about the history of Israel before the reigns of David and Solomon, or even (as some scholars would say) before the Babylonian exile? Are the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel history or aggadic,¹⁶ the writer's pious, imaginative reflections on what we call 'the Old Testament'? How historical are the resurrection narratives of the Gospels?

Historical questions such as these can be unsettling. The list could go on. Newer disciplines – notably 'narrative criticism' – have shed new light on the Gospels and brought more questions. However, two fundamental questions are relevant for us: how much does all of this matter, and how are the faithful to deal with it all in their spiritual reading of the Bible – that is, their practice of *lectio divina*?

The answer surely must be that we work through what we can, baptise into Christ what we can, and put aside, at least for the time being, what we cannot deal with. By 'baptise into Christ' in this context I mean, 'use to enrich our practice of *lectio divina*'. In the end, what matters is how biblical scholarship may inform, illumine and deepen our understanding of Scripture.

There is no shortage of examples. 'Wives, obey your husbands' has become one biblical text which has understandably become notorious to many female readers of the Bible. What we now know of the social context in which Paul and his followers gave their teaching helps us to see why they said what they did, why it should not be interpreted today in a wooden, literal way, and how, nevertheless, this unpromising text might shed light on the daily give and take of family life today.

To give another example, archaeological discoveries at Corinth and its environs, or at Pompeii and elsewhere in Italy, have enriched our understanding of the letters to Corinth and of the Pauline house churches.¹⁷ Similarly, what archaeology has found *and not found* has corrected and enlarged our understanding of the Old Testament.¹⁸

Reader-response criticism, feminist criticism and postcolonial criticism have also brought sharp challenges to bear on the reading of the Bible. Again, the clock cannot be put back, despite the well-intentioned prayer about the theory

of evolution: 'Lord, may it not be true, or, if it is, at least let it be hushed up.' All three, in different ways, have contributed to, and oblige us to acknowledge, what has been called 'the hermeneutic of suspicion'. Two examples of 'suspicion' must suffice. The elderly woman who had been a slave warned her grandson to be wary in reading the letters of St Paul. She clearly had in mind the injunction, 'Slaves, give entire obedience to your earthly masters ...' (Colossians 3:22, REB translation; cf. Ephesians 6:5). Two female readers of 'Wives, be subject to your husbands ...' (Colossians 3:18; cf. Ephesians 5:22) found it impossible to say at the end of the (public) reading, 'This is the word of the Lord.'

So how can a person engage in a spiritual reading of the Bible if she or he is suspicious of it? First, we should acknowledge that it was necessary and right that biblical scholars, over the last three centuries or so, established a measure of autonomy over against the Church. They didn't have to believe, for example, that Matthew's Gospel was the first to be written, even though the Church for centuries had believed that. No Church can *tout simple* dictate the meaning of a biblical text, if that meaning flies in the face of unambiguous or well-nigh certain historical and literary evidence to the contrary. That is a vital gain.

But it cannot be the whole story. What is biblical scholarship to do with its new-found autonomy and freedom? And how are Christians to respond – especially in their understanding and reading of Scripture? I suggest that many contemporary Christians – Catholic and Protestant alike – may have a great deal to work through in the process of practising *lectio divina*.

Baptising biblical scholarship into Christ: towards a 'second naivety'¹⁹

Enzo Bianchi helpfully sets the scene for us here:

The process *lectio divina* sets in motion is a very human one: by listening we come to know, and by knowing we come to love. We begin by making the effort of 'leaving ourselves' in order to bridge the chronological and cultural distance that separates us from the text: this allows us to accept the text in its otherness, as we would in any relationship with an other.²⁰

'Accepting the text in its otherness' is one vital way in which biblical scholarship can help us in reading the Bible spiritually. As many have noted over the years,

quoting L. P. Hartley's novel, 'the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'. There is a vital interpretative issue at stake here. The more familiar we are with a biblical text, the more likely we are to misconstrue or distort the meaning. We assume its meaning, or we accept what we have been told about its meaning – and yet both interpretations may be wrong. Or we find the text difficult or obscure, and, again, in our puzzlement, we easily mistake its meaning.

Biblical scholarship – I am speaking generally, here – often makes the biblical text stranger still *before* it brings illumination. So, as Bianchi says, we have to 'leave ourselves' in order to bridge 'the chronological and cultural distance' between us and the text. The analogy of a conversation for this process is a good one: we seek to engage in an honest – even 'no-holds-barred' – conversation with the Bible, and that often means putting questions to the text, and trying to hear the questions which the text puts to us. And all this we do with the Spirit's help so that through that engaged, honest, prayerful conversation we may encounter the living Christ.

The twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur offers two valuable ideas to help us in this process. First, he speaks of a 'double hermeneutic', of critical 'suspicion' and then, equally crucial, a post-critical 'retrieval'.²¹ In his own words, 'Hermeneutics seem to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.' Ricoeur concludes: 'The idols must die – so that symbols may live.'²²

The resonances here with the Christian ascetical tradition and the way of 'unknowing' are unmistakable. 'Suspicion' may seem an unduly negative word. Yet if we are serious about Christian apologetics – that is, beginning where people are – we are bound to help people outside and inside the Church who are suspicious about the Bible to engage prayerfully with it. This is where Ricoeur's 'double hermeneutic' becomes important; we work through the doubts, questions and suspicion to what he elsewhere calls 'a second naivety' – a concept that has a biblical foundation: 'Truly I tell you, unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 18:3, REB translation).

The spiritual odyssey envisaged here for some will be a journey from a hermeneutic of suspicion; for everyone it will be a journey to a hermeneutic of love, and that is the context for some brief concluding remarks.

Conclusion

The practice of *lectio divina* has occupied a central place in Christian tradition, and no doubt will do so as long as there is a Church 'militant on earth'. Terminology may vary, but shared essentials are unmistakable: prayerful, engaged attention to Scripture in the presence of the Lord with the enabling light of the Spirit.

There is an urgent need to recover and encourage the practice of *lectio divina* in the churches. As this paper was being completed, a local Methodist friend drew my attention to *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, by an American Catholic. It notes the contemporary need to rediscover not only the practice of *lectio divina* but also of contemplation. Contemplation may be 'a strange land', but it will make us 'not less concerned for the world we live in, but more'. The author concludes her discussion with the intriguing, perhaps prophetic, words of Karl Rahner: 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he (*sic*) will not be a Christian at all.'²³

This is an ecumenical path. An English Puritan once observed: 'Tell me what you see in your Bible, and I will tell you what kind of person you are.' His words can be adapted: 'Share with me what you have found in Scripture, that I may understand how your tradition has shaped and enriched your understanding of it.' There will be times, no doubt, when we have to say to Christians of other traditions: 'I find it hard to see what you see in this passage.' That need not surprise or disturb us – we are still brothers and sisters in Christ. A hermeneutic of love, after all, embraces not just the text, but those with whom we read it.

To end where I began: the Scriptures are given that they might be *ōphelimos* – useful to the Church, forming us in the likeness of Christ. The practice of *lectio divina* leads us in two directions at once: the way of contemplation and the way of mission – a suffering apostolate. The two ways are not contradictory, but one and the same. In our contemplation we wait in silence in the presence of the crucified and risen Christ; in mission we encounter that same Christ at the heart of a suffering world.

