

Spring 2008

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

BETWEEN BABEL AND BEATITUDE:
THE BIBLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY



ARTWORK BY CAROL BOMER

COVER:

Purified Lips (Zeph. 3:9)
Zeph. 3:9 — “For then I will give to the peoples purified lips,
that all of them may call on the name of the
LORD, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder.”

FACING PAGE:

Peniel / Jacob Wrestles With God

Reflections is a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry published biannually by Yale Divinity School. Opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent those of the sponsoring institution and its administration and faculty.

We welcome letters to the editor. All correspondence regarding Reflections should be addressed to Ray Waddle at the School's address or at reflections.editor@yale.edu.

For a free subscription or to buy additional copies of this issue, please contact divinity.subscribe@yale.edu or call 203.432.5033. Reflections online study guides and other information are available at www.yale.edu/reflections.

REFLECTIONS—VOLUME 95, NUMBER 1

ISSN 0362-0611

Harold W. Attridge—publisher

Ray Waddle—editor

Frank Brown—managing editor

Peter Johnson—graphic designer, YaleRIS

John Lindner, Gustav Spohn—senior advisers

Elizabeth L. Wilkinson—poetry acquisition

Chantee Parris—circulation manager

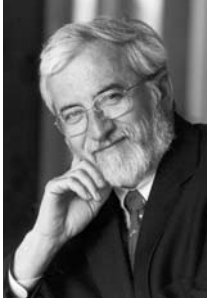
Campbell Harmon—online coordinator

Adela Yarbro Collins, John J. Collins—faculty guest editors

BETWEEN BABEL AND BEATITUDE:
THE BIBLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY



From the Dean's Desk



Harold W. Attridge

Dean of Yale Divinity School
& Lillian Claus Professor
of New Testament

The Bible continues to be a rallying point for many religious Americans and a stumbling block for others who criticize those with religious commitments. The Bible also continues to be used as a tool of polemic or a whipping boy. Should its precepts be set up in public places? Or should instruction in its contents be banned in public schools? Strident voices on the left and right have opinions about the Bible and its place in contemporary American culture. This issue of *Reflections* will probably not resolve debate about the role of the Bible on the contemporary scene. It will, we hope, say something to both believers and nonbelievers alike about the ways in which contemporary students of the Bible make sense of this complex mélange of ancient law, pious prayer, and moving story.

The world of contemporary biblical scholarship is an amazingly diverse arena in which scholars of different faith commitments, who are steeped in very different modes of inquiry, explore and expound the Sacred Text. Literary critics plumb the symbolism, the irony, and the rhetorical effects of biblical texts while social critics probe the structures of Israelite society and the patronage structures of the Greco-Roman world within which the New Testament took shape. Feminist critics explore the roles accorded to women, listen for their voices, and note the ways in which they can be marginalized. Postmodern critics argue about the ways in which meaning is constructed by the various readers of the texts. The amazing diversity of voices and perspectives, evident every year in the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion, reflects the diversity of contemporary readers of Scripture in the pews of American congregations.

Despite this diversity in interpretive strategies, the Bible remains a focal point of the faith of most American Christians. Every week preachers take portions of the text as starting points for their words of inspiration and admonition. In churches of all theological persuasions small groups meet to read and reflect together on the Bible or the lectionary readings for the week.

This issue of *Reflections*, guest-edited by two of my senior colleagues, John and Adela Collins, offers a sample of the rich diversity of contemporary scholarly approaches to Scripture. They bring to the task impressive credentials and intimate familiarity with the complexity of the international scholarly scene. John has contributed significantly to the study of Jewish literature of the Second Temple period through his commentary on Daniel in the *Hermeneia* series as well as studies of apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. Adela, specializing in the New Testament, is well known for her work on the Book of Revelation and for her recent commentary on the Gospel According to Mark, also in the *Hermeneia* series. Both have collaborated in the study of apocalypticism, both Jewish and Christian.

This issue also highlights some of the creative ways in which Scripture is being used in the life of the Church. One such experiment is the Yale Divinity School Bible Study program that has begun at the First Congregational Church in New Canaan, Connecticut, where one of our alums and member of our Board of Advisors, Skip Masback, is the pastor. David Bartlett, Lantz Professor of Homiletics Emeritus, and I collaborated to produce video introductions and guided readings for two books of the New Testament and we hope to be doing more in the near future. What we and our friends in New Canaan have already produced is available on the YDS Web site (www.yale.edu/reflections/yalebiblestudy).

The Bible, a focal point for controversy and source of inspiration, occupies a special place in the life of YDS. We hope that this issue will provide a glimpse of the ways in which we engage it and it engages so many lively minds.

Harold W. Attridge
Dean

Contents

<i>From the Dean's Desk</i>	2
<i>Old Testament in a New Climate</i> – John J. Collins	4
<i>The Historical Jesus: Then and Now</i> – Adela Yarbro Collins	9
<i>Jesus of Hollywood</i> – Adele Reinhartz	14
<i>The Risks of Nonconformity</i> – Peter J. Gomes	18
<i>Living With Difficult Texts at YDS</i> – Harold W. Attridge	22
<i>Holy Bible 3.0: Scripture in the Digital Age</i> – Kwok Pui-Lan	25
<i>The Bible in Song: Reclaiming African American Spirituals</i> – Yolanda Y. Smith	29
<i>Remembering for the Future: Interpreting Paul Today</i> – Diana M. Swancutt	34
<i>Politics and Prophet Motives</i> – An Interview with Thomas W. Ogletree	39
<i>Faith and those “Other Gospels”: What’s a Pastor to Do?</i> – PHEME PERKINS	44
<i>A Truth-Teller for Dangerous Times</i> – Walter Brueggemann	49
<i>Reading the Bible in a Sea of Signs</i> – A.K.M. Adam	52
<i>“Cast Your Life Raft Upon the Waters”</i> – Peter S. Hawkins	58
<i>“God is One, So Are We”: A Theo-political Hermeneutic</i> – Paul D. Hanson	63
<i>The Empire of God and the Postcolonial Era</i> – Stephen D. Moore	69
<i>Seeking Truth Together: The Yale Bible Study Series</i> – Ray Waddle	72
<i>Scripture, Conflict, and a New Theological Humanism</i> – William Schweiker	75
<i>From the Editor: Soli Deo Gloria</i>	84

POEMS:

Virginia Hamilton Adair (inside back cover); Yehuda Amichai 48;

Mark Jarman 32, 38, 57; Dan Pagis 24; Grace Schulman 8; David Shumate 13.

Old Testament in a New Climate

By John J. Collins

The story of the tower of Babel is told briefly and enigmatically in Gen. 11:1–9. In the beginning, people had one language throughout the earth. They attempted to build a city and a tower, with its top in the heavens, to make a name for themselves.

The Lord, however, figuring that this was only the beginning of what they would do, went down and confused their language and scattered them abroad over the face of the earth.

This little story has been interpreted in various ways. Traditionally, it was taken to show how humanity is kept in its place by a jealous God, but it also admits of more positive interpretations. The city and tower can be seen as symbols of oppressive empire, and their destruction as liberation. Or the story can be read as a celebration of diversity. It has been invoked more than once as an allegory for the fate of biblical scholarship in the past century.¹

In the mid-twentieth century there was a wide-ranging consensus on many issues, at least in the English-speaking world, grounded in an accepting attitude towards the biblical text with regard both to its historical accuracy and to its religious and moral values. This consensus found expression in the magisterial textbooks of Bernhard Anderson² and John Bright,³ and in the Biblical Theology Movement, typified by G. E. Wright's book *God Who Acts*.⁴ Today that consensus has dissipated, and, like the tower of Babel, its demise is variously lamented or celebrated.

A Postmodern Situation

The collapse of the old consensus is often associated with postmodernism. It is not the case that biblical scholarship has been influenced to any great degree by Derrida or Foucault (with a few notable exceptions). But the field has been influenced by what might be called a postmodern situation, characterized by pluralism and cultural warfare.

Forty years ago, the Society of Biblical Literature was predominantly white, male, and Christian, even Protestant, and its meetings were small enough to be accommodated in Union Seminary in New York. In the meantime we have had the rise of feminism, increased participation by Jewish scholars, and the emerging presence of Asian and African American scholars. (The SBL annual meeting now attracts three thousand or four thousand members.) Because of this diversity, two slogans of postmodernism have gained currency: the importance of "voices from the margins" and the distrust of "metanarratives" that try to impose a unifying vision on the field.

Nowhere has the collapse of the old consensus been clearer than in the history of Israel. A small group of "minimalist" scholars such as Thomas Thompson and Philip Davies has garnered most of the attention here, but "the collapse of history" can be better gauged from the ostensible defenders of the historicity of the Bible, such as the archaeologist William Dever. Citing an article from the *New York Times* entitled "The Bible, as History, Flunks New Archaeological Tests," Dever asks, "but does it?"⁵ His answer is hardly the ringing denial that we might have been led to expect: "Perhaps the books of Exodus and Numbers do because . . . their accounts . . . are overwhelmingly contradicted by the archaeological evidence." Moreover, "there is little that we can salvage from Joshua's stories of the rapid, wholesale destruction of Canaanite cities and the annihilation of the local population. It simply did not happen; the archaeological evidence is indisputable."

This is the judgment of one of the more *conservative* historians of ancient Israel. To be sure, there are far more conservative historians who try to defend the historicity of the entire biblical account beginning with Abraham, but their work rests on confessional presuppositions and is an exercise in apologetics rather than historiography. Most biblical scholars have come to terms with the fact that much (not all!) of the biblical narrative is only loosely related to history and cannot be verified.

The story of the Exodus, to take the most central of biblical events, is still powerful even if we regard it as a myth. It has inspired Jews and Christians alike for some three thousand years. It expresses the hope that there is liberation from oppression, and this hope is more important than the historical details. But the moral significance of the Exodus story has also been called into question in recent years. Critics of liberation theology, such as Jon Levenson, have pointed out that liberation from Egypt is not an end in itself. It is followed by the giving of the Law on

There is much in the Bible that remains compelling in the postmodern world, beginning with the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, or the calls for justice in the prophets.

Mount Sinai. But the story does not end at Sinai either. The goal indicated in God's words to Moses at the burning bush was "to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites" (Exod 3:8). This land was allegedly promised to the patriarchs in Genesis, but the Canaanites were not about to vacate it peacefully. The story culminates in the conquest of that land, as recorded in the book of Joshua, and involves the wholesale slaughter of the native inhabitants.

