

Taking the Bible seriously but not literally.

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This year we mark the 400th anniversary of the publication of the so-called ‘King James Bible’ (KJB) under the authority of King James I of England in 1611. That particular version of the Bible has had a profound impact on the history of religion in the English-speaking world, as well as playing a powerful role in the shaping of modern English. As a result of its influence on modern English and the subsequent development of English as the *lingua franca* of the modern world, the KJB has enjoyed an influence that its translators could never have imagined. Not only is the Christian religion in a very different place because of the influence of this book, but even the present form of our global society owes a great debt to the KJB.

This is a good moment in time to pause and reflect on our debt to the forty-four scholars who worked in six different teams to prepare this translation, as well as to civil and religious authorities who sponsored the project, and the craftsman printers who brought the complicated project to a successful conclusion. They could never have imagined the migration of English dissenters to North America, nor the subsequent development of Anglophone cultural, economic and political influence around the globe. Four hundred years later we look back over a rich and complex story, and express our gratitude to the mostly nameless heroes whose efforts laid the basis of our modern world.

On reflection we note how much that we now take for granted was once controversial and highly contested. This Bible comes to us from the world before the Enlightenment, while we are very much children of the Enlightenment. In the world from which this version of the Bible derives, people were imprisoned, exiled and even killed by state and church authorities. This book comes from a world where kings exercised absolute authority and parliaments were yet to find their power to limit the prerogatives of the king.

The KJB was essentially a project to control dissent and limit religious diversity within the English-speaking kingdoms of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. At the time it was barely imaginable that significant numbers of Englishmen (sic) would be found beyond the shores of the British Isles. When the KJB project was commissioned at the Hampton Court conference of 1604, the colony at Jamestown, Virginia had not yet been founded. That would happen in 1607 while work on the KJB was underway. The Pilgrim Fathers were not to sail from Plymouth until September 6, 1620; some nine years after the publication of KJB.

I note in passing that my own direct ancestor, Joseph Jenkes, did not arrive in Massachusetts until 1642. Some twelve generations later I stand here as a visitor from an even more distant English society that also been profoundly shaped by the KJB and was equally beyond the imagination of King James and his Privy Council. Joseph was a dissenter who fled England to make a new life for himself in the colonies, and we can be reasonably sure he owned a copy of the KJB. More than three hundred years later, that same version of the Bible would dominate the religious community in which I was born and raised.

Much as we celebrate the heroic achievements of those who struggled for the right to read the Bible in their own language, and to do so free of interference by church or state, we also note those ways in which the Bible has been co-opted as a tool in the religious and social controversies of the modern world. The same Bible that served as an icon of liberty was used to justify slavery, to reinforce the supremacy of men over women, and to validate racism.

Today we find the KJB invoked by ultra-conservatives who wish to deny the humanity and the civil liberties of gay and lesbian persons. Their attachment to the KJB is even more remarkable given the well-known homosexuality of King James himself. We need not delve into those matters now, but it sometimes seems to me that the King James Bible might be better labeled as the ‘Queen James Bible.’

Re-imagining the Bible back then

We tend to look back at the KJB as the beginning of a long period of cultural and religious influence. It is natural and right to do that. However, the production of the KJB was also the conclusion to a process of change in attitudes to the Bible that had been taking place over the previous century as the Protestant Reformation upturned the religious and social order of Europe.

On the eve of All Saints Day in 1517, a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* to the door of All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg, Saxony. That act launched a major transition in the life of the European church. It marked the beginning of a process of reform and renewal of which the KJB was one of the most prominent fruits.

The Reformation especially impacted how the Bible was understood. This is often overlooked but it deserves our attention. The Bible *before* the Reformation was very different to the Bible *after* the Reformation

At that time there was a significant re-imagining of the Bible, so that it came to be imagined (at least in Protestant circles) in the ways in which we so often find it understood today. Roman Catholics never accepted this unilateral re-imagining of the Bible, and it has never been a part of the Christian faith among the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, or the many ancient Eastern churches: Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian, or Mar Thoma Christians. Even the Anglicans were prepared to retain them within the Bible while abstaining from using them as authoritative for doctrine.