Notes

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book. The Art of Spiritual Reading*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006, p. xi.
2. That is, reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

3. Enzo Bianchi, *Words of Spirituality. Towards a Lexicon of the Inner Life*, London: SPCK, 2002, p. 45.
4. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, London: Epworth Press, 1976, p. 794.
5. Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture: What the Early Church Can Teach Us*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014, p. 17.
6. Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*.
7. *The Message of the Wesleys: A Reader of Instruction and Devotion*, compiled by Philip S. Watson, London: Epworth Press, 1964, p. 162.
8. *The Message of the Wesleys*, p. 162.
9. *The Message of the Wesleys*, p. 162.
10. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, Sermons 1 (1–33), ed. Albert Outler, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984, p. 387.
11. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, London: Epworth Press, 2007, p. 89.
12. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, London: Epworth Press, 1989, p. 544.
13. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (first published 1728), London: Fontana, 1965, p. 132. For Law's chapter on prayer, see pp.128–144.
14. Gordon Wakefield, *Fire of Love*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976, pp. 20–21.
15. See, for example, A. E. Harvey, *Is Scripture Still Holy? Coming of Age with the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.
16. David Instone-Brewer makes reference to 'the type of *aggadic* "sermon filler" which is likely to be composed. David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*, vol.1, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004, p. 151.
17. See, for example, Anthony C. Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000, p. 617ff., and Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level*, London: SPCK, 2009.
18. For example, my *Who on Earth is God? Making Sense of God in the Bible*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, ch. 2.
19. This section draws on Anthony Thistleton's discussion of Paul Ricoeur in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 531–532.
20. Bianchi, *Words of Spirituality*, p. 45.
21. Thistleton, drawing on Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1965), in Ford (ed.), *Modern Theologians*, p. 531.
22. Ricoeur's conclusion in *Freud and Philosophy*, in Ford (ed.), *Modern Theologians*, p. 532.
23. Thelma Hall RC, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, pp. 49, 53. Peterson is especially helpful on contemplation (*Eat This Book*, pp. 109–117); for example, "contemplative" is a designation that any of us can accept for ourselves and one that we all should ... All contemplatives are failed contemplatives' (pp. 112–113).



The invitation: holiness, Scripture and the practice of Godly Play

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Godly Play is a different way of being with children and introducing them to Scripture and the language of the Christian people. More akin to spiritual guidance than religious education, it assumes an innate spirituality in the child. Based on Montessori principles, the process works through a simple, structured creation of a child-centred 'sacred space'. The session itself, involving sharing a story, wondering, response time and feast together, allows participants the freedom to respond as they will. This article similarly shares a story, wonders about it and then allows the reader to be drawn into the experience of a Godly Play session.

GODLY PLAY • MONTESSORI • JEROME BERRYMAN • SACRED SPACE •
WONDERING • TEACHER BURNOUT • CRYSTAL CASTLE

I was seven years old. The knock came at the back door, as it came most days, and when my mother answered it a voice could be heard, asking the same question it always asked: 'Can Susan and Peter come out to play?' I remember it so well, one memory encapsulating so many. We would scramble for our shoes, my little brother and I, and go joyfully out to join the group of children from neighbouring houses and play. We 'played out' whatever the season, whatever the weather, until it was dark and time for tea. At weekends this play time was sometimes extended to long days out – often with older children leading and safeguarding the group to more adventurous places further afield. Always coming home by dark.

We had no plan. Play simply evolved. Sometimes we just 'hung' around. We had a jennel between the houses, a covered passageway, and rainy days saw us in there just watching. Hot days I remember the smell of melting tarmac on the pavements and on the 'blue hill' as we called it – in adult view just a short, wide walkway up to the main road and church opposite our house. The 'big tree' marked a distance along our play road where we would try riding our bikes or just run to with each other. I cannot now remember what we played at or with but we were not bored. We learned about each other and tried out the world; we felt the sunshine, rain, wind and snow; we lived the seasons and time seemed timeless.

When groups of adults are asked to describe a really happy childhood memory, even perhaps out of an unhappy past – be it a favourite toy or game, a place, a time, a special person – and then to find words that describe how they felt in those times, it brings out words like 'happy, free, full of wonder, timeless, loved, carefree, safe ...'. With each shared memory and these words we are transported back out of adulthood, to remember what it was like to be a child and to play. Might this be spirituality – that hard-to-capture, indescribable thing? I am going to propose that these words that expressed how we felt and what we were experiencing back then, might also describe 'spirituality' – that 'awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences'¹ both good and bad. If so then children, far from being the empty vessels we might have thought them to be and needing to be filled up with religious knowledge and practice to become spiritual, are in fact *innately* spiritual from the beginning. Might we not have been aware back then of our spirituality and 'God' but just simply lacking the words or knowledge to give meaning to it or even to want or need to?

Jesus said something too about needing to *become* like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven. Does this mean that perhaps we were in touch with our

spirituality then in a way that has been lost, or just crushed a little, in the growing up and cares of adulthood? Can children actually bring *us* something – do we need to learn how to play again? More importantly, if children are innately spiritual we need to consider what they really need from adults; what will nurture and not crush this ‘knowing’ of God; what will give them the language and tools they need to give meaning to it and help it to grow and deepen?

So I come to the essence of this article, something called ‘Godly Play’, which you may or may not already be familiar with, but where for me a true understanding of holiness and Scripture finally began.

Godly Play itself started in 1960, some 56 years ago now when a man, Jerome Berryman, was in his middle year at Princeton Theological Seminary and wondered about the lack of any real training in children’s spirituality. This wondering began for him a journey that led him to study in Europe the methods of the great educationalist Maria Montessori and to spend time with Sofia Cavalletti and her ‘Catechesis of the Good Shepherd’. Over the subsequent 20 or so years he and his wife began to explore what children really *needed*. They developed a different way of being with children, more spiritual guides than teachers, with mutual blessing – and a different way of sharing Scripture that helped children become familiar with the language of the Christian people, people of God. The Montessori training influenced the visual storytelling, the natural materials used for the story pieces, the open wondering and the free response time.

Its resultant name ‘Godly Play’ gives a clue to perhaps its most important element – play. Play and story are the main ways children learn. Perhaps it might be useful then to pause and consider what we mean by *play*. For most of us it immediately signals something for younger children – something we could still enjoy but which for adults has been labelled as ‘time wasting’ and therefore only to be indulged in with guilt. Yet Stuart Brown in his book about play states that his research has found that

remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being. The ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person.²

Play, then, is proposed as not *just* being about learning but is also essential for all ages.

I am talking here of course about the play we knew as children, and it has certain distinguishing characteristics. Free play cannot be forced – you can only invite people to play and allow them to come willingly or not. It has no predetermined aim or purpose. It is done just for the sheer pleasure of doing it – like skimming stones across a pond. Such play can go in any direction; it is fun and enjoyable and may even be subversive! Jerome Berryman once said that a Godly Play room should be full of laughter. It can be creative and in being so may lead to problem-solving. It allows you to ‘try on’ other roles and explore them. It is the same for both adults and children – it may just take different forms and directions. So we come back to Godly Play – developed with children but actually for all ages and run in exactly the same way whatever the group of people gathered together. There may be some adjustments needed to cater for those of greater age or limited abilities or dementia – but the time together holds the same essential elements and play is at the centre of it.