It is now accepted, by all but conservative apologists, that the conquest of Canaan did not actually happen as described in Joshua. But this does not relieve the moral problem presented by the story. Taken at face value, the text authorizes one group of people to take the land of others and slaughter the inhabitants. One of the most troubling aspects of the story is the way it has been used analogically over the centuries as a legitimating paradigm of violent conquest—by the Puritans in Ireland and in New England, by the Boers in South Africa, and by right-wing Zionists and their conservative Christian

supporters in modern Israel.⁶ As the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said pointed out, when Exodus is read from a Canaanite (or Palestinian) perspective, it is not a liberating story at all.⁷ The force of the "Canaanite" perspective does not depend only on its application to modern Palestine. It is equally relevant to the experience of native Americans, black South Africans, Australian aborigines, or any other people whose lands have been conquered and expropriated.

This is not to say that the Exodus story cannot still serve as a paradigm of liberation. But as Jonathan Boyarin has argued, it does not just "work" automatically that way: "it is merely available for effective rhetoric in a wide variety of situations."⁸ Historically, the Bible has been used as often to legitimate empire and colonialism as to inspire resistance and liberation. It is an inherently ambiguous document, and its effect depends to a great degree on the choices and perspectives of its interpreters. The Exodus and Conquest provide only one of many examples that could be cited. The problematic nature of biblical portrayals of women, and pronouncements on gender more generally, have been rehearsed too often in recent years to require repetition here. Biblical representations of the apocalyptic future are at least as problematic as those of past history.

The Quest for Foundations

The collapse of the old Bible-affirming consensus is especially problematic in the field of biblical theology. For the Biblical Theology Movement of the mid-twentieth century, history provided the foundations of faith, but these foundations have been subject to erosion. There is in fact a whole movement in contemporary philosophy and theology that makes a virtue out of necessity and argues that any quest for foundations, in the sense of unassailably certain beliefs, is not only futile but misguided. Truth is not the correlation of mind and reality, but a matter of coherence within a set of shared beliefs. There is no neutral ground from which to evaluate competing claims. The idea that there are no self-evident foundations on which our beliefs might be based is somewhat unsettling to most people when they first encounter it, but it has been welcomed by some, primarily Protestant, theologians. Karl Barth held that there could be no foundation, support or justification for theology in any philosophy, and emphatically rejected any natural theology. For Barth, faith provided its own certainty. For philosophical nonfoundationalism, however, certainty is not given to the human condition.

In the field of Old Testament theology, the most influential nonfoundational approach (in the theological sense) is undoubtedly that of Brevard Childs, who taught at Yale Divinity School for some forty years and died in 2007. Childs rejected the historical orientation of the older Biblical Theology Movement, and argued that the Scripture should be viewed as canon—that is, as authoritative writings for the church. “The divine imperatives are no longer moored in the past,” he wrote, “but continue to confront the reader as truth.”⁹ Childs did not insist on the historical truth of the biblical narratives, and he acknowledged the tension between history as critically reconstructed and history as portrayed in the biblical writings. But he had no solution to offer: “Biblical Theology offers neither a new philosophy of history nor a fresh theory of language, but rather it suggests that the church’s path of theological reflection lies in its understanding of its Scripture, its canon, and its Christological confession which encompass the mystery of God’s ways in the world with his people.”¹⁰ In short, history is a mystery. In this case the canonical approach amounts to little more than an insistence on a reverential attitude toward the text.

The Bible’s Embattled Morality

But a reverential attitude towards the text is not always appropriate. Another long time Yale professor, Roland Bainton, raised the question how the Old Testament could be regarded as authoritative in the light of the gross immoralities of the patriarchs.¹¹ Childs responded that “everything that happened to the patriarchs has been encompassed within the rubric of God’s wonderful works and his mighty deeds of redemption.”¹² But is the morality of the patriarchs any less problematic for being subsumed into God’s wonderful works? And while one might argue that the Bible does not approve the deceitful practices of the patriarchs, what are we to make of cases where divine commands are repugnant (the command to sacrifice Isaac, or to slaughter the Canaanites)?

Childs did not acknowledge an ethical problem with the Conquest at all in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*.¹³ This reluctance to acknowledge the problematic nature of the text seems to me to be a major shortcoming not only of Childs’s canonical approach but also of other postliberal theologies that speak of the text shaping the imagination and perceptions of the reader, or of the reader being conformed to the text.

No one in modern pluralist society can live in a world that is shaped only by biblical narrative. We

are all heirs to other traditions as well, including the Enlightenment and sundry other intellectual movements. We may agree that none of these provides secure foundations from which to judge the others, but neither does the Bible. The biblical perspective is an important one that has informed much of Western culture, but it can be granted no presumption of priority in the postmodern age.

The breakdown of consensus can be salutary, as it forces us to look again at assumptions we had taken for granted.

Fifty years ago, much of biblical scholarship had a theological orientation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, biblical theology has lost its centrality, and many biblical scholars see no reason to concern themselves with it. This, of course, is largely a result of the secularization of the field, of its migration from seminaries and divinity schools to departments of religious studies or Near Eastern languages. But if biblical theology is understood broadly as a concern with what the Bible has to say to the modern world, it should also be of interest in a secular setting. This requires that biblical theology take seriously the critiques, whether historical or moral, that arise from secular inquiry. What is needed in the current situation is a critical biblical theology that does not simply affirm the values of the text but weighs them in comparison and contrast with the knowledge and values we derive from other sources. There is much in the Bible that remains compelling in the postmodern world, beginning with the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, or the calls for justice in the prophets. But there is also much in the Bible (the command to slaughter the Canaanites, the subordination of women) that is difficult to reconcile with its higher ideals. Biblical theology needs to emphasize the positive, to be sure, but it cannot gloss over the aspects of the biblical tradition that we now find to be problematic.¹⁴

I began these reflections by referring to the “postmodern situation” in which biblical studies, like academia in general, finds itself, and which is characterized by diversity of perspectives and cultural warfare. This situation poses an obvious danger of disintegration into cultures of mutual indifference. The pursuit of consensus, or of reasoned and disciplined conversation, remains an important and necessary goal. The more extreme forms of postmodernism seem to me to be destructive in this regard.

But the postmodern situation has brought some advantages too. The main gain of postmodernist criticism is that it has expanded the horizons of biblical studies, by going out to the highways and byways to bring new “voices from the margin” to the conversation. The persistent attention to the Other, or to other ways of reading, is a salutary exercise. These horizons will inevitably continue to expand in the twenty-first century. The breakdown of consensus can also be salutary, as it forces us to look again at assumptions we had taken for granted. Too often the Bible has been, and continues to be, taken to be the guarantor of certitude in disputed issues. It may be well to realize that almost everything about it is open to dispute.

John J. Collins is Holmes Professor of Old Testament at Yale Divinity School. His recent books include *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2007); *The Bible after Babel. Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Eerdmans, 2005); and *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Augsburg Fortress, 2004)

Notes

- 1 For a fuller treatment of the issues discussed here see John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel. Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).
- 2 *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1957)
- 3 *A History of Israel* (4th ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000, originally published in 1959).
- 4 *God who acts : Biblical theology as recital* (Chicago, A.R. Allenson, 1956).
- 5 W. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2003), 227. The article in the *New York Times* was dated July 19, 2000.
- 6 See further my comments in *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).
- 7 Edward Said, “Michael Walzer’s ‘Exodus and Revolution,’ A Canaanite Reading,” *Grand Street* 5 (Winter 1986): 86–106.
- 8 Jonathan Boyarin, “Reading Exodus into History,” *New Literary History* 23(1992): 532.
- 9 B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments. Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 86.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 11 R. H. Bainton, “The Immoralities of the Patriarchs According to the Exegesis of the Late Middle Ages and the Reformers,” *HTR* 23(1930): 39-49.
- 12 Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 679-80.
- 13 Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).
- 14 For case studies, see my book *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

GOD'S LETTERS

by Grace Schulman

When God thought up the world,
the alphabet letters
whistled in his crown,
where they were engraved
with a pen of fire,
each wanting to begin
the story of Creation.

S said, I am Soul.
I can Shine out
from within your creatures.
God replied, I know that,
but you are Sin, too.

L said, I am Love,
and I brush away malice.
God rejoined, Yes,
but you are Lie,
and falsehood is not
what I had in mind.

P said, I am Praise,
and where there's a celebration,
I Perform
in my Purple coat.
Yes, roared God,
but at the same time,
you are Pessimism –
the other side of Praise.

And so forth.

All the letters
had two sides or more.
None was pure.
There was a clamor
in paradise, words,
syllables, shouting
to be seen and heard
for the glory
of the new heavens and earth.

God fell silent,
wondering,
How can song
rise from that commotion?

Rather than speculate,
God chose B,
who had intoned,
Bashfully, Boldly,
Blessed in his name.

The Historical Jesus: Then and Now

By Adela Yarbro Collins

The “modern” problem of the historical Jesus was already raised, to some degree, by the third-century Christian theologian and philosopher Origen. He described the gospels as “histories” but also stated that they narrate certain events that could not have happened.

For most interpreters from the beginning until the modern period, however, the real world was identified with the world that was constituted by combining the biblical narratives into a chronological sequence. Thus, no distinction was made between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

By the eighteenth century, thinkers associated with the Enlightenment attempted to redefine religion and social life, responding positively to the rise of modern science and negatively to the religious wars that followed the Reformation. The radicals among them were materialists and atheists. Others, especially those closely related to Deism, attempted to reconcile faith and science. Traditional belief in God, theism, included the conviction that God actively intervenes, or at least intervened in the past, by performing miracles that suspend the ordinary processes of nature. The Deists, on the contrary, argued that God was the first cause of all things and the originator of the immutable laws of nature, but that these laws exclude the possibility of miracles or direct divine intervention. In other words, God got the universe going, but since then is letting it run its course.

Rationalism and its Discontents

The Deist who had the most influence on research on the historical Jesus was a German, Hermann Reimarus. His work was entitled *Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God*. Reimarus believed that only a rational religion could benefit humanity. He also believed that a good defense of rational religion involved an attack on traditional Christian faith. He argued that Jesus did not intend to found a new

religion, but to present himself as a political Messiah who would liberate the Jewish people from the power of Rome and reestablish an independent, earthly, kingdom of Israel. The disciples of Jesus looked forward to sharing power and wealth with him once this kingdom was established. When Jesus was crucified, the disciples invented the idea of the atonement and falsely claimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They did so, Reimarus claimed, in order to achieve for themselves the power and influence that they had been expecting Jesus to provide for them. Reimarus argued against the historicity of the resurrection on the basis of the differences among the accounts and because he took the proof from Scripture to be a circular argument.

The next scholar to have an enormous influence on research on the historical Jesus was another German, David Friedrich Strauss, who published a book called *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in 1835. Strauss agreed with Reimarus that the origins of Christianity were entirely natural, but disagreed that fraud was involved.