This novel re-imagining of the Bible among Protestants in NW Europe involved at least five major changes in the way the Bible was understood.

First, *the contents and the sequence of the Old Testament* were changed, after more than one thousand years of continuous Christian practice, to exclude those books found in the ancient Greek versions of the Bible but not found in the Hebrew versions of the Jewish Tanakh.

Secondly, *the language of the Bible was changed*. We sometimes struggle with issues of inclusive language, but the reformers engaged in a much more profound task as they took the risk (sometimes at the cost of their own lives) of making the Bible available in the vernacular.

Thirdly, *new technologies* impacted on the ways in which the Bible was re-imagined. Now copies of the Bible could be produced in great number and at low cost. Combined with the move to the vernacular, this helped to spread the influence of these new ways of imagining the Bible, including its recently reduced contents without the Apocrypha.

The fourth new development was that *daily reading of the Bible by lay people* became a possibility for the very first time in Christian history, albeit only in Protestant areas of NW Europe. We take this for granted, but without a growing level of literacy in the population, and also the invention of the printing press, this could simply not have happened. No longer the privilege of the religious orders, the Bible could now be owned and read by any person with enough wealth to secure a minimal education.

Of course they were mostly men, and men with power and status. Their reading of the Bible, now conveniently expressed in their own language, tended to reinforce their existing social privilege, and their views of women, children, servants, and hired labor.

Finally, *a new degree of authority was attributed to the Bible*. People who imagined the Bible in this way gave lesser weight to the authority of Popes and Bishops, the rulings of Church Councils, the force of Church Tradition, and even the prerogatives of the king. Heads rolled and thrones tottered as this new way of imagining the Bible took hold on the public.

We tend to note the last development, but not appreciate how radical all five changes were. In a very sense, Bible was re-imagined and re-engineered at the Reformation. This was not simply a recovery of ancient practices, but the development of a whole new set of possibilities for the Bible in the life of the church.

While this brave new way of imagining the Bible was soon challenged by the humanistic cultural revolution of the Enlightenment, it continues to shape the religion of many devout Christians as well as to attract the disdain of a skeptical public. It is, however, an unsustainable way of imagining the Bible and it is time for us to re-imagine the Bible all over again so that it can continue to serve as a sacred text for the churches in the third millennium.

Engaging with the ‘problem’ of the Bible

Since the Reformation—and especially in the last 150 years—grassroots Christian views of the Bible have become increasingly exaggerated and naïve, claiming far too much for the Bible. In this uncritical attachment to the Bible (known as ‘Biblicism’) the Christian Scriptures are defended as uniquely authoritative, inerrant, infallible, historically correct, self-sufficient, internally consistent, self-evident in their meaning, and universal applicable.¹

The cultural revolution of the Enlightenment would soon mean that this high water mark of the Bible’s influence would subside as the Bible became the site for a profound and continuing challenge to the authority of the church. For cultural, historical, political, and social reasons, the nature and authority of the Scriptures were challenged by humanists and defended by religionists.

¹ For a recent critique of Biblicism from an Evangelical perspective see Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos,

The controversy continues to our own time, although the churches mostly act as if the authority of the Bible is beyond question. In formal religious statements it often remains sufficient simply to cite a biblical reference to settle a theological point.

In the contemporary church we can observe both conservative and progressive readings of Scriptures. This is a divide that cuts across traditional Catholic/Protestant, Conservative/Liberal categories, and it exposes a reactionary/progressive dynamic within all expressions of Christianity. As people of faith, do we read Scripture primarily to preserve and protect beliefs, rituals and roles inherited from the past, or to seek new insights and gain fresh wisdom for the challenges of being faithful today? And if both, then what kind of creative balance is achieved, and how is it maintained?