The *Godly* part? At its simplest it is an invitation – an invitation from God. ‘Do you want to come and play and spend time with me and see where it leads? Come – just as you are.’

I have been accepting this invitation and sharing with children and adults in many different situations these last ten years – taking off my shoes instead of putting them on, but going increasingly as joyfully in to play as I did once go joyfully out. Before this I was like the prodigal son who has been welcomed home and forgiven but still hangs around down the road unable to believe it is really true. No matter how much I longed to go in and enjoy the party I just never could. I still felt I needed to earn my place by working in the fields. I didn’t really *know* the Father. Thankfully he knew me and ten years ago he called me in from the fields and began to show me just how very much he really loved me.

Our children were grown, I was teaching part time in a private school and we were in an era in our church of very few children and even fewer adults willing to teach them. I remember praying for direction. I loved teaching but not the paraphernalia that went with it, whether as a lecturer or with primary children. I had done both! I loved children but we Sunday school leaders were burned out and despite great programme materials our enthusiasm was gone. Even our own four children left church as soon as they were allowed to choose at age 14 and, apart from links in the youth group, they have never been back. I

was very, very low. Then someone told me about Godly Play. Even as they briefly described it I was tingling, sensing something special. Understanding only the minimal basics, I rushed to try it with a group of Year 4 girls in their Religious Education lesson. They intuitively responded to it and did not even want to leave when the dinner bell went – something previously unheard of, particularly in RE! Thus my own journey with this Godly Play began. It has led me to where I am now as a trainer with Godly Play UK, working in a different way with children in schools and training teachers in how we might best nurture children's spirituality. I have a fully equipped Montessori Godly Play room, created out of a broken-down outside wooden classroom behind our church. Children come there, and adults come too.

In the beginning I thought I was embarking upon something new for the children but I had no idea how very much it was also meant for me. I can only describe the journey I now find myself on as like walking inside Dr Who's Tardis – the further you walk in, the bigger and better and more awe-inspiring it gets, and I am more and more silenced by it. St Teresa of Avila described it much more profoundly than I ever could in her book *The Interior Castle*. She wrote (and I quote Jerome Berryman's story script) that 'coming closer to God is like entering a huge castle made out of very clear crystal in which there are many rooms. Each room has an inner door, which opens to the next room, until you come to the centre of the castle. It is so light there that all you can see is God.'³

But what is Godly Play? It might be helpful at this point to try to describe what a Godly Play session might be like if you visited this room yourself, particularly if you have never heard of it before. Our outside room is set beside a wood and behind our village church. You enter via a little porch tacked on to it and a 'doorkeeper' is waiting there to greet you and welcome you warmly. You are invited to take off your shoes if you would like to and given the chance to get ready to go in – to children I describe it as 'finding the quiet place inside yourselves'. It's a letting go of all that is running around in your mind, a readying to be open to this time that is just for you. When you are asked if you are ready to go in it's a true invitation – you may not feel ready. You may want to sit inside the door and see first. Children seem to understand quite intuitively what you mean. One nine-year-old boy at a school I visited, where no one had experienced Godly Play before, refused to come and join in our circle despite the best efforts of his exasperated teacher at the door. When I asked him what was wrong for him, he explained that he still felt 'jumpy' inside and wasn't ready. He sat quietly by the doorkeeper for a while then later came and joined us in the circle. He had known exactly what getting ready meant.

As you enter the room you see a circle of cushions on the floor ahead of you, or small chairs if you prefer, and a 'storyteller' – sitting ready to welcome you and help you find the place most comfortable for you. There are shelves all around the room to waist height, with a lower focal shelf directly behind the storyteller. They are full of stories in open baskets, although some are intriguingly in gold closed boxes on a shelf of their own. All the materials in the room are made of wood and natural products, beautiful to touch and handle. The space feels warm and inviting. It evokes messages of care, order, accessibility, mystery ... holiness?

It soon becomes apparent looking at the focal shelf that this is a Christ-centred room. In the middle of this shelf is *The Holy Family* story, seemingly a Nativity group but with an additional simple wooden figure with outstretched arms representing the risen Jesus, and a Christ child with open arms in the manger. To the left of this group is a white circle of felt with a candle on it, Jesus the Light of the World, and to the right a green circle with sheep in a fold and a figure of a shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders, Jesus the Good Shepherd. To the left of the focal shelves are the Christmas shelves; to the right are the Easter shelves.

Around the rest of the room the tops of the shelves carry the big stories about the People of God in a very loose timeline: beginning on your left from *Creation*, through *The Flood and the Ark*, the beginnings of *The Great Family*, *The Exodus*, *The Ten Best Ways*, *The Ark and the Tent*, *The Ark and the Temple*, and finishing with *The Exile and Return*, just before the Christmas shelves and the Advent materials. On the Easter shelves, *The Faces of Easter* tells the story through the weeks of Lent of Jesus' journey from his birth to his death and resurrection. Beyond, on your right, comes *Jesus and the Twelve*, then through others to *The Mystery of Pentecost* and *Paul's Discovery*. There are twelve *Saints* stories and then finally those six gold boxes containing *The Parables*. On lower shelves are more baskets of stories telling of individual lives that fit into the 'big picture' ones: liturgical action stories, extension materials, and books.

Across the back of the room are shelves filled with as many art, craft and construction materials as can be accommodated, with trays, boards and mats to put them on – all in open pots and containers and inviting use. There is not a broken felt pen or piece of old crayon in sight. Finally come the shelves containing cleaning implements to help clear up at the end of a session.

I have described all this to give a feel of how Scripture is presented in this place. It is there laid out around you whenever you visit. You can only briefly take it in

at first but you will be told that everything in the room is for you to touch and work with whenever you need to. Not everyone will have such a room, and Godly Play at its very simplest needs only a story, a storyteller, a warm welcome and a circle of people to happen, with perhaps some simple response materials. A sacred space has come into being. However, as story materials are built up they take their same places around the circle so they can always be found in the same places to work with. Sitting there, surrounded each time by these well-known stories, hearing them told and learning the language that links them all together, the whole great plan of love and redemption flows as one coherent picture that can be understood by the very youngest and simplest and oldest alike. The Greatest Story is laid out in a way that all can see and access.

After building the circle a little more, perhaps with name sharing, the storyteller collects a story from the shelves, inviting everyone to watch where it comes from in case you need it later. The story is then told on the floor, a visual presentation and in the oral tradition, a mutual entering in and a sharing of this story together. At the end the storyteller sits back and a time of wondering together about it begins. There are wondering questions, but there is no coercion, no eye contact invitation to speak, and silence does not have to be filled. All contributions are equally valued and reflected back, even the awkward ones! There are no right or wrong answers, simply an open invitation. There is space and time – time to be, time to be you. It is here, surrounded by the whole, hearing a part, and in the time and space given, that spiritual nurture happens and God can speak. There is no ‘teaching point’ to distract from what has spoken to you and no teacher to tell you what to think. Wondering can be quiet and reflective, even silent at times, but it can equally become more noisy, fun and even argumentative as different thoughts are shared. It can go in any direction – but then it is play.