The problem may be illustrated with regard to the miracles of Jesus. The naturalist view forces the Christian historian and theologian to choose one of the following alternatives: one may retain the historical character of the miracles and sacrifice the divine, regarding them as commonplace deceptions or misunderstandings; or hold fast the divine and eliminate the historical, taking them as representations of certain spiritual truths. The latter is the path chosen by Strauss. With the exception of the exorcisms, the miracles attributed to Jesus

did not actually happen, according to Strauss. The miracle stories are expressions and illustrations of the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah. Strauss's ideas were very controversial. He was removed almost immediately from his professorship in Zurich and given a research stipend instead.

Most theologians in the nineteenth century, however, continued to construct interpretations of Jesus from Deist, rationalist, and naturalist perspectives. Primary emphasis was laid upon Jesus' moral teaching, whereas miracles and dogmas were downplayed or ignored. During the nineteenth century, however, new documents from the period of Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity were discovered, edited, and translated. Many of these were apocalyptic works, like the canonical books of Daniel and Revelation. These ancient works led New Testament scholars to read the gospels in a new way.

In apocalyptic works, the present time, from the point of view of the authors, is a time in which evil forces have control of creation or "this age." God still rules in heaven, but has allowed Satan, fallen angels, tyrants, and other opponents of God to get control of the earth and most of its people. These works look forward to a time when God will act to remove these evil forces and restore creation to its original goodness and glory or to bring in "the age to come." The "kingdom of God" is a shorthand expression for this new age or the state of salvation, because it is the time when God will regain control over the created world.

Albert Schweitzer was an Alsatian scholar active in the early twentieth century who was familiar with the new apocalyptic works, as well as the old ones. In his books *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* and *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, he argued that when Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God, he was not speaking about a just and moral society to be established by human beings, but about the new age described by the apocalypses.

Liberal Defeat

Schweitzer was not a supernaturalist himself, but he reminded his audience that Jesus was. Jesus was not the liberal teacher that most scholars of the nineteenth century had constructed in their own image.

Although Schweitzer had attacked the liberal portrait of Jesus as historically inaccurate, the eclipse of liberal theology was accomplished primarily by the disillusionment of the First World War. Between the world wars, neo-orthodox theology came into vogue, as well as existentialist philosophy. The well-known German New Testament scholar and theologian

Rudolf Bultmann accepted Schweitzer's historical argument that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. He agreed that Jesus' point of view was mythic, and he used existentialist philosophy to "demythologize" the teaching of Jesus. He reinterpreted Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God to mean an entirely future power that wholly determines the present. Although modern persons no longer expect God to intervene in history and establish a new age, we each must face our own deaths, and this expectation is analogous to that of Jesus. As persons who face an inevitable death, we ought to focus on the necessity and significance of decision.

Under the influence of neo-orthodox theology, the quest for the historical Jesus was relegated to the sidelines as irrelevant for Christian theology, which, it was argued, is based on the apostolic witness, not the teaching of Jesus. But in the 1950s, Ernst Käsemann, a former student of Bultmann's, reopened

During his lifetime, Jesus attracted some followers as an authoritative teacher, others as a prophet proclaiming the kingdom of God, and others as an exorcist who had the power to overcome evil spirits.

the question of the historical Jesus, arguing that it was necessary for Christian faith that continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith be established. A kind of consensus portrait of Jesus was published under the title *Jesus of Nazareth* in 1956 by Günther Bornkamm, another former student of Bultmann's. The standard mid-century portrait, however, was rather bland and failed to take seriously enough the Jewishness of Jesus.

Firm Facts of History

In 1985, the American scholar E. P. Sanders published his book *Jesus and Judaism*, which revived and updated the interpretation of Jesus pioneered by Albert Schweitzer. Sanders argued that it is difficult to move from "Jesus the teacher" to "Jesus, a Jew who was crucified, who was the leader of a group that survived his death, which in turn was persecuted, and which formed a messianic sect that was finally successful." Rather than make the teaching of Jesus his starting point, therefore, Sanders decided to begin with certain facts about Jesus, his career, and its consequences, which are very firm and which do point toward solutions of historical questions. These facts are that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist; was a Galilean who preached and healed;

called disciples and spoke about there being twelve of them; confined his activity to Israel; engaged in a controversy about the temple; was crucified outside Jerusalem by the Roman authorities; and that after his death his followers continued as an identifiable movement, at least parts of which were persecuted by at least some Jews.

He concluded that Jesus should be interpreted as a prophet of the restoration of Israel. He expected God to intervene soon to establish a new and glorious age.

The work of John Dominic Crossan, an Irish scholar who has made the United States his home, contrasts sharply with Sanders's work. His book *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, published in 1991, attempts to eliminate the apocalyptic aspect of the activity and teaching of Jesus. In this respect, it is a revival of the nineteenth-century liberal view of Jesus. Crossan accomplishes this goal in two ways. He discredits apocalypticism by associating the ancient apocalypses with the militant activists in the late Second Temple period; in other words, he links the apocalyptic perspective with violence and assassination. He also claims

Crossan concludes that Jesus proclaimed and founded an egalitarian kingdom of nobodies whom Jesus sent out to exchange a miracle for a meal, that is, healing for hospitality.

that the sources that portray Jesus as a wisdom teacher or sage are older than those that present him and his message in prophetic and apocalyptic terms. Crossan concludes that Jesus proclaimed and founded an egalitarian kingdom of nobodies whom Jesus sent out to exchange a miracle for a meal—that is, healing for hospitality. Although Crossan portrays Jesus and his followers as rural and thus as “peasants,” he also claims that they were similar to Cynic philosophers. The Cynic movement, however, was an urban phenomenon.

Market Economy Messiahs

In the 1990s some scholars criticized the whole enterprise of research into the historical Jesus. One of these, Dieter Georgi, spent part of his professional life in the United States and part of it in his homeland, Germany. He wrote an article entitled “The Interest in Life of Jesus Theology as a Paradigm for the Social History of Biblical Criticism,” which was published in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1992.

Georgi argued that the aim of Reimarus and others who took up the quest for the historical Jesus after him was not neutral, but had a clear theological purpose—to gain a *verifiable* reconstruction of the public career of Jesus of Nazareth and to put this reconstruction at the *center* of reflection on theology and faith, turning this “true” Jesus into the center of theological discourse.

He argued further that early theologies of Jesus were shaped by the cult of the extraordinary in Hellenistic-Roman society, and that such fascination was related to the market economy of the time. In the late medieval and early modern period, interest in Jesus as a superhuman individual became prominent again with the rise of a new class of burghers as an economic and social force. The extraordinarily gifted person became a relevant and formative model for society. The preference for the divine in Jesus turned out to be an enlargement of the human potential. What Georgi calls the bourgeois concept of genius began to emerge in the sixteenth century. The idea of the genius embodied the interest of the bourgeoisie in reproducing and strengthening itself. Georgi concluded: “The contemporaneity of the New Quest with the end of the New Deal and the restoration of the bourgeoisie in the United States and Germany after World War II and within the confines of a burgeoning market-oriented Atlantic community is not accidental.”

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is a German-educated scholar who has lived and worked for most of her career in the United States. She took an approach similar to Georgi's with a feminist perspective in her article “Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation,” published in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1997. She argued that the two dominant hermeneutical approaches in Jesus research are historical positivism (represented by Crossan) and canonical, theological positivism (the approach of the American scholar Luke Timothy Johnson). She proposed a reconstructive paradigm that understands history not so much as scientific proof, but in terms of memory. She claimed that the flood of allegedly new scholarly and popular books on Jesus does nothing to undermine fundamentalist desires for a reliable account of the historical Jesus or religious certainty about the meaning of his life. At best, one can glimpse the historical shadow of Jesus, but how “his picture” develops will always depend on the lens one uses—that is, on the reconstructive model adopted.

If the memory of Jesus' suffering and resurrection, understood as an instance of unjust human suffering and survival, is at the heart and center of Christian memory, then, she argues, the critical line lies between injustice and justice, between the world of domination and a world of freedom and well-being.

In 2006, emeritus Yale professor Wayne Meeks published *Christ Is the Question*, in which he argued that the identity of Jesus has been constructed by his followers and readers of the gospels from the time of his death until the present.

In 1991, 1994, and 2001, the American scholar John P. Meier, published three volumes on the historical Jesus under the umbrella title *A Marginal Jew*. A fourth volume is projected. This work is a model of secular, skeptical historiography that results in one of the more reliable portraits of the historical Jesus.

What then is the state of the question? What can be said about the historical Jesus today?

Historians have labeled Jesus as a prophet, as the Messiah, as a miracle worker, as a rabbi, or a teacher. Jesus, however, apparently did not look and behave like a prophet. John the Baptist wore what had become the typical dress of a prophet: a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt. No such attire is attributed to Jesus. John was ascetic in other ways too. He ate locusts and wild honey and was famous for fasting. In contrast, it was known that Jesus did not teach his disciples to fast. In fact, he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. This contrast suggests that Jesus' self-understanding and message were different from John's in important ways. Rather than emphasizing sin, punishment, and moral renewal, like John did, Jesus portrayed God as reaching out to those who had turned aside. His was a message of love and joy, and he embodied it in table fellowship, sometimes even feasting, that prefigured and symbolized the rule of God.

Teacher, Prophet, Exorcist, Risen Lord

Jesus is also presented as a teacher and interpreter of Jewish Scripture and law. According to Mark, the people of Capernaum were amazed at his teaching, because he was teaching them with authority, not as the experts in the law taught. It is likely that Jesus did claim an extraordinary authority in his teaching. It may be that he did so indirectly and with the consciousness of being a prophet. Soon, however, perhaps already during his lifetime, this authority was understood to be unique and linked to his messianic status.

According to an early, deep, and widespread tradition, Jesus performed mighty deeds or miracles. Among all the mighty deeds that Jesus is said to have done, those most likely to be historical are the exorcisms. The idea that demons could possess and torment people is a part of folk religion, but it also had a place among the learned in Jesus' time, especially those who thought in dualistic, apocalyptic terms.

During his lifetime, then, Jesus attracted some followers as an authoritative teacher, others as a prophet proclaiming the kingdom of God, and others as an exorcist who had the power to overcome evil spirits. It is likely that some drew the conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah during his lifetime. This response was due in part to his authoritative and charismatic activity and in part to the readiness of a segment of the people to look for an alternative to the rule of the Romans and their client-kings, the Herodians. The crowds that Jesus drew no doubt attracted the attention of the authorities. Not long after they heard some of the people proclaim him as king and saw him overturn tables in the temple, they arrested him and executed him. This event must have been a devastating shock to his followers. Some of them interpreted his execution as the typical fate of a prophet.