At the heart of critical biblical scholarship—and indeed all scholarship, religious or otherwise—is a critical mindset that challenges traditional ways of thinking, including time-honored ways of using Scripture. The critical method is a sustained existential interrogative: Why? Why that? Why now? Why here? Why not? What if?

One significant danger associated with such a sustained critical perspective is the risk of discarding too much wisdom from the past in the quest for new and improved solutions to current challenges. But that risk does not outweigh the advantages of fresh insights that may arise from a persistent quest for improvement: better analysis, better diagnosis, and better praxis.

While critical religion scholarship has its own philosophical and theological grounds for such a critical (prophetic?) stance towards the tradition, it also acts as part of a broad progressive cultural alliance. Where ascendant religion tends to cling to power and protect its privileges, prophetic religion operates from the margins of respectability and may find common ground with artists, philosophers, scientists, and literary scholars.

Points of confrontation and challenge

We can usefully consider the problem posed by the Bible for theologians and church leaders under three categories: the world behind the text, the world within the text, and the world in front of the text. This metaphor of three biblical ‘worlds’ has been developed by Sandra Schneiders,² and it will allow us to group the major problematic dimensions of the Bible according to their primary location in the historical world behind the text, within the text itself, or within our own acts of interpretation as readers.

From the perspective of the *world behind the biblical text* there have been a considerable number of challenges posed for people of faith by critical biblical scholarship. The central characteristic of these challenges relates to the deconstructive impact of critical attention to questions of historicity, to traditional assumptions about the origins of the biblical writings, and to the increased number of ancient manuscripts now available to scholars.

² Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*.

As a result of our increased knowledge of the ancient past, the historical character of the Bible has been seriously compromised. The relationship between what ‘actually happened’ in the ancient past and how those events are narrated in the biblical texts is far more complex than has often been assumed by previous generations of Bible readers.

At the same time as the historicity of the Bible has been challenged, we have been able to gain a much more accurate understanding of the cultural and social dynamics of the ancient communities who first created and used these texts. We find ourselves knowing more about what life was like ‘back then,’ and yet also being less certain of the historicity of the biblical narratives. In this complex process it is tempting to seek short-term polemical advantage in certain discoveries or models, but perhaps wiser to refrain from doing so.

The need to suspend judgment on the historicity of the biblical narrative already implies a significant reduction of the claims so often made on behalf of the Bible and its contribution to Christian thought and practice. While it seems certain that ‘David’ was a ruler in Jerusalem during the tenth century BCE, it is even more certain that his achievements were nothing like those attributed to him in the Bible, and his vast empire is an exercise in religious imagination. Such historical reservations have significant religious and theological implications for people for whom God’s ‘mighty acts’ in the past are the basis of faith here and now. What if those mighty acts are fictional?

Not only are the events represented in the Bible more often fictional than historical, but the texts themselves have an uncertain pedigree as well as a confused history of copying and transmission. Moses did not write the Pentateuch, and David did not write the Psalms. More seriously, the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate that only Psalms

1–91 were finalized by the second century BCE, and books such as Samuel and Jeremiah existed in both longer and shorter versions just a century or so before the time of Jesus.

Critical investigation of the world behind the biblical texts has established beyond reasonable doubt that the origins of the Bible were very different than Christians like to imagine. While this does not prevent us using the Scriptures in new and creative ways, it does require us to rethink how these sacred texts function in the life of the contemporary church.

As questions around the world behind the text multiplied, some scholars turned their attention to the *world within the biblical text*. Here we seem to be on firmer ground. No longer adrift in a world of historical ambiguity, the reader can simply engage with the texts as they stand. The historical questions can be set aside as we enter the world of the text.

In this hermeneutical move, the focus shifts from defending the historicity of the Bible to appreciating the literary artistry of the authors. But these were human authors, and ancient ones as well. They imagined their texts under the influence of literary and rhetorical conventions that are very different from those of today's readers. These writers were shaped by Homer, and operated on the basis of mimesis and intertextual dynamics whose finer points escape we moderns.