Once the story has been packed away and returned to its place it is explained that there is now a time just for you to use however you need to. You can sit and reflect, read, write, take down a story and work with it (there is an enticing desert bag of sand for some of the stories) or choose a tray and fill it with creative things – no one is going to come and watch you and there is no show and tell at the end. Each of you is asked in turn if you know what you want to do but with no pressure and the doorkeeper is there to help. The storyteller stays in the circle and response begins. This work is more about process than product and if work is brought by children to show, the responses to it are interested open ones. They soon realise that this is a place where they can truly enter into play – and themselves.

Time calls a gentle halt, you can store your work for another time if you are coming back, and everyone puts back what has been taken out and clears away his or her own things.

The session ends in the circle again with the sharing of a simple 'feast' together. The doorkeeper directs as napkins, pieces of fruit or a biscuit and a simple drink are served to one another. The Christ candle might be brought to the circle and lit and the invitation is given for anyone to pray. It may be simple thanks or it may turn into a prayer time. Then the feast is shared and it is a time of news sharing and talking together about anything that we want to. The time ends with a blessing and thank you for coming. You leave, put on your shoes and go out into the world again.

I don't burn out in this place. I don't teach the children or try to make them spiritual – we learn from each other and the only Teacher in the room. This space, wherever it is or whatever group I share it with, has become my crystal castle, and I am going through the rooms towards that centre where there is only the light. Some of the children I have on Sundays have been with me from the beginning and are just turning into teenagers, and they keep coming; some older ones stayed on to help as they became adults, so I guess it is the same for them. We are led deeper and deeper in as we 'waste time' with God, and Scripture has become the language and the song that gives the meaning to it all.

One of the holiest times I have ever experienced was recently in that room with just three children aged five, seven and nine. The youngest, Poppy, had never been there before. It grew from our lying around wondering about *The Good Shepherd* parable. It ended with nearly every story in the room having been brought into the middle to create a picture of heaven that we will none of us ever forget. It suddenly made sense that this is what all these stories were really about. Poppy was then seen to be setting out a group of the little wooden figures of the People of God. She said they were all on a journey to this beautiful place. None of us wanted to leave and we couldn't put it away. I guess we all lost some of our fears about death that day and gained a vision of the kingdom – it felt a very holy place and we all hugged each other as we left. I can still feel moved to tears at the memory of it.

Godly Play is at its simplest an invitation but it isn't a new one. The same invitation is there for all in Revelation: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock' (Revelation 3:20, AV).

Notes

1. Rebecca Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, London: Church House Publishing, 2009. One of three proposed definitions of children's spirituality.
2. Stuart Brown, *Play*, New York: Avery, 2009, Chapter One, 'The Promise of Play'.
3. Jerome W. Berryman, 2008, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Volume 7*, Denver, CO: Morehouse Education Resources, 2008. From the story script for Teresa of Avila saint's story.

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What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? Scriptural Christianity: the mind of Christ

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Wesley's sermon on 'Scriptural Christianity' was preached before the University of Oxford in 1744, and received a hostile reception. Scriptural Christianity (or scriptural holiness) means having 'the mind of Christ'. Wesley outlines the change effected in the individual by the gospel, the necessity for mission, and the future establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. In a final section he attacks his hearers – both College Fellows and undergraduates – for their failure to live holy lives. The sermon is valuable today for its affirmation of the biblical holiness which is centred, not on the righteousness of the individual, but on love for God and for one's neighbour.

SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS • THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT • THE MIND OF CHRIST • SOCIAL CHRISTIANITY • THE HOLY CLUB • MISSION • FELLOWSHIP • SOCIAL JUSTICE • THE KINGDOM OF GOD • PHARISEES

John Wesley preached his sermon on 'Scriptural Christianity' before the University of Oxford at St Mary's Church on 24 August 1744. Today it seems strange that such an event should take place in August, for occasions such as this are now confined to University terms, but in those days, sermons before the University apparently continued throughout the year. In that year, 24 August fell on a Friday, and was St Bartholomew's Day. Wesley himself remarked that it was appropriate that the event had occurred on that day, since on St Bartholomew's Day 1662, 'near two thousand burning and shining lights were put out at one stroke'.¹ He is referring to the expulsion of two thousand clergymen – including Wesley's own grandfather, John Wesley – from their livings for refusing to take the oath required by the Act of Uniformity. Wesley clearly saw a parallel between what happened to his predecessors and the reaction to his own sermon, commenting however that whereas they had lost everything, he was simply 'hindered from preaching' – a mere inconvenience.

Among those present in St Mary's on this occasion were the Vice-Chancellor, the heads of houses, professors, fellows of the colleges, and undergraduates. The church was packed – the numbers attending increased, so Charles Wesley tells us, by the fact that it was race week! Charles commented that he had never seen a more attentive congregation.² After the sermon, the Vice-Chancellor sent for John's notes, which suggested interest, but subsequent events showed that this was not accompanied by approval of what had been said.

The theme of 'Scriptural Christianity' was dear to Wesley's heart. For him, 'scriptural Christianity' was 'authentic Christianity'. Methodism, as he explained elsewhere, had been raised 'to spread scriptural *holiness* over the land'.³ It was a definition that was to make its way into the Deed of Union. 'Scriptural holiness' is fundamental to what it means to be a Methodist – and 'scriptural Christianity' is, in effect, the same thing.

As this sermon demonstrates, Wesley's approach to preaching is certainly scriptural, since he makes constant appeal to Scripture, not using it in a fundamentalist or literalist fashion, but anchoring his argument there. He begins from a text – 'And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost' (Acts 4:31) – and remarks first on the parallel with the account of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–6), but points out that in Acts 4 there is no reference to outward manifestations of the Spirit such as are found in chapter 2; nor is there any reference to 'extraordinary gifts', such as those mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 (*Intro. 1–2*).⁴ These gifts are rare, he argues, and are not given to all Christians (*Intro. 3*). What *were* given were the 'ordinary' fruits of the Spirit, such as those listed in Galatians 5: love,

joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness. The effect of these gifts was to give those who received them 'the mind which was in Christ' (*Intro. 4–5*). Here Wesley sums up his understanding of 'scriptural Christianity': it is quite simply to have 'the mind of Christ'. Christianity, he insists, is not a 'set of opinions' or a 'system of doctrines', but something that is seen in believers' 'hearts and minds'.