Jesus' was a message of love and joy, and he embodied it in table fellowship, sometimes even feasting, that prefigured and symbolized the rule of God.

It is much more surprising, from a historical point of view, that other followers of Jesus interpreted his death as the preordained death of the Messiah, since this idea was not only new but against the grain of contemporary expectations about the Messiah of Israel. Instead of giving up the idea that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel because he suffered and died (rather than a Messiah who led the people to victory over the Romans), this group of followers reinterpreted the concept of the Messiah after some of their number had experienced Jesus as risen from the dead. They looked to Scripture for guidance and became convinced that the psalms of individual lament, such as Psalm 22 and 69, and the passage about the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 showed that the suffering and death of the Messiah was part of the divine plan. They concluded that it was the risen Jesus, not the earthly one, who would rule over all creation as God's agent. Jesus, they believed, had already been exalted to heaven and had begun to

rule. His reign would be fully manifest in the future when he would be revealed as the Son of Man, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14.

It is impossible to know whether Jesus considered himself to be the Messiah. He presented himself as a prophet, perhaps at least implicitly as the final and most authoritative prophet; as a teacher with extraordinary authority; and he was believed to have performed at least one type of mighty deed. These qualities made him stand out as a leader and a focal point for the hopes and expectations of those who were dissatisfied with the current order. Even if Jesus showed no interest in leading a revolt, his talk about the kingdom of God and his extraordinary qualities were apparently enough to lead those with high hopes for a new order to fix those hopes on him.

So how does this portrait of the historical Jesus relate to the Christ of faith? A key issue is the apocalyptic world view that defines the teaching and life of the historical Jesus. Some reconcile the two by explaining away the apocalyptic character of Jesus' message or by ignoring it. A better way is to work with the apocalyptic language of the gospels as metaphorical or symbolic language. Such images and metaphors may be interpreted as ancient efforts to address recurrent human desires to be free from physical, moral, and political evils. Those desires can then be recognized in our own lives and addressed in the various languages and social contexts of our day.

Adela Yarbro Collins is Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School, where she has been teaching since 2000. Her recent books include Mark: A Commentary (Fortress, 2007); The Beginning of the Gospel: Probing of Mark in Context (Wipf & Stock, 2001); and Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism (Brill, 1996).

DRAWING JESUS

By David Shumate

The first patient drew Jesus as a tall, slender man with three smiling heads, one eye in the center of each. Another sketched him as a stick figure wearing a yellow hat. The teenage girl from Alabama drew a white vulture with a halo above its head. At the table by the window the Hungarian immigrant whose language no one understood drew a face with a scar running down his cheek, a ragged red beard, and the kind of wild eyes that frighten children. The old woman who had lived half-a-century in the asylum painted a picture of a dozen orange boxes and asked me to guess which one Jesus was hiding in. I pointed to the box with the bulge in the middle. The Hungarian started laughing. Then they all joined in.

Jesus of Hollywood

By Adele Reinhartz

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus once asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples answered: “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:27-30).

Our society’s ongoing fascination with Jesus of Nazareth has spawned literally thousands of portraits of this ancient Jew, in every medium of expression possible. But since the birth of cinema in the late nineteenth century, it is first and foremost through film that our society has seen Jesus, tried to understand his identity, and pondered his significance.

Anyone who grew up with the Jesus epics of the 1960s and ’70s might well think Hollywood has always portrayed Jesus in a simplistic and, well, Hollywoodish way. Certainly it is true that the cinema has given us some rather wooden saviors. The stereotypical cinematic Jesus, being perfect, runs the risk of being perfectly boring. But the film industry has also supplied interesting answers to the question of who Jesus is and was.

For some filmmakers, Jesus is the political and military Messiah, the savior who does battle with the forces of evil and liberates humankind from the oppression wrought by Roman imperial rule. The 1961 film *King of Kings* begins with a lengthy and a majestic voice-over narration—intoned by a male who sounds like God but who in fact is Orson Welles:

And it is written, that in the year 63 BC the Roman legions like a scourge of locusts poured through the east laying waste to the land of Canaan and the kingdom of Judea. Rome’s imperial armies went unto the hills and struck Jerusalem’s walls in a three-month siege. Reaching the gates, these legions laid the dust of battle in a shower of blood.

The narrator goes on to describe the suffering of the Jews as they are hunted, killed, and burned.

The Jews of Judea went to the slaughter “like sheep, from their own green fields” and “survived by one promise: God would send the Messiah to deliver them forth.”

This declamation paraphrases the prophet Isaiah’s famous words: “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7). Isaiah is speaking of the suffering servant, whom Christians later saw as a prototype of Jesus’ suffering on the cross. In the period immediately after World War II, however, the phrase “like sheep to the slaughter” was being used to describe the tragedy of the Holocaust in which six million Jews went to their deaths in the green fields and gas chambers of Nazi Europe. For the film *King of Kings*, the answer to Jesus’ question “Who do people say that I am?” is a political one: People say that you are the Messiah who will save the Jews from the oppression of Roman rule.

This is a powerful vision, but it flounders. For in this film, as in all others that emphasize the political realities of Jesus’ lifetime, the historical outcome does not support the desired Hollywood ending. Jesus does not save his people from Rome; Roman control over Judea continues for some centuries after his death. Hollywood must fall back on a softer, gentler notion of salvation: Jesus saves not by overthrowing Rome but by providing everlasting life for those who believe.

If the epic Jesus is obsessed with the fate of the Jewish people, not so the hippie savior of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), who is sidetracked from any universal mission by concerns with his own celebrity.

At the Last Supper, this Jesus sets aside the solemn message of remembrance and forgiveness to complain about his disciples' devotion:

For all you care this wine could be my blood

For all you care this bread could be my body

The end!...

I must be mad thinking I'll be remembered —yes

I must be out of my head!

Look at your blank faces! My name will mean nothing

Ten minutes after I'm dead!

The point of the film, of course, is not to mock the Eucharist, Jesus, or Christian faith but to attack our society's obsession with celebrities who believe that the world does indeed revolve around them.

Other films made in the 1970s and 80s betray the strong influence of historical Jesus research, particularly the emphasis on Jesus' specifically Jewish identity. Yet the most interesting explorations

The cinematic Jesus is a man, or perhaps a God, created in our own image.

of this theme can be found in films that have taken the greatest liberty with the traditional stories. Take, for example, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979). Strictly speaking, this brilliant spoof is a "Brian" movie and not a "Jesus" movie; its portrait of Jesus as such is as reverential as they come. But in its depiction of the young man mistakenly taken for the Messiah, *Life of Brian* both uses and mocks the clichés of the Jesus film genre, to hilarious effect. If Monty Python's Jesus is the cardboard figure of sentimental piety, Brian is a fiercely proud Jew who loves his mother and hates the Romans. When his mother finally reveals his Roman ancestry, Brian is very upset: "I'm not a Roman, and I never will be! I'm a kike, a yid, a hebie, a hook-nose, I'm kosher, Mum, I'm a Red Sea pedestrian and proud of it!"

This scene draws upon the ancient Jewish legend that Jesus was the illegitimate child of Mary and a Roman soldier. I would not set much store by the historicity of this legend; more than likely the sages who circulated it did so in order to mock and discredit Christian beliefs in Jesus' virginal conception. But Brian's proud declaration of his Jewish identity echoes the views of scholars who believe that Jesus too saw his Jewishness as fundamental to who he was and what he did.

A similar point is made in Denys Arcand's 1989 film, *Jesus of Montreal*, my personal favorite of the Jesus movies. The film portrays a group of actors commissioned to refresh a Passion play that has been performed on church grounds for decades.

The Passion play that they create also reflects the scholarly skepticism of historical Jesus research in the 1980s. This play, the actors say, is

the story of the Jewish prophet Yeshu Ben Panthera whom we all call Jesus. Historians of the day, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Flavius Josephus, mention him only in passing. What we know was pieced together by his disciples a century later. Disciples lie; they embellish. We don't know where he was born, or his age when he died. Some say 24, others 50. But we do know that on April 7 in year 30, or April 27 in year 31, or April 3 in year 33 he appeared before the fifth Roman procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

This film does not deny Jesus' profound impact on humanity; rather, it decouples that impact from the set of traditional Catholic beliefs about Jesus' person. The result is a Jesus whose power transcends religion, dogma, and faith and allows him to touch the lives of all viewers. Indeed, for this particular Jewish viewer, it was this secular Jesus who made it possible to imagine why and how so many people, over so many centuries, could be moved to faith by the carpenter from Nazareth.

Scorsese, Gibson, Schweitzer

If Arcand's trenchant critique of the Catholic Church in Quebec ruffled some feathers, it nevertheless proved to be less controversial than Martin Scorsese's 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In a lengthy text that scrolls before the opening credits, Scorsese emphasizes that the film is by no means historical. Rather, like Nikos Kazantzakis' novel upon which it is based, the film engages in a fictional exploration of the eternal conflict between spirit and flesh. Yet this disclaimer did nothing to defuse the controversy that broke out prior to its release. Outraged citizens protested in front of theaters and wrote angry letters to the editor.

Their target was the so-called dream sequence at the end of the film. As Jesus hangs on the cross, he is approached by a young red-headed girl, who carefully extracts the nails and helps him down off the cross. She leads him toward a Technicolor field, where Jesus discovers himself to be the groom at a wedding party. The bride is Mary Magdalene. Alone in the tent, Mary cradles Jesus in her lap, much as his mother Mary does in Michelangelo's famous

sculpture of the Pieta. She gently washes his wounds as the sensual music that has accompanied her throughout the film plays in the background. They make tender love; Mary cries out in joy, not at the fulfillment of her sexual desire, but at her certain knowledge that they will have a child. Mary dies before their child is born, but Jesus then marries and raises a family with both Mary and Martha of Bethany. Jesus' Last Temptation, as it turns out, is not sex but domesticity.

Perhaps the scenes of Jesus making love to Mary and other women were just too much for some viewers. But these protestors missed a far more interesting theme: the homoerotic relationship between Jesus and Judas. Apart from the dream sequence, which is, after all, just a dream, Jesus avoids touching Mary Magdalene and is extraordinarily uncomfortable in her presence. Not so, however, with Judas, to whom he confides his fears and his growing understanding of the role that God demands that he

The Jesus film genre, like all other types of Hollywood films, was profoundly affected by the censorship code, known as the Production Code, that came into effect in 1930.

play in the divine drama of salvation. In one scene, Jesus sits alone in the cool night as the disciples prepare to retire. Judas comes over to Jesus and they talk at some length. Then Jesus says to Judas: "I'm afraid. Stay with me." The two men share the warmth of a single blanket, clinging to each other throughout the night. The sexual undertones of the visual scene are drawn out further by the musical soundtrack, which is same as that accompanying Mary Magdalene throughout the film. The theme of sexual temptation is then made even more explicit by the apple that Jesus draws out from his robe and bites into at the end of this scene. When he tosses the seeds away, they immediately grow into a mature apple tree. The allusion to the temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden is impossible to miss.