The nagging historical anxiety of the modern West refuses to leave us alone even in the relative sanctuary of the biblical text. Are we reading accounts of actual events or symbolic narratives? And even when the events may have happened (as with the

crucifixion of Jesus), is the narrative more the product of imagination than memory? Is everything just melting away into (mere) story? Does this wonderful narrative have any basis in real events in the lives of actual people? Is Christian faith anything more than a heroic act of imagination?

More confronting still, what of the unacceptable values and immoral practices encoded in the text?³ Even if God did not command the ethnic cleansing of ancient Palestine, the Bible seems to have been written and approved by people who liked to imagine that she did. These sacred texts are increasingly recognized as artifacts created by persons with particular cultural and religious agendas in the ancient world, and the modern reader can find herself an intruder in an unfamiliar landscape when exploring the world of the text.

Then there is the *world in front of the text*, the lived realities of the actual readers here and now. Not only is it clear that it makes a difference *who* is doing the reading, it is also becoming increasingly clear that a text without a reader is a document that has no significance.

The impact of different readers is simple enough to recognize. Not only do different people discover (construct?) different meanings in the same text, but the same persons at different times in their own practice as readers will report finding quite different meanings in the same texts.

³ Note the recent collection of essays around the question of ‘animosity’ in the Bible: John Fitzgerald, Fika J. van Rensburg, and Herrie van Rooy, eds. *Animosity, the Bible, and Us*.

It is for this reason, surely, that a classic text such as the Twenty-Third Psalm can be read at funerals as well as at weddings. The text has not changed, but the readers and their contexts certainly have.

As scholars of communication and literature rethink the relationship between author, text and reader there are clear implications for Scripture, which exists and functions as text at the hands and in the imaginations of readers. We are learning to reimagine what a text is and how it operates. While every text comes with certain assumptions, these operating conditions may not be valid at the time when it is read.

To remain significant, and especially to continue as a site for divine-human encounter, the Bible may need to be read contrary to its literal and historical significance. Only then can it serve as a source of wisdom for readers in contexts beyond the imagination of its authors and previous readers.

This is a necessary corollary for a sacred text in a religious tradition that accords primacy to the freedom of the divine Spirit to speak a prophetic word to the contemporary context of the faithful. However, it destabilizes both the text and the traditional interpretations of its significance. Under what conditions could we ever imagine the Bible to be the unchanging and self-explicating revelation of what the Spirit is saying to the churches?

As contemporary readers of Scripture, we are alert to the impact of unequal distributions of power; within and beyond the community of faith. We are alert to the multivalent significance of the text to readers of particular ethnicity, gender, sexuality and status.

We note the abuse of creation implicit in many biblical texts and much Christian theology, and we acknowledge the power of prior commitments to filter the meanings we discover in Scripture.

As we seek to engage faithfully with the God to whom the Scriptures bear witness, we may also come to appreciate that ‘faith’ is an attitude of vulnerable trust generated and practiced in the here and now. It is not derived from either the actual events that may have happened once upon a time or the literary qualities of the text.

What matters most to me now is not whether Abraham and Sarah trusted YHWH, but whether I am going to spend my allocated span of human existence in an act of trust akin to that of Jesus. What does it mean for me to be a person of faith here and now? How is that shaped and informed by the Bible? How little does the Bible really matter when the time comes for me to choose how to live faithfully right now, right here?

As residents of the global village, we are also inevitably aware of the problem posed by claims to unique truth. My village includes good people who do not share my religious outlook, and in many cases have their own traditional wisdom that seems to serve them well in the task of shaping lives that are holy and true. The village also includes scoundrels and villains, whose dark propensity for evil threatens both the well being of the village and the carefully nuanced optimism of my own decision to live as a person of faith. The mono-cultural assumptions of the Bible seem radically incompatible with the realities of life in the twenty-first century.