Wesley sets out to consider this 'scriptural Christianity' under three headings. In Part 1, he considers it 'as beginning to exist in individuals'. Today, New Testament scholars may well wonder whether he was right to begin here! Jesus' mission was to his nation, Israel. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, understood his mission to be to bring all nations to God, incorporating them into God's holy people. For both, the focus was on the community, rather than on individuals. In practical terms, however, appeals must be made to individuals, and it is individuals who either respond or fail to do so. Although Jesus believed himself to be sent to Israel, it was individuals whom he summoned to follow him, and the core of the new community which was born at Pentecost consisted of his first disciples – both men and women: Christianity was social from the very beginning. The apostle Paul thinks in global terms, insisting that Christ's death and resurrection affect all humankind, but his arguments are persuasive precisely because they are personal, as in Galatians 2:20, which Wesley quotes here: 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave up himself for me' (*I.1*). In later centuries, with Israel's failure (as Christians saw it) to respond, and with the spread of Christianity, the focus inevitably shifted more and more to the individual, with the result that later spirituality focused on one's own salvation.

This, of course, was precisely the mistake that the Wesley brothers had made in their early lives when, as members of the 'Holy Club', they had devoted themselves to personal piety, in hope of finding personal salvation. Now their passion was to save others. Yet in view of his own experience of the warmed heart, it is hardly surprising that Wesley should begin in this sermon with the individual's experience of the Spirit, and the love of God 'shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost' (Romans 5:5) (*I.1–4*). This, however, leads immediately to the conclusion that those who experience the love of God must not only love God in return, but love their brothers and sisters also: since God's Son died for all (as Charles emphasises so often in his hymns), we must love all (*I.5*). Religion may *begin* in an individual experience, but must not remain there: as Wesley puts it elsewhere, there is no such thing as solitary religion. Wesley then spells out what is involved in love for others: they must not be puffed up; they

must do no harm to others, must join in common worship, and do good to others – feeding the poor and clothing the naked; they must share their possessions (*l.6–9*). Once again, we are reminded of the ‘Holy Club’, but now these activities are grounded solely in love for God and for others. In those early days of the Church, concludes Wesley, ‘the love of Him in whom they had believed constrain[ed] them to love one another’ (*l.10*). He is well aware that Christianity is a social religion. His decision to begin with the experience of individuals is in no sense inconsistent, therefore, with his conviction that the world was his parish.

And it is the theme of ‘mission’ to which Wesley turns in Part 2 of the sermon. The first disciples were called to give light to the world and to act as salt (*ll.1*). As ‘lovers of mankind’, they felt bound to preach the gospel to all, and restore the sheep that had gone astray to their shepherd (*ll.2*). Here, as elsewhere, Wesley’s language is full of biblical allusions. But the substance, too, is biblical: these early Christians warned others of divine wrath (*ll.3*), and promised them forgiveness, while believers were urged to pursue holiness (*ll.4*). The result was that God was glorified, while outsiders were offended (*ll.5*); inevitably, this led to persecution (*ll.6–9*).

In Part 3, Wesley turns to the ultimate goal – a Christian world. He affirms that God will finally reign and the kingdom of God be established on earth. In many ways, this is perhaps the most difficult section. Today we echo the ancient cry: when, Lord, when? Yet we do not expect an early end to history or a restoration of paradise. Nevertheless, the conviction that God has a purpose for creation is central to biblical teaching, from Genesis to Revelation. Once again, Wesley’s theme is scriptural.

So far, Wesley presents us with a conventional sermon – a text, followed by three points. Perhaps he should have ended there! One member of the congregation – Benjamin Kennicott, an eminent Hebraist – commented that ‘Under three heads he expressed himself like a very good scholar, but a rigid zealot; and then he came to what he called his plain, practical conclusion. Here was what he had been preparing for all along.’⁵

It was this plain, practical conclusion that led the Vice-Chancellor to ask for a copy of the sermon – not because he wished to learn from it and apply its conclusions to his life, but rather to confirm his worst suspicions about its content. The result was that Wesley was never again invited to preach at St Mary’s.

According to the note on the first page of the sermon, it had not been Wesley's intention to publish 'the latter part of the . . . sermon: but the false and scurrilous accounts of it which have been published, almost in every corner of the nation, constrain[ed him] to publish the whole, just as it was preached'. I find this note intriguing: did Wesley in fact regard his 'three points' complete in themselves, without this last section? Yet he says that the present format was how it was preached, and this final part seems to belong to the rest, for it is here that he applies his message to a particular congregation. Here, like John the Baptist addressing the Pharisees as 'a brood of vipers', he puts the boot in.

So what were the scurrilous accounts, to which he refers? Benjamin Kennicott said he liked some of this section: he approved, for example, of Wesley describing undergraduates as 'a generation of triflers'.⁶ What don would not? But he found Wesley's conclusion presumptuous and far too censorious. William Blackstone, a lawyer, and later a famous judge, wrote as follows:

We were last Friday entertained at St. Mary's by a curious sermon from Wesley the Methodist. Among other equally modest particulars he informed us; first, That there was not one Christian among all the Heads of Houses; secondly, that pride, gluttony, avarice, luxury, sensuality, and drunkenness were the general characteristicks of all Fellows of Colleges, who were useless to a proverbial uselessness. Lastly, that the younger part of the University were a generation of triflers, all of them perjured, and not one of them of any religion at all. His notes were demanded by the Vice-Chancellor, but on mature deliberation it has been thought proper to punish him by a mortifying neglect.⁷

Wesley's own words were certainly condemnatory. There were, he said, no Christian countries, no Christian cities. Addressing in particular all those entrusted with authority, he demanded, 'Is this city a Christian city? Is Christianity, *scriptural* Christianity, found here?' Again he reminds them what this means: 'Are we "holy as He who hath called us is holy in all manner of conversation"?' This is what he means by scriptural holiness – being like God (IV.1–4). After applying his questions particularly to the city dignitaries and magistrates in his congregation (IV.5), he turns to the dons – to the 'venerable men who are more especially called to form the tender minds of youth', demanding to know what kind of example they set their pupils, and whether they abound in the fruits of the Spirit. His answer would appear to be 'No', since

he goes on to accuse them of 'pride and haughtiness ... impatience and peevishness, sloth and indolence, gluttony and sensuality' (IV.6–7). Applying his questioning particularly to those (including himself) who are 'called to minister in holy things', he asks, 'Do we know God? Do we know Jesus Christ? Hath God "revealed his Son in us"?' The questions appear to expect the answer 'No' (IV.8). As for 'the youth of this place', they are 'stubborn, self-willed, heady and high-minded', wasting their time and neglecting their studies (IV.9–10). The situation seems hopeless, and the sermon ends with a plea to God to save his people (IV.11).

Is this sermon relevant today?

Commentators suggest that Wesley would perhaps have been wiser had he omitted the last section and concentrated on the first three points – though the sermon would certainly not have received so much attention. Moreover, it is in this last section that Wesley does what all preachers should do: he shows the relevance of his comments for his congregation. We may well feel some sympathy for his hearers, and think that he was going too far: are his strictures not those of a somewhat straight-laced preacher who was out of touch with his audience? But Wesley's situation was very different from ours. He was living in a country which called itself Christian, and the same could be said of the city of Oxford and of the University. His sermon followed the pattern of the condemnations pronounced by Old Testament prophets. Whether, as someone who was no longer part of the university system, he had any hope of effecting reform seems doubtful. Today, interestingly, the Christian links are still claimed – tenuously – by our country, by most of our cities, and by our ancient universities – but the vast majority of those who belong to those three entities make no claim to be Christians. Certainly we can be sure that it would not be wise – or appropriate – for preachers today to make similar denunciations of their congregations! Nevertheless, some of the questions Wesley poses may still be relevant.