Scorsese answers Jesus' question: "Who do people say that I am?" by creating a Jesus initially conflicted and tortured by self-doubt, who then seems to accept his fate and identity as the Son of God, even persuading his intimate friend Judas to play a necessary role in this drama, and then is apparently diverted from his course by a fantasy of domesticity that represents the path not taken. At the end, however, he dies as Jesus always must: on

the cross in the final victory of spirit over flesh and the resolution of all doubt.

Yet even the public outcry over Scorsese's tormented Jesus pales in comparison with the media attention paid to Mel Gibson's 2004 blockbuster, *The Passion of the Christ*. While some Christian groups referred to Gibson's movie as the best outreach opportunity of the last two thousand years, many academics and religious leaders, both Jewish and Christian, spoke out strongly against the film's harsh representation of the Jewish leaders of Jesus' era. Gibson certainly brought graphic images of Jesus' condemnation and death to millions of viewers. But one is hard put to figure out how Gibson's film responds to our guiding question: Who do people say that I am?

Judging from the quotation from Isaiah 53 in the opening frames, Gibson's own answer points to Jesus as the suffering servant prophesied by Isaiah. But for most of the film Jesus does not resemble a man, whether Servant or Lord, so much as a hunk of raw meat. By pounding Jesus' body to an oozing pulp, Gibson has reduced him from divine being to subhuman creature. If Gibson intended to show Jesus' superhuman forbearance, he also made it almost impossible to feel compassion or concern, since the relentless beating and bleeding prevent us from seeing Jesus as anything more than a broken body. Not only is Jesus' divine identity erased but his human one as well. Of course, not everyone shares this assessment; many viewers found in this film a powerful and potent Jesus who spoke directly to their hearts and souls. But I fail to see how this is possible unless such a Jesus is already alive in their imaginations as the opening credits roll.

Even as they pay lip service to traditional Christian views of Jesus, the Jesus movies betray more ambivalent assessments: Jesus is a political leader who fails to save his countrymen from Roman oppression; he is a confused and perhaps unstable man who must persuade his best friend to betray him; or he is a Hollywood celebrity concerned about his own posterity.

Cracking the Code

These answers are influenced by numerous factors, including the gospels, of course, but also the two-thousand-year history of interpretation, and the legacy of art, music, drama, literature, theology, and liturgy.

They are also shaped by the conventions and politics of the film industry itself. The Jesus film genre, like all other types of Hollywood films, was

profoundly affected by the censorship code, known as the Production Code, that came into effect in 1930. The Production Code, which had a major impact on films until 1960, required a high standard of reverence in any representations of Jesus and forbade filmmakers from “throwing ridicule” on any religious faith. The exigencies of the code likely account at least in part for the long hiatus in the American production of Jesus movies between DeMille’s 1927 film *The King of Kings* and the release of Nicholas Ray’s *King of Kings* in 1961.

Another long gap occurred between 1989, when *Jesus of Montreal* was released, and 2003, when Philip Saville’s film *The Gospel of John* debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival. This hiatus coincided with a surge of popular interest in the question of the historical Jesus, and a new awareness of the difficulties of truly reconstructing Jesus’ life, words, and deeds from the meager sources at hand. Gibson’s film has opened the floodgates again. One may speculate that the tremendous box office success of that film, as well as perceptions of a large conservative Christian market for reverential renditions of Jesus’ life story, are encouraging others to follow Gibson’s lead. Two new films appeared in 2006, *The Nativity Story* and *The Color of the Cross*, and a new BBC mini-series, *The Passion*, aired on television during Easter Week 2008. These films, like Saville’s and Gibson’s offerings, owe more to the epics than to the historical skepticism, iconoclasm, and creativity evident in *Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal*.

In the final analysis, Jesus movies say more about the times in which they were made than about the era they portray. They express the commitments and the concerns of the present using a vehicle of the past. Politics, sexuality, gender roles, violence, and other issues are worked through and reflected back to us through these stories of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth.

A century ago, as the very first Jesus movies were being made, Albert Schweitzer, famed doctor, explorer, musician, and theologian, commented on the many different portraits of Jesus found among the works of Christian theologians.

“Each successive epoch of theology,” he wrote, “found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make Him live.”

But, he continued, “it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character.”

Schweitzer’s observation holds true today, not only of theologians and historians, but of filmmak-

ers and their audiences. The cinematic Jesus is a man, or perhaps a God, created in our own image. Is Jesus of Hollywood also the Messiah, as Peter assured Jesus of Nazareth so many years ago? For some, perhaps; for others, obviously not. Yet one might argue that Jesus of Hollywood, like many other heroes of stage and screen, offers not salvation so much as an opportunity to see ourselves more clearly, and to think about who we, as individuals and as a society, really are.

Adele Reinhartz teaches in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa. Her books include Jesus of Hollywood (Oxford University Press, 2007) and Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John (Continuum, 2002).

The Risks of Nonconformity

By Peter J. Gomes

Adapted from *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* by Peter J. Gomes.

© Copyright by Peter J. Gomes. By permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Perhaps the most dangerous verse in all the Bible is the second verse of Romans 12, where Saint Paul endorses Christian nonconformity.

When he writes, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God,” he is telling his readers not to do that which comes naturally to them. An invitation to nonconformity is a dangerous thing, and thoughtful nonconformity, for that is what Paul is requiring, is all the more dangerous because nonconformity is an intention and not an inadvertence. In a culture in which conformity is valued, nonconformity is likely to get one into trouble.

The tension between what Romans 12 says and what most people believe is muted by the fact that most Christians read Scripture within the context of their own circles of faith and interpretation. Despite all the claims of those who would wrap themselves in biblical authority, most people read the Bible as confirmation of their own practices and convictions; they do not find themselves either condemned by it or challenged to change their views in light of what it has to say. Thus, conformity or nonconformity does not have to do with some abstract biblical principle or even the biblical practices of some distant and distinct period. Rather, conformity has to do with the current prevailing opinion and practice, and nonconformity departs from that cultural consensus. Godly conduct would appear to be what the people of God say it is at any particular time, just as in America the law is what the Supreme Court says it is.

This may seem a harsh indictment of those who would take the Bible seriously, even literally, as so many American Christians claim to do, yet how else does one explain the fact that the Bible

and the church more often than not are used to preserve the status quo rather than to challenge or change it?

The objections to Jesus’ teaching were based on the view that he was an agent of change. “He stirreth up the people” was one of the charges shouted against him when Pilate asked why he should be condemned. The trouble with the apostles, who preached throughout the book of Acts, was that they were introducing new things into the moral discourse of the day. They themselves were ordinary, unlearned men, speaking out of place and out of turn, and for their pains they were persecuted, imprisoned, driven from place to place, and made to suffer all manner of terrible indignities. Hebrews 11:37 makes clear what the nonconformists suffered:

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented ...

That the image of martyrs, the suffering faithful, and oppressed witnesses to the truth does not seem to be the prevailing image of Christians serves to demonstrate the sad fact that conformity is a greater characteristic of the Christian community than nonconformity.

The people described in the Bible as people of faith are usually depicted as those whose loyalty to their faith places them on the outside of the prevailing culture, and their rules and practices are designed both to distinguish them and to protect them against that culture. Biblical people are by definition people on the margins who are, in the



classical aphorism, *contra mundum*, against the world. If the world is Egypt or Rome, then religious people, Jews or Christians, are against that, distinct from it, and defining themselves in opposition to it. Conformity to that world and its values is death.

Paul, however, was not inviting social revolution, a point that such Christian conservatives as Martin Luther were always eager to make. His principle was one of nonconformity, but his call to obedience to the magistrate was one of expedience. That situation is similar to the position in which Christian

Today, rather than a point of pride, the tradition of Christian dissent and nonconformity seems to be an embarrassment.

slaves found themselves in the American antebellum south when, in order to survive, the slaves had to give outward obedience to their masters. They knew, however, that to conform to the slave culture was itself a form of death, and so their real survival depended upon their ability to be loyal to something else and other. Their virtue as believers was defined by their distinction from those who held power over them.

But what happens when the minority and the oppressed become the majority with the capacity to oppress others? Where, then, is the mandate for nonconformity? The irony is that whenever the Christian community gains worldly power, it nearly always loses its capacity to be the critic of the power and influence it so readily brokers.

Today, rather than a point of pride, the tradition of Christian dissent and nonconformity seems to be an embarrassment. The flourishing of orthodoxies and the Christian community's enchantment with power form a dangerous combination of forces that make Paul's appeal to nonconformity difficult for the Christian to take seriously. It is even more difficult for the non-Christian to believe that the Christian could possibly take it seriously.

Clerical Cocktail Party

Some years ago I attended a White House Prayer Breakfast. I didn't particularly want to go, but a former student of mine, well placed in the Clinton White House, prevailed upon me to attend, and so I did—and immediately knew I had made the wrong decision when I found myself in a long line of clergy in the street opposite the Treasury, waiting to have our credentials validated for admission into the White House.

What a sight we must have been to early-morning Washington commuters! Every conceivable form of clerical dress from nearly all the religions of the world was represented, and all the people so dressed were eager for a moment of favor in the East Room of the White House. Once we were inside, it was worse—a sort of early-morning clerical cocktail party composed of clergy hoping to be seen with anyone more important than the person with whom they happened to be speaking. There was little prayer at this Prayer Breakfast, but a great deal of networking and schmoozing, and whatever Caesar had to offer, the clergy were glad to take it. No one in the assemblage seemed to embrace a nonconformist thought: the world appeared very much in charge. Both John the Baptist and David Koresh would have been out of place, and I, no prophetic soul, wished I were anywhere but there.

Prayer Breakfasts are a big deal in Washington, I am told, and foreign visitors who are brought to them are fascinated by both their absence of piety and their display of power. Most of those who bow their heads before tucking into the eggs and bacon are not seeking transformation, but rather appear to be celebrating the confirmation of the status quo or, worse, longing to recreate the good old days when a Christian consensus determined the right and wrong ways of doing things.

"Are You a Christian?"

Indeed, much of the momentum behind a good deal of contemporary religious zealotry is an attempt to recapture something of what was lost. The notion of revival, a recurrent theme in American religious history, appeals to that notion of something that once was good that must somehow be recovered. As a historian, I am often asked to what great period in history I would care to return, and I can think of none, for every age has fallen short of what the good news promised, and no past age has achieved an instance of grace for which I would sacrifice one second of the future. When I say, as I often do, that our best days are ahead of us, I truly believe that the good news that Jesus preached has yet to be experienced, for it goes before us, as did Jesus himself on Easter morning.