Re-imagining the Bible now and for the future

All of this has implications for theologians, for churches, and for everyday people of faith. The first and most far-reaching implication is that the Bible is simply not capable of sustaining all the demands made of it. The more we know about the Bible, the worlds from which it derives, and the dynamics of reading any text in our own time and place, the less the Bible is able to live up to our expectations. For its own sake as much as for ours, the Bible needs a demotion.

In our concern to defend, protect and retain the Bible we may too easily find ourselves engaging in a biblical version of the ‘God of the gaps’ strategy. Rather than seeking to defend the Bible by protecting it from critical attention, we may be best to liberate the Bible from the unfortunate and unsustainable expectations of the religious. Neither the Bible nor God is well served by any tactics that seek to protect the Bible from scrutiny.

We must, therefore, resist any temptation to treat our sacred texts differently than the way we treat other people’s sacred texts. Legend and self-serving fiction are to be found in the Bible just as surely as they are in the sacred traditions of other communities. Ancient texts, and indeed all written texts, are ambiguous preparations for an act of communication that will necessarily be driven and controlled by the reader (rather than the author). This dynamic needs to be embraced, not ignored. It cannot be obscured by an appeal to divine inspiration.

There is a kind of *kenotic* (self-limiting) principle that applies to the Bible as much as to Jesus. If God chooses to communicate with humanity through written documents, then that communication is necessarily constrained by the implicit dynamics

of the process. The human origins of the texts, and the vulnerable circumstances of the Bible's preservation and transmission, will necessarily need to be taken into account. So will the complex processes of reading and interpretation through which a reader creates meaning. Even an inspired book requires a very human reader in order to have any meaning.

When it comes to the question of historicity—that 'Holy Grail' to which western culture has mortgaged so much of our concept of truth—we shall need to accept and work within the methodological constraints of ancient historiography. As ancient oriental literature, the Bible comes from times and places that are profoundly foreign to us, and will forever remain strange; even when we delude ourselves into imagining that we are comprehending and practicing biblical values.

The biblical narratives may well preserve memories of ancient events and relationships, but their primary character is to proclaim the worldview (the faith and the practices) of ancient Jewish and Christian communities, not to address our misplaced obsession with history. They are sacred texts for us because of their religious value, not their historical worth.

Although we feel the loss that necessarily follows from such a decision, we shall need to embrace a methodological bias towards skepticism in our reading of our own sacred texts. Minimalist historical claims will be matched with modest theological claims, in part as reparations for the past excesses of theological triumphalism. Better to take our place lower down the table and be called up higher, than to overreach ourselves and be shamed into a public confession of religious hubris.

The value of our religious traditions will not be their assumed superiority over the traditions of other religious communities. Nor will we make the mistake of thinking that the validity of our tradition is derived from either its historicity or the capacity of earlier generations to express themselves in ways that we moderns find cogent or convincing. Rather, the value of our tradition—and ultimately of the Bible itself—will be generated by the capacity of Christianity to facilitate human transformation and ecological justice; taking us beyond ourselves for the sake of the larger web of life at whose center we find God.

The God celebrated and proclaimed by this kind of Christianity will draw us beyond the Christian Scriptures, but we shall never leave them behind. They will not need to be defended from criticism, but neither will they be invoked as a simple recipe for a successful life in the present time. Theologians, churches and everyday believers will find ourselves drawn into fresh explorations of truth in a quest for holy wisdom.

Such a process will be challenging, and even confronting, for the churches. Not only will we need to learn how to read the Bible differently, we shall need to rewrite so much of our creeds and liturgies.

Instead of rehearsing the mighty acts of God in times past, we shall focus on discerning the wisdom of God for the present times. Canonical boundaries will not vanish, but their significance may once again decrease as the function of Scripture changes from enforcing the boundaries of acceptability to enlarging the boundaries of our spiritual imagination.

Such re-imagining of the Bible is hard work, and we see something of the pain of that struggle in the tone of complaints protesting this or that development as having gone

too far from traditional forms of orthodoxy. The pain is inescapable, but so is the duty to re-imagine the Bible in fresh and credible ways; in other words, taking the Bible seriously, but not literally.

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