The purpose of this series on Wesley's sermons is to explore their usefulness for us today. Are they still of value? Do they represent the true characteristics of Methodism? Most of us would probably agree that we are more likely to find Methodism's core values in our emphases on mission, fellowship and social justice than in our codes of discipline and our structures. But all these emphases are based on what Wesley called 'scriptural Christianity', and it is 'scriptural Christianity' which this sermon claims to expound. Does it?

The sermon is certainly scriptural at a superficial level, for it makes constant reference to Scripture. It is not so much an exegesis of Acts 4 – though Wesley returns several times to that passage – as an exposition which appeals to a large number of scriptural texts. But it is scriptural at a more fundamental level, for its basis is one which modern exegetes would recognise as a core theme of both Old and New Testaments – in other words, the biblical notion of ‘holiness’. We have noted already that in the course of his concluding section Wesley defines scriptural holiness as *the call to be like God*: ‘Are we’, he asks, “‘holy as He who hath called us is holy in all manner of conversation”?’ (IV.3). This demand is certainly scriptural; in the Old Testament, we are told that God is holy, and called Israel to be holy. Jesus commanded his followers to be perfect, as God is perfect (Matthew 6:48). Paul describes how Christians are transformed into the image of Christ, reflecting his glory (Romans 8:29).

But what does this holiness mean? In the Old Testament narrative, the call came to Israel, rather than to individuals, and Israel was called to be a holy nation. God had chosen Israel to be his people, saved her from Egypt, and called her to be holy, as he was:

I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy ... For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.⁸

It is significant that what God demands is based on what God has already done – in other words, on ‘prevenient grace’. God has graciously chosen Israel as his special people, and her holiness depends on her relationship with him. She is to be holy as he is holy, to be *like* him. In Leviticus, ‘being holy’ is defined mainly in cultic terms. Israel is separated from other nations by rules about cleanliness. She must therefore keep the food laws and regulations about purity. Being God’s holy people was interpreted by many as a demand to keep apart from other nations – to be different. The signs of this difference or purity were set out in the Law in terms of compliance to certain food laws and regulations regarding cleanliness. For individual members of the nation, it meant obeying the rules. This emphasis inevitably led to introspection, and to concern not only with Israel’s holiness but with one’s own. This understanding has its roots in the priestly tradition in the Old Testament, and was adopted later by the Pharisees, who also saw ‘holiness’ in terms of obedience to food laws and laws of purification, and a rigid adherence to all the commands of the Law.

There was another interpretation, however, normally referred to as the prophetic, which stressed the idea that being holy meant being *like* God. To

speaking of his holiness is to speak, in effect, of what he is, so being holy means living according to the revealed character of God – that is, sharing his character, which was demonstrated in his grace, love, generosity, justice and concern for his creation.

This is why God's demands for his people can be summed up in Deuteronomy in the command to love God,⁹ and in Leviticus in the command to love your neighbour as yourself¹⁰ – commands which Jesus famously brought together.¹¹

The second command is the corollary of the first, for it depends upon it.¹² If you love God, you *must* love your neighbours, and Jesus maintained that 'neighbours' included *Gentiles* as well as Jews.¹³ As the author of 1 John later insisted, you cannot claim to love God if you hate others.¹⁴

Biblical holiness is essentially *social* holiness, involving relationships within the community, as well as with God. Moreover, it involves relationships *outside* the community of Israel, for if holiness is seen in terms of reflecting the character of a loving, gracious and generous God, then his people were called not to treat him as their own possession but to spread knowledge of him to the nations. They have been called to be his witnesses. It was no wonder, then, that it was from this understanding of God's holiness that the conviction of the necessity for mission was born.

Like St Paul, Wesley moved from the Pharisaic interpretation of holiness as 'purity' to the prophetic understanding of it as a reflection of God's character of grace. God called Christians to be 'holy as He who hath called us is holy'. He moved from the Holy Club, with its emphasis on personal piety, and concern with one's own salvation, to an understanding of mission that embraced the whole world, and a longing to bring others to accept the gospel. Following his 'conversion', he comprehends holiness as something outgoing. The signs of holiness are no longer found in prayers, fasts and good works, but in the fruits of the Spirit that *lead* to 'good works'. This was why mission, fellowship and social justice all became marks of Methodism.

Wesley himself insists in this sermon that Christianity is not to be understood as a set of opinions or a system of doctrines, but as something which concerns hearts and lives – namely, the mind which was in Christ. It is this 'having the mind of Christ' that he understands as 'scriptural holiness', and certainly the idea that following Christ means not just following his teaching but becoming *like* him – and so like God – is found throughout the New Testament. The belief

that God called Israel to be his people – and that now, ‘in Christ’, Gentiles are incorporated into that people – means that the idea that we are called to share this holiness pervades the whole Bible. This is certainly scriptural Christianity – *authentic* Christianity. Wesley believed that Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness over the land. Is this still the conviction of those who stand in the Methodist tradition today? Is this still our mission? Do we still believe ourselves to be called to be ‘holy, as God is holy’? If so, then the answer to the question ‘What does this sermon do for us?’ is that it expresses our core beliefs: the people called Methodists are called to spread this idea of scriptural holiness, not just throughout the land but throughout the world.

Notes

1. *A Short History of the Methodists*, 1781.
2. Charles Wesley, *Journal*, 24 August 1744.
3. John Wesley, ‘The Large Minutes, in *Works*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 1829–1831, vol. VIII, p. 299.
4. The italic references in brackets refer to John Wesley’s *Forty-Four Sermons* (London: Epworth Press, 1944), giving section and paragraph numbers.
5. See John Lawson, *Notes on Wesley’s Forty-Four Sermons*, London: Epworth Press, 1946, p. 25.
6. Quoted by Lawson, *Notes*, p. 31, referring to comments recorded by Edward Sugden, in volume I of his edition of Wesley’s sermons.
7. In a letter quoted by Lawson, *Notes*, p. 35, again based on the work of Sugden.
8. Leviticus 11:44. Similarly Leviticus 19:2; 20:26. Cf. Exodus 19:6; 22:31; Deuteronomy 7:6.
9. Deuteronomy 6:5.
10. Leviticus 19:18.
11. Mark 12:28–34.
12. To be sure, Paul quotes the second command, saying that it contains ‘the whole law’, in Galatians 5:14, without making any reference to the first; cf. also Romans 13:9f. Love for God is apparently taken for granted, but it is of course the corollary – love for one’s neighbours – which needs to be spelt out.
13. Luke 10:25–37.
14. 1 John 4:20.



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Using the Bible in Practical Theology: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, Zoë Bennett (London: Routledge, 2014), 160 pp, £19.99 pbk

This is a book written not only for students of practical theology who need to think about how the Bible features as a source of theology in dialogue with other sources like tradition, reason and experience. It is also written for people in churches who are wrestling with how the Bible relates to their everyday lives, aware of their own changing perspectives and sometimes contradictory attitudes.