Increasingly, I meet people who, when asked, "Are you a Christian?" respond with the parsing carefulness of a lawyer, or of Bill Clinton: "That depends on what you mean by Christian." Many say, "I would like to think of myself as a Christian, but I don't want to be associated with [this group or that group]." Can Christians agree that following the teachings of Jesus and the example that he

and the best of his followers have set is sufficient to maintain a Christian identity and witness in the world? It would seem not. Many complain that the evangelicals have defined “Christian” in such a way as to impose a creed and not a lifestyle.

In the early church a Christian was one who believed, on the authority of the witnesses to the resurrection, that Jesus is Lord. In the early twentieth century, some Christians, eventually described as fundamentalists, imposed a series of fundamental beliefs essential to being a Christian, including a belief in the literal truth of Scripture, the virgin birth, the second coming, and substitutionary atonement.

When I say that our best days are ahead of us, I truly believe that the good news that Jesus preached has yet to be experienced, for it goes before us, as did Jesus himself on Easter morning.

Those who affirmed those things were Christians; those who did not, were not. In the 1920s, Harry Emerson Fosdick condemned fundamentalism for its lack of charity and its refusal to share disputed ground with Christians of other persuasions. He predicted that the kind of narrow, doctrinal piety with which he associated the aggressive fundamentalism of his day would expire in the light of modernity and higher education. He would be surprised, and perhaps more than a little disappointed, to find that the modernist position that he espoused has long been in retreat, and that the cultural tune is more often called by an evangelical piety having much in common with the fundamentalism to which he was so adamantly opposed.

Cosmic Immodesty

Two elements nearly always missing from any religious establishment, especially one that has come to prevail only after a long period of suffering and deprivation in the wilderness, are charity and modesty. Charity is the capacity to love the other and to lead with the heart and not simply with the head. Although religious establishments often espouse charity, they rarely risk their own hard-won status by exercising it among others. Charity in this context often suggests weakness, a tolerance of error, a failure to exercise the sovereignty of truth. Charity free of condescension is rare. The notion that God may know more about the salvation business than we do is often more than a true believer can bear.

Having won the truth “our” way, it is difficult to believe that there is any other way, or that anyone else might have found it.

Christian exclusiveness, for that is what the lack of charity suggests, cannot face the requirements of modesty, the notion that all is not known and that we do not know all. When devout Christians believe that only Christians of a particular doctrinal stripe have access to God, that, for example, God hears their prayers only, they stand in cosmic immodesty. The Christian Bible more than once makes the point that God’s ways are not our ways, and that the mind of God is vastly different from our own minds. Thus, when Christians state categorically that Jews, or Muslims, or believers in other faith systems are outside the provisions of God, they utter arrogant nonsense. If God is the God of all, and not just a tribal deity, then God has made provision, not necessarily known to us, for the healing and care of all his creation, and not simply our little part of it.

If there is any good news that is truly good news for everybody and not just for a few somebodies, it is this: God is greater and more generous than the best of those who profess to know and serve him. This is the radical nonconformity against the conventional wisdom that Jesus both proclaimed and exemplified, and, alas, it cost him his life. Will we hope to fare any better, as disciples of his nonconformity?

The Rev. Peter Gomes is Pusey Minister of Memorial Church, Harvard University, where he is also a professor of Christian Morals. He is the best-selling author of The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart (HarperOne, 2002).

Living with Difficult Texts at YDS

By Harold W. Attridge

On several occasions in recent years I have had the pleasure of teaching a very special course at Yale Divinity School entitled Living with Difficult Texts. It has been reserved for M.Div. seniors who are willing to commit themselves to a serious exploration of applied hermeneutics.

The course, limited to about a dozen students, begins without a set syllabus, but with a discussion identifying biblical passages, mainly in the New Testament, that students in the class find “difficult” for whatever reason.

Many of those that the students propose are quite predictable. They include texts that have stirred up controversy in various churches in recent times, texts that enjoin women to be silent in church (1 Cor. 14:33–36; 1 Tim. 2:8–3:1) or subordinate to male authority (Cor. 3:18–21; Eph. 5:22–24; 1 Pet. 3:1–6). The roster might include texts that seem to condemn same-sex relations (Rom. 1:25–27; 1 Cor. 6:9) or texts that have seemed to glorify violence (Ps. 137:9; Rev. 18:19–24; 19:15), willing acceptance of slavery (Col. 3:22–25; Eph. 6:5–8; 1 Tim. 6:1; 1 Cor. 7:21–24), or unquestioning obedience to civil authority (Rom. 13:1–7). Texts that have demonized the Jews (John 8:44; Rev. 3:9) or could be read as disparaging Jewish tradition (Heb. 7:18–19; 8:13; Rom. 7:7–13; 1 Cor. 15:56) and have thus played a role in the sorry history of Christian anti-Semitism usually appear on the list.

The roster includes texts that have created classical theological or ecclesiological problems, such as the apparent discrepancy between Paul in Romans and Galatians and James on the relationship of “faith” and “works.” Some students propose texts that have been at the center of contemporary exegetical debates, such as the texts in the Pauline corpus that speak of the “faith in/of Jesus Christ” (e.g., Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:22), texts at the heart of the “new perspective” on Paul. Students also propose texts, like the whole book of Revelation, whose

conceptuality and style continue to baffle and challenge many readers, particularly in light of the prominence of dispensational theology in American evangelicalism.

Many of the texts proposed are “difficult” because they make claims or suggest norms that stand in tension with our modern sensibilities and with the conscientious judgment of many Christian communities in recent days. Some issues—e.g., the immorality of slavery or anti-Semitism—have long since been settled, so the difficulty consists in the simple presence of texts whose presuppositions or implications have been clearly rejected by the Christian tradition. Part of the difficulty that such texts raise is at the level of a theology of Scripture. What do we make of a body of “revelation” that has such transparent, and such widely recognized, flaws?

Other texts are difficult because they remain controversial among contemporary readers of Scripture. Here divisions between more “liberal” and more “evangelical” readers surface. It is hardly a surprise that texts involving sexual ethics, which have provoked intense debate among Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others, should be on the roster.

In addition to the more or less predictable texts, students have proposed familiar but still opaque texts, such as the parable of the “unjust steward” in Luke 16:1–9. Of course, as soon as students begin to discuss one apparently obscure parable, it often becomes apparent how tricky virtually all of the parables of Jesus can be. (As John Dominic Crossan famously asked,¹ does the finder of the treasure in Matt. 13:44 have a right to the treasure, and if not,

how does this little vignette function as an image of the reign of God?)

Finally, as difficult texts some students propose passages the meaning of which is not at all in dispute; nor would Christians disagree in principle on the relevance of the texts to their lives of faith. Yet the exhortations to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), to sell all and give to the poor (Matt. 29:21; Mark 10:21-22; Luke 18:22-25), not to divorce (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18), to love enemies

Scripture is a “cathedral” that one enters and lives in, “reading” it in different ways, being formed and inspired by it as a community of worshippers.

in deed and in truth (Matt. 5:44)—such extravagant, sometimes outrageous, demands have always been “difficult” to preach, teach, and fulfill. Equally challenging are the descriptions of his own ministry in which Jesus is portrayed as calling into question love of parents and family (Matt. 10:34-39; Luke 12:51-53; 14:26-27) or embracing a very severe asceticism (Matt. 12:12). A resolutely radical Jesus remains as challenging and difficult now as he ever was.

As anyone who has had a ministry devoted to expository preaching can probably testify, just about any passage in the New Testament could, with a little reflection, qualify as a “difficult text.”

Intense Discussions

After students have proposed their texts, I select a roster for treatment in the course. Each week all the students prepare a two-page position paper on the text(s) of the week, which they share ahead of the class session. One or two students will be called upon each session to present their paper to the class and then the floor is open for what usually turns out to be an intense discussion.

From time to time I modify the rhetoric of the “position paper” by asking students to consider a pastoral scenario in which they have to deal with the text in some way. They are called upon to preach it; they are asked about it at a picnic, a pot-luck or a cocktail party; they are in a situation of interfaith conversation; they are counseling a couple who come from different religious traditions, and so on.

Students bring to the discussions of these texts various resources from their academic experience at Yale, from their own denominational traditions, and from their own personal experience. Sharing their tools and strategies usually proves illuminating no matter where the students are “coming from.”

Most, reflecting their course work at YDS, find it helpful to put the text in question into its historical and literary contexts. That process seldom settles issues, but it exposes the differences in presuppositions between ancients and moderns. It also often leads to a conversation about development within and beyond Scripture about fundamental values and the evolving implications of faith claims. Historical and contextual considerations can be useful, especially in discussing issues of sexuality, social institutions such as slavery, or attitudes toward women in roles of leadership. But history, either in the sense of the historical context of the original scriptural witness or the history of its appropriation, seldom resolves an issue.

Students will often bring to the table a framework for theological reflection, such as the “quadrilateral” of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Conversations then develop about how each of those factors should be brought to bear on a particular issue raised by the difficult texts. There are some issues on which there is ready consensus about the moral or practical matter involved. No student in any version of this course, for instance, has ever argued that slaves should be submissive to their masters. There remain questions of what to make of a revelatory text that supports such a notion, and there opinions will differ rather dramatically, reflecting different denominational and personal assessments of where the center of gravity in religious authority lies. Some are content with a rather “low” view of Scripture, a testimony of the struggles and the beliefs of our forebears in this religious tradition, instructive, yes, but hardly binding. For others, it is vital to find ways in which Scripture functions as the Word of God in today’s world.

Whatever their theology of revelation or their notions of inspiration, most students in this class develop a more thoughtful and articulate view of the significance of Scripture for their ministry, a sense of its power and potential as well as a sense of its limitations. Some are attracted to a model that I have borrowed from my colleague Dale Martin in Religious Studies, of Scripture as a kind of “cathedral” that one enters and lives in, “reading” it in different ways, being formed and inspired by it as a community of worshippers. Some have found helpful my own essay in an earlier issue of this journal² about the ways we can and cannot “trust the Bible,” not as a textbook of science, history, or even ethics but as a story or collection of stories, a compendium of debates around issues crucial to human life, and as a poetic hymnal, articulating basic hu-

man fears, aspirations, and longings. The telling of those tales, the arguments about the presence or absence of God, and the expression of human hopes and fears have shaped and will continue to shape communities of profound conviction, in service to a fractured world.

One fruitful result that emerges from the many conversations in a course on difficult texts is this: students reflect on their experiences as readers of Scripture in communities of faith, and in reflecting on those experiences they come to a deeper appreciation of the ways in which Scripture, for all its difficulties, takes on its layers of meaning. Whatever their problems, the texts gather meaning in such communities of faithful and faith-seeking readers, communities like the classes that have met at YDS.