The author begins from a commitment to the Bible as a source for theology and as a place of encounter with God, but she expresses also a desire for an intellectual honesty about our own interpretive lenses, wanting to move beyond both what she calls the 'tyranny of the text' and the 'tyranny of experience'. Section 1 of the book deals with the sterile polarisations that can emerge when we assume that liberals engage only with their experience and evangelicals only with the Bible as a flat text. She illustrates, instead, the ways in which conservative thinkers, like the 1948 author of *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, B. B. Warfield, claim that only inerrancy can explain their experience, while some feminist theologians like Daphne Hampson justify their experience of the full humanity of women through the Bible.

Section 2 of the book highlights the way in which the Scriptures are held by living people in contingent and contextual ways through an extended dialogue with the work of John Ruskin.

Ruskin (1819–1901) is better known as an art critic and social critic, and for his short-lived unhappy marriage, than as a practical theologian. He was a daily

reader of the Bible, however, and the quantity of references to the Bible in his various works reveal someone who was, at times, inspired by the Bible, and yet who was aware that his interpretation of it was shaped by his changing experiences and perspectives. As such, Bennett argues that Ruskin's relationship with the Bible is suggestive for those of us who would be personal and public theologians today.

Insisting that what matters to Ruskin (and to Christian living) is not so much a system for making connections, as the daily practice of seeing connections, in Section 3 Bennett expounds this approach in three contexts where she sees not reflection *on* action but reflection *in* action: in the Occupy movement that led to the resignation of Giles Fraser from St Paul's Cathedral in 2011; in the Kairos Palestine Document of 2009; and in her own work in leading a doctoral programme within the Cambridge Theological Federation. In each context she argues that the protagonists are seeing connections and living them in ways that are both critically self-aware and passionately engaged.

This is a book that draws on a wealth of hermeneutical sophistication but is oriented to practical ends. What Bennett invites us into is a way of thinking that is 'more fluid and mobile, a more warm and hospitable and ultimately a more fruitful and faithful way of engaging with the Bible together' (p. 51).

Jane Leach

Rethinking Biblical Literacy, ed. Katie Edwards (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 208 pp, £22.99 pbk

Rethinking Biblical Literacy sets out, as Katie Edwards says in her editorial introduction, 'to complicate and problematize the biblical literacy debate so far' (p. x). Indeed, the nine essays in the volume collectively challenge a narrow understanding of biblical literacy (which tends to focus on the decline of Bible reading and Bible knowledge in the West) and suggest many places one might go looking for it: English political discourse (James Crossley, pp. 23–46), *Lost*, the television series (Matthew Collins, pp. 71–94), street art (Amanda Dillon, pp. 95–118), Madonna's pop song, 'Girl Gone Wild' (Alan Hooker, pp. 119–142), *The Simpsons* television series (Robert Myles, pp. 143–164), the novel, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Caroline Blyth, pp. 165–186), or the comedy of Eddie Izzard (Christopher Meredith, pp. 187–212).

The only essay to focus on the more traditional concerns of biblical literacy is the first of the volume, by Máire Byrn, who focuses on biblical literacy in Ireland, raising issues about the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and religious education. Iona Hine's essay, 'The Quest for Biblical Literacy', perhaps more than any other, focuses on the issues surrounding the concept of biblical literacy itself, affirming the need to consider broader understandings of both 'biblical' and 'literacy', as these concept relate to the phrase 'biblical literacy' (pp. 43–67).

As one reads the essays, a basic thesis is implied – an argument with which most, if not all, of the essays appear to agree: the widespread (and widely reported) claim that biblical literacy is in decline is probably mistaken (or misguided) because (1) biblical literacy should account for more than rote Bible knowledge, since (2) cultural appropriations of the Bible (especially in popular media) indicate and depend upon familiarity with biblical motifs or storylines. This line of thinking is presented in the volume's opening paragraph, for example, where the claims of the decline of biblical literacy are juxtaposed with a few examples of the 'renewed attention to the Bible in the media' (p. ix), leading to the claim that 'Popular culture, then, is in a constant state of retelling, reinterpreting and re-appropriating biblical stories, characters and figures, and yet annual reports from Christian organizations repeatedly warn us of a steep

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decline in biblical literacy' (p. ix). What would strengthen the volume is an essay that argues for (or against) this in a more sustained manner, especially querying the extent to which biblical tropes in pop culture map to individual literacies.

In sum, *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* is eminently readable and informative, and will be of interest to anyone who is concerned with the cultural appropriation of the Bible. It raises many important questions, even if it provides few answers. Footnotes (not endnotes) make citations easy to navigate, and a reasonably sized subject-name index offers further accessibility.

Josh Mann

Repentance at Qumran: The Penitential Framework of Religious Experience in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Mark A. Jason (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 208 pp, £38.99 pbk

Mark Jason provides an illuminating study of a theological-liturgical motif integrated within an impressive array of Qumran writings: repentance. After examining the textual evidence for repentance in the scrolls, Jason further attempts to locate the ritual-liturgical act of repentance within the structures of the practical, daily life of the Qumran community. The study, thus, takes a theological-liturgical motif, somewhat peripheral to the predominant contemporary models for understanding Qumran, and prioritises it as the crucial lens for interpreting the community's self-understanding and religious experience: 'The starting point of religious experience at Qumran was a penitential experience' (p. 103).

In dealing with the complexities of the Qumran corpus, across time, as well as provenience, the study prioritises classic 'sectarian documents' believed to have been composed from within the Qumran movement (*Pesharim*, *Rule of the Community*, *Rule of the Congregation*, *Hodayot*, *Damascus Document*, *Some of the Works of the Torah*, *Temple Scroll*). Also treated are additional liturgical compositions that emphasise repentance within the context of worship and religious experience (4Q393, 4Q434–438, 4Q504–506).

A treatment of core sectarian passages of the *Rule of the Community* (8.1–14) and *Some of the Works of the Torah* (C 7–8) reveals the relationship between repentance and the community's sectarian separation from the larger Jewish community. The community's spatial locale in the wilderness literally embodied its penitential 'turning away' from sinful Israel and its corrupt legal practices. While many contemporary movements also emphasised repentance and separation within its historical environment, 'the community's identity as a separate, organized, spatial entity at Qumran ... clearly rendered the Qumran community different from other "separatist groups" of that era' (p. 82).

Within the larger arena of the community's theology, penitence was also related in conceptually sophisticated ways with predeterminism, purification and eschatology. Penitence combined both personal volition and predestination by God (p. 142). The community's penitence was, thus, preordained

and ritually embodied through exclusive water purification rituals (*Rule of the Community* 3.1–9). Through ritual, penitence became a daily way of life, a continual process that defined the community's identity. Moreover, the community envisioned its penitence within an eschatological framework in which it played a distinct role (*Some of the Works of the Torah* C 13–22): their own repentance 'inaugurated the eschatological age' (p. 228) and embodied the latter-day penitence through which God was redeeming the elect of Israel.

Jason's study provides a valuable portrait of the Qumran community as an early Jewish penitence movement. This penitence model may complement/refine more political, sociological or legal approaches to Qumran. In so doing, the study further illuminates varied conceptualities of repentance within early Judaism and the nascent church. The diversity of conceptions within the scrolls themselves will remain an unresolved problem (eg, certain tensions remain between the *Rule*, *Damascus Document* and *Hodayot*), even if Jason's contribution successfully presents a more encompassing synthesis, a holistic portrait of the community's penitential theology and self-understanding.