Harold W. Attridge is dean of Yale Divinity School and Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament.

Notes

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Finding is the First Act* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

² "Can We Trust the Bible?" *Reflections* (Spring 2005).

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Dan Pagis

I died with the first blow and was buried
among the rocks of the field.
The raven taught my parents
what to do with me.

If my family is famous,
not a little of the credit goes to me.
My brother invented murder,
my parents invented grief,
I invented silence.

Afterward the well-known events took place.
Our inventions were perfected. One thing led to another,
orders were given. There were those who murdered
in their own way,
grieved in their own way.

I won't mention names
out of consideration for the reader,
since at first the details horrify
though finally they're a bore:

you can die once, twice, even seven times,
but you can't die a thousand times.
I can.
My underground cells reach everywhere.

When Cain began to multiply on the face of the earth,
I began to multiply in the belly of the earth,
and my strength has long been greater than his.
His legions desert him and go over to me,
and even this is only half a revenge.

Holy Bible 3.0: Scripture in the Digital Age

by Kwok Pui-lan

Ten years ago, I wrote a short essay – “What If God’s Name is 01100100?” – for a theological newsletter in Boston. I was not being facetious or trying to make fun of God. What I tried to do was to imagine God using the binary language of the digital code.

Since writing that article, the impact of the digital revolution has, of course, become far more pronounced in all aspects of modern life. We can hardly imagine how we lived without email or Internet or iPod or BlackBerry or online shopping. At an opening worship of an Asian women’s gathering, a young Japanese student flipped open her cell phone and read the selected biblical passage from the tiny screen, for she had downloaded the Bible into her phone. My student Steve, who is taking Introduction to the New Testament, bought the Bible on CD and downloaded it onto his iPod. As he walks, jogs, or does his chores, he can listen to passages from the gospel or from Paul, just as he can sample different pieces of music.

The transmission and study of the Bible have always evolved alongside human communication. For a long time, the gospel was passed down from generation to generation in oral form because most Christians were illiterate. Basilicas were built and magnificently adorned as “Stone Bibles,” where the imagery in stained glass, statues, mosaics, and frescos proclaimed the Word. During the medieval period, monks and scribes produced handwritten, elaborately illustrated Bibles and manuscripts. Communication in Europe was revolutionized when Johann Gutenberg introduced movable type about 1450 C.E. Before Gutenberg, there were about 30,000 books on the entire continent, nearly all Bibles or biblical commentary. The introduction of moveable type and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular during the Reformation made the Bible accessible to all. The Bible was no longer under the purview of the church and its priests and theologians alone, but

available to individual Christian readers.

With the advent of printing, higher criticism of the Bible emerged. Even as the philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment influenced the historical study of the Bible, the sheer availability of texts, including those from other cultures, also shaped the kinds of questions biblical critics asked. Phil Mullins points out: “Only in a world in which the mechanized press has turned into an organ of proliferation, populating the world with many texts, does a connection between text and social world become an important connection.”¹

Despite the domination of historical criticism in the academic study of the Bible for the past two centuries, a new question presses upon us: What will the study of the Bible look like in the future as we move from a print culture to one defined increasingly by digital media?

Those of us who entered seminary before the early 1990s remember how we needed a large table for studying the Bible—enough space for our Hebrew and Greek texts, various modern translations, lexicons and dictionaries, concordance, Bible word books, and volumes of history and theology of the ancient Near East or the Roman Empire. These study tools were big and expensive, and they were considered good investments that would last us throughout our ministry. We spent hours poring over the meanings of individual words and scrutinizing their occurrence in the Bible. Today, all we need is a computer with a handful of software programs, allowing us easily to display Hebrew and Greek texts, compare different translations, and check the meanings of ancient words without hassle. In a matter of

seconds, we can find out how many times the word “justice” appears throughout the New Testament or in the Pauline epistles alone. We can print out the original Hebrew or Greek texts alongside different biblical translations for use in the classroom or in Bible study groups at church.

In addition to these valuable time-saving electronic devices, of course, the Internet offers a vast world of biblical resources unthinkable just twenty years ago. My colleague Gale A. Yee, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, showed me some thirty Bible links that she has bookmarked in her computer. They

Biblical scholars will need to be conversant with film criticism, art criticism, media, and cultural studies in order to understand the emerging cybermedia interpretations.

include links to professional organizations, scholarly journals, biblical archaeology, and study of the ancient Near East. As a scholar interested in the visual representations of women and the Hebrew Bible, Yee finds that the Internet saves her much time combing through library and museum catalogues, by providing information about paintings, videos, animations, and other electronic products at her fingertips.

Sacred Hypertext

Will the availability of these multimedia digital resources change our relationship with the Bible? Some scholars believe that the electronic medium will transform our understanding of a “sacred text.” In an oral culture, stories are told, interpreted, and embellished based on the context and responses of the audiences. With the printed text, the “hard” copy gives the impression that the text is final and the boundary fixed. For some, the notion of a “sacred text” belonged to a past culture and era. As Richard Thieme writes, “To speak of ‘sacred text’ is to identify ourselves as Print People, post-Gutenberg pilgrims voyaging through vast typographic seas.”²

Today print culture is yielding to a digital one, where visual, electronic text appears much more fluid and malleable. Electronic text has no fixed borders and can be constantly updated and constructed by the creator and the user/reader. Scripture now appears in hypertext format, with links to all kinds of information and Web sites. The reader can read a few lines, surf other sites, and check out video clips, thereby creating her own domain of knowledge and context of knowing. Digital culture is not just

another way of delivering the text, Robert S. Fortner argues, but “rather an entirely new and complex reorientation of sensibility, and a new metaphor that is redefining people’s relationship with the texts that have constituted our Christian foundation.”³

Biblical scholarship is surely destined to face new generations steeped in visual culture, with pictures, animations, and videos forming an important new context of learning and understanding. The guiding questions will no longer be focused on the text’s historical setting and the original audiences. “When interpretation involves not only verbal truth-claims about interpretive propositions,” biblical scholar A.K.M. Adam writes, “but also shapes, colors, soundtracks and motion, the matter of historical verisimilitude recedes among a host of other questions.”⁴ Biblical scholars will need to be conversant with film criticism, art criticism, media, and cultural studies in order to understand the emerging cybermedia interpretations.

Gog, Magog, Blog

One of the exciting developments in cybermedia is the way individuals are able not only to receive information but also interact with it across time and space. When Sarah Dylan Breuer began her lectionary blog during the advent of 2003, her goal was quite modest. As director of Christian formation for youth and adults in her church in Maryland, she hoped to provide some type of mid-week formation for those who were too busy to come to church for Bible study or prayer groups. In the first week after she started the blog, about twenty-five people in her church accessed it. But the number quickly jumped to 700 to 800 a month later, as many people who did not know her began reading it. Her blog was picked up by Google and other sites, and now she has about 8,000 visitors a week, mostly from the United States, but also from other nations, including countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Although trained in biblical studies, Breuer writes her blog in a friendly, dialogical style and does not assume the position of an expert. She sees her role as an “agitator” to incite people to think about the lectionary in light of current events and the social environment in which they find themselves. Because her blog allows visitors to leave comments, people can read the responses left by people from different parts of the world. Breuer and her visitors form a kind of virtual interpretive community, as respondents can comment on how her ideas work out in their own situations. By reading these comments on the blog, Breuer said that she has learned much about cultural specificity in biblical interpretation.

All of these developments call into question the traditional understanding of authority in interpretation. In the past, pastors, scholars, and religious leaders with theological training were the trusted authority figures and custodians of biblical tradition. Many Christians will no doubt continue to rely on these experts, as evidenced by the enormous appeal of popular books on the historical Jesus. But there are many more channels now to look for information about the Bible by surfing the Web, interacting virtually with other interpreters, and sending questions online. Anyone can start a Web site or a blog about the Bible, with or without biblical training.

Seekers and Surfers

Will digital culture, hailed as democratic and granting access to ordinary people, challenge established authority and religious institutions?

The question is a complicated one that should be examined from many sides. Some savvy Christian denominations and religious organizations were quick to see the potential of using cybermedia to reach out to people. The United Methodist Church was one of the first denominations to use computer technology to reach out to its members for religious formation and networking, dating as far back as the early 1980s. By now, the whole range of denominations and local congregations makes extensive use of the Web to champion their interpretations of faith and Scripture. According to a survey, the majority of the young adults who use the Internet to look for religion and spirituality consult the Web sites of their own faith traditions. Therefore, the growth of digital media may not necessarily undercut traditional religious structures, but can be a tool for communication and outreach.

The ease of accessing biblical materials on the Web may create confusion and conundrums about the reliability of the information one may find. Some biblical scholars have used their expertise to provide helpful advice and guided tours. Mark Goodacre, a professor in the Department of Religion at Duke University, has created a Web site, The New Testament Gateway (<http://www.ntgateway.com>), which is regarded as one of the best resources for biblical studies on the Internet and provides a model for others to follow. The site is a gateway to other sites, and is searchable and topically organized in a user-friendly way. R. Christopher Heard of Pepperdine University has created iTanakh (<http://itanakh.org>), which provides information about the academic study and teaching of the Hebrew Bible. The site is arranged alphabetically and covers a wide range of

topics, including archaeology, languages, methods, scholars, software and publications.⁵

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow has argued that since the 1950s, a spirituality of inhabiting sacred spaces has slowly given way to a spirituality of seeking. This traditional spirituality of dwelling identifies with traditional religious structures and feels secure in the spiritual heritage passed down through generations. Religious boundaries are clearly drawn, and religious authority is respected as the custodian of the sacred.

In contrast, seekers do not have an identifiable spiritual home; they are explorers and sojourners, not dwellers. They exchange certainty for freedom to explore; they combine various spiritual practices.⁶ In his new work, *After the Baby Boomers: How*

I hope scholars will pay attention to religious dwellers and tinkerers, experts and ordinary readers, baby boomers and Generation Net.

Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion, Wuthnow describes young adults as “tinkerers” who pull together bits and pieces from different cultures, traditions, belief systems, and backgrounds to create tapestries of meaning.⁷ For these tinkerers, the electronic medium further relativizes their approaches to “sacred text,” including the Bible. The boundary and meaning of the Bible is not fixed, and its meaning is no longer universal, or to be deciphered and controlled by the experts. Rather, the Bible is an open “book” whose meaning can be actively constructed by the reader through a comparative reading of or in combination with many other texts and traditions in the cyber marketplace. The concepts of orthodoxy, heritage, tradition, and authority are continually challenged.