Casey Elledge

Reading the Poetry of First Isaiah: The Most Perfect Model of Biblical Poetry, J. Blake Couey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 272 pp, £65.00 hbk

This monograph is a substantially revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation, defended at Princeton. Its title should not mislead the reader into thinking that Couey is unaware of those recent developments that have led many scholars to rediscover the value of reading Isaiah as a complex unity. Here, as always, his line is balanced, informed and judicious. He is clearly well aware of the problematic nature of Duhm's analysis of the book, but implies that, whatever the merits of that analysis, its former status as an 'assured result' has contributed to a focus on the poetic excellences of the chapters following Isaiah 40.1 to the detriment of the poetry of Isaiah 1—39. Couey's aim is to redress this neglect. Acknowledging our great debt to Robert Lowth (1710–1787), the father of the academic study of Hebrew poetics, who saw in Isaiah 'the most perfect model of biblical poetry', Couey seeks to show how that judgement is as valid for many poetic sections in 1—39 as it is for the later chapters.

In a short (20 pages) Introduction Couey justifies his methodology; one that, in keeping with a certain scepticism about 'final form' analysis, treats individual poems in relative isolation 'with minimal attention to their arrangement or connections to other parts of the book' (p. 12). However, his approach is not mere formalism; he also asserts the value of allowing accounts of the historical background to inform interpretation. Admitting the subjective, provisional nature of such accounts, he nevertheless endorses the traditional understanding that Judah in the eighth century BC offers the most plausible context for much of Isaiah 1—39. Three roughly equal chapters follow, each devoted to a particular topic: *viz.* the poetic line in first Isaiah, the poetics of structure and movement in the book and, finally, imagery and metaphor. Each chapter ends with a reading of an extended passage, readings that open up the meaning of the chosen text in fruitful and illuminating ways. He concludes with a very short summary of his main themes and findings with some brief suggestions for further enquiry.

Couey's style is clear. He explains technical terms accurately and simply, drawing extensively on the text of Isaiah to illustrate the points he is making.

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His preference for the vocabulary of the literary rather than the biblical critics (eg, 'line, couplet and triplet' rather than 'colon, bicolon and tricolon') makes for clarity and accessibility. However, this is also a book of great value for specialists who will find judicious and nuanced discussions of some of the most contentious points in the field, for instance the question of synonymy and progression in biblical 'parallelism' (pp. 71–91).

Hebrew is represented throughout by transliteration; I suppose to make the book more accessible. It would have been helpful to have had the Masoretic text complete with *te'amim* ('cantillation marks') as well. This, however, is a quibble. Couey has made a splendid contribution not just to the study of Isaiah but to the discussion of Hebrew poetry in general.

Peter Hatton

Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence, Jonathan Sacks
(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015), 305 pp, £20.00 hbk

What if God's big project is to reconcile and bring human beings together not divide or separate them? This is the question held up by Jonathan Sacks in his timely and prophetic book on confronting religious and politicised religious violence. The book concludes with the stirring challenge,

today God is calling us, Jew, Christian and Muslim, to let go of hate and the preaching of hate, and live at last as brothers and sisters, true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honouring God's name by honouring his image, humankind.
(p. 267)

It would be easy to take incidents of violence like the 9/11 attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, or the London (2007), Mumbai (2008), Paris (2015) or Brussels (2016) attacks, or The Troubles in Northern Ireland, or the current conflict in Syria, or the blatant violence of religious bigots of different faiths, and assert like Hitchens¹ that 'religion kills'. There is a need for serious theological examination and reflection on this charge.

Jonathan Sacks' book provides a good, sustained theological examination of the roots of religious violence. Sacks acknowledges that while religion can be hateful, much violence is political not religious. He argues that we have to re-examine the theologies that do lead to violent conflict, and is honest enough to locate 'the problem in Jewish, not just Christian and Islamic theology'.

Sacks' book is structured into three sections. The first section assesses Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the three faiths that are rooted in Abraham, and their 'fraught, often violent relationships'. Here Sacks explores the complexity of issues around identity, tribalism, and the concepts of the scapegoat, mimetic desire and sibling rivalry. He turns to biblical stories of sibling rivalry particularly in Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and Rachel and Leah, for some understanding of religiously motivated hatred and violence. Sacks admits the unexpected surprise of identifying the roots of hatred between Jews, Christians and Muslims in these stories.

The second section is devoted to a reassessment and reinterpretation of these stories of sibling rivalry. Sacks invites another look at the subtext of the stories of sibling rivalry in Genesis and offers an interpretation which shows that God refuses to favour one side and to 'reject' the other side. For example, Ishmael is not vilified. Both Isaac and Ismael stand beside each other and are affirmed as Abraham's 'sons' (Genesis 25:9) at the time of his burial. There is a 'counter-narrative' and 'a story beneath a story' leading to a reconciliation of the brothers. The work of God is to bless people, not curse them. We can see this in the different sibling rivalry stories in Genesis. Here rivalry, anger and revenge among siblings is challenged at the very root. God blesses both 'rivals'. Sibling rivalry is rejected. This is the reply of God to those who commit violence in God's name. For Sacks this has 'astonishing interfaith implications'.

In the third section Sacks considers the universality of justice and the particularity of love in the light of the stories of the Flood, the universal Noachic Covenant, the Tower of Babel (Genesis 6—9), and the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12). These stories affirm that there is human diversity, that identity is plural, and the rejection of the imposition of a single culture on all people. What transcends difference is that all human beings bear the image of God. This unity in God challenges us all to see the image of God in each other, in those who are different from us, the stranger, the outsider. The ethnicity, identity, faith and culture of others is not the same as ours, but they are made in the image of God. He calls us to experience an event from the perspective of the victim and to discover the brother and sister in the stranger, the other. So Sacks can assert that 'those who murder God's image in God's name commit a double sacrilege'. In his view the Bible rejects literal interpretation, sibling rivalry, hatred, the alliance of religion with power, and violence in the name of God. Fundamentalism for him is text without interpretation, and this is an act of violence against tradition. Sacks challenges us to let go of hate and replace swords with words, dialogue and reasoning. Prophets use words, not weapons.

Jonathan Sacks, writing as a Jew, reflects deeply on the hatred of Jews in Hitler and the Holocaust, and in contemporary Jihadists. His book is essential reading for all religious and political leaders and preachers. It offers ample material for interfaith dialogue. His reflections point to resources that religion can offer for the complex ongoing conversations centred on national identity, young people's search for identity and their engagement with extremist political and religious organisations. Religions can indeed be very hateful. Religions also offer the ways of nonviolence and peace shown in scriptures. Religions have a role to play in providing a moral sense and ethical codes, and in seeking the

widest participation in building hospitable as opposed to hostile communities. In our internet world exclusivism is a contradiction. It is possible for everyone to be included, to engage everyone and make sure all of us are included in the discussion.

Inderjit Bhogal

Note

1. C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, London: Atlantic Books, 2007.