A New Interpretive Community

There are other issues to ponder. Even as the digital age has led to the shrinking of the world and the compression of time and space, it has also resulted in a huge digital divide between the haves and have-nots. Though much attention goes to how the electronic medium has changed our relation with the Bible, African biblical scholars such as Musa Dube and Gerald West remind us that most of the world has yet to benefit from the new technology. They have urged us to pay attention to the “ordinary readers,” who are not only nonacademic readers but include the majority of third-world readers relegated to the periphery of the global economic structures.



The inclusion of these ordinary readers will enlarge the moral horizon of the interpretive community, for these readers often possess “suppressed knowledges” that are vital to their survival. These readers read the Bible privately and in small groups in order to find out how the Bible can provide sustenance for their ongoing struggles for food, safe drinking water, and means for survival. The experience of *reading with* these ordinary readers, including women in the African Independent Churches, has contributed to a postcolonial and anti-imperial reading of the Bible.⁸

It would be premature to predict the approaches and scope of reading the Bible in the twenty-first century, but I hope scholars and critics will pay attention to the religious dwellers and the tinkerers, the biblical experts and ordinary readers, the baby boomers and Generation Net, and the impact of cybermedia interpretation on the generations to come.

Kwok Pui-lan teaches Christian theology and spirituality at Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Mass. She is the author of Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology (Westminster John Knox, 2005), Introducing Asian Feminist Theology (Pilgrim Press, 2000), and other books. She was a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School in fall 2007.

Notes

- 1 Phil Mullins, “Sacred Text in an Electronic Age,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20 (1990): 101.
- 2 Richard Thieme, “Entering Sacred Digital Space: Seeking to Distinguish the Dreamer and the Dream,” in *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium*, ed. Robert M. Fowler, Edith Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2004), 51.
- 3 Robert S. Fortner, “Digital Media as Cultural Metaphor,” in Fowler, Blumhofer, and Segovia, *New Paradigms for Bible Study*, 42.
- 4 A. K. M. Adam, “This Is Not a Bible: Dispelling the Mystique of Words for the Future of Biblical Interpretation,” in Fowler, Blumhofer, and Segovia, *New Paradigms for Bible Study*, 14.
- 5 See Matthew W. Mitchell, “Biblical Studies on the Internet,” *Religious Studies Review* 32, no. 4 (2006): 216-18.
- 6 Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-18.
- 7 Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 14-15.
- 8 Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

The Bible in Song: Reclaiming African American Spirituals

By Yolanda Y. Smith

Wade in the water
Wade in the water children
Wade in the water
God's a-gonna trouble the water

African American spirituals have long had special meaning in my personal and professional life. My awareness of their significance, however, came relatively late. I did not gain a full appreciation of the spirituals or my African American Christian heritage until I joined a black church in my late teens.

Yet my introduction to the African American spirituals came to stand at the very heart of this cultural and spiritual awakening for me. As I began to sing these songs, deeply rooted in both the Bible and the tragedy of slavery, I came to understand their profound meaning. It is no exaggeration to say that through the spirituals I learned to appreciate the dramatic history and depths of the African American religious experience.

As I pursued my career as a Christian educator, first as a director of Christian education in the local church and later as a professor in the academy, the spirituals became one of my most valuable resources for teaching both the biblical text and the African American Christian experience. Unfortunately, I discovered that many African American churches, having uncritically adopted Eurocentric educational paradigms, curriculum materials, and modes of worship, have abandoned the use of the spirituals. Consequently, these churches are in danger of losing the spirituals not only as an embodiment of their heritage but also as a valuable tool for Christian education.

The spirituals embody the faith and heritage of a people who have encountered the dehumanizing effects of slavery and racism. Enslaved for nearly three hundred years, the collective creators of these songs sang about the suffering they en-

dured: "Nobody knows the trouble I see, nobody knows my sorrow; nobody knows the trouble I see, Glory, Hallelujah!"

Despite the overwhelming despair, they never lost sight of their faith. As preservers of this dynamic faith and heritage, the spirituals helped sustain the enslaved community. They served not only as a means of education and worship. They gave the community a way to express its deepest aspirations for freedom and social change. As a form of covert communication in the resistance struggle for liberation, the spirituals often signaled impending escapes or secret gatherings. Although the spirituals recount the brutal realities of slavery, they simultaneously reflect an enduring legacy of hope, resilience, survival, and unwavering faith.¹

Though various sources have influenced the spirituals, I have long been intrigued by how the Bible functioned in song within the enslaved community. As E. Franklin Frazier notes, "The Bible provided the Negro with the rich imagery which has characterized . . . the sacred folk songs" of African Americans.² Selected biblical stories and images, forming a distinct "slave canon" that drew heavily upon the Old Testament, provided a unique theological and hermeneutical foundation, whereby the enslaved community read the Bible in light of their particular experience. More specifically, as enslaved Africans looked to the Bible, they identified with the plight of the Hebrew children of God and appropriated their story of bondage and liberation.³

To a lesser extent, the New Testament also played a role in the spirituals, emphasizing the life and death of Jesus Christ. Since the enslaved community

identified more intensely with the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the stories of Jesus' birth are not as prominent in the spirituals.

Though the biblical message as embodied in the spirituals took on great meaning during the antebellum period, I believe that the Bible in song can continue to have meaning and influence in our society and in our churches even today.

The Bible in song highlighted basic tenets of the Christian faith—love, hope, mercy, grace, justice, judgment, eternal life.

Embodied in spirituals, the Bible can serve as a source of education that embraces, for instance, the value of the oral tradition. Certainly, the oral tradition was central to the education system of the enslaved community. Enslaved Africans, prohibited from learning to read and write, passed on valuable life lessons from the Scriptures and other wisdom sources through the spirituals. Slaves learned these lessons in the fields as they labored from sunup to sundown, in the privacy of their living quarters, and in clandestine worship services.⁴ Indeed, for the masses of slaves who could not read, the “spirituals were their channel to the word of God.”⁵ The Bible in song highlighted the basic tenets of the Christian faith—love, hope, mercy, grace, justice, judgment, death, eternal life. It was also a guide for living the Christian life, as the following spiritual illustrates:

For in dat Bible you will see,
Jesus died fer you an' me.
Matthew, Mark, Luke an' John
Tell me where my Master's gone.
Go read de fifth of Matthew
An' read de chapter through,
It is de guide to Christians,
An' tell 'em what to do.
Now take yo' Bible an' read it through,
An' ev'y word you fin' is true.

The spirituals, then, served as an important medium for teaching and learning the Bible within the black community.

And they still can. In *Reclaiming the Spirituals*, I argue that these songs offer numerous creative approaches to teaching not only the biblical text but also African American Christian heritage. In fact, the spirituals embody various educational elements (e.g., dialogue, imagination, spontaneity, rhythm, narrative, nature, and ritual) that can enhance the overall educational experience. I have seen this

at work in local church settings where spirituals embodying biblical narratives are used to reenact the stories of biblical heroes and heroines. Some churches have also used spirituals to recount the Christmas story in song.

Yet many African American churches today have lost sight of the spirituals as a mode of education and as a critical part of their rich heritage. They have replaced the spirituals as well as the oral tradition with print resources that do not reflect their heritage. By incorporating these materials, many churches assumed that they were promoting a “more ‘proper’ religious instruction than had been provided, presumably, by the oral tradition.”⁶ Given this trend, the spirituals may be lost not only as an important aspect of the African American Christian heritage but also as a source for teaching the biblical text. It is essential that African American Christians reclaim this valuable resource along with the oral tradition grounded in their heritage. Otherwise, additional aspects of the oral tradition such as poetry, dance, music, ritual, metaphors, proverbs, folktales, and historical accounts may be lost as well.

A Theology of Freedom and Self-Worth

In addition to serving as an educational tool, the spirituals can strengthen the life of the worshiping community. During the antebellum period, the spirituals were a crucial part of spontaneous, high-spirited worship services, which consisted of preaching, praying, singing, dancing, shouting, and fellowship. Grounded in their understanding of the Bible, enslaved Africans employed a unique interpretation of God, Jesus, and human worth. Indeed, they saw themselves as full “children of God” despite their condition of slavery and despite slave owners' teachings. Identifying closely with the children of Israel and the Exodus story, the slaves embraced a vision of God as the deliverer of the oppressed. They viewed Jesus not only as a suffering servant and friend who understood oppression but also as a conquering king who, through the power of his resurrection, could overcome even the most oppressive structures. The slaves believed and affirmed in song that they were valued in the eyes of God and that one day they too would experience deliverance from their bondage. This understanding of the Bible sparked a sense of self-worth within the enslaved community and inspired their resistance to bondage and efforts toward freedom. The antebellum black preacher reinforced this belief by reminding the worshiping community through the preaching and teaching of the Bible that they were created in God's image and were, therefore, loved by God.⁷

The biblical message of the spirituals can serve a similar function in today's worshiping community by reinforcing messages of love, hope, resistance, survival, deliverance, and self-worth. In my work with African American churches, I have discovered that many African American youth (and some adults) know little about their history of struggle and the contributions that came out of it. This lack of knowledge has often led to a poor sense of self-worth, a lack of direction for the future.

But I am convinced that a clear understanding of their rich heritage can help African American youth increase self-worth and exercise their God-given potential. One way of exposing young people to this legacy is through the worship experience. As a teenager, my introduction to the spirituals during worship opened up a new understanding of myself. Rather than using only contemporary praise songs in worship (which so many churches are now doing), I prefer to expose youth

Spirituals embody a legacy of African American Christian survival, resistance, protest, and resilience.

to the African American spirituals and the biblical messages that undergird them because they provide a more culturally and historically authentic worship experience.

Tearful Epiphany

For example, the spirituals invite deep reflection upon God's particular involvement in the life of the African American community throughout history. This is in contrast to the more individualistic and supposedly universal experience of God embodied in many contemporary praise songs. Though praise songs can play a helpful role in the African American church, the spirituals encourage African Americans to engage a theology and heritage that remembers God's sustaining power in their community. I recently observed the liberating power of the spirituals when an African American student approached me after I had finished a presentation on the spirituals. With tears in her eyes, she noted that the spirituals helped her to replace negative images of herself (and her ancestors) with positive ones and that she is now embracing the fullness of her heritage.

Finally, the biblical message embodied in spirituals can provide contemporary African Americans with a sense of hope, assurance, and confidence even in the most difficult situations. This was the

case for enslaved Africans, who voiced not only the despair about their living conditions under the harsh system of chattel slavery but also a hope for freedom. Although "freedom from slavery and freedom from life were often synonymous,"⁸ this desire did not mean that the slaves had accepted the constraints of slavery. The tone of many spirituals indicates that some of the slaves were determined to resist the bonds of slavery in this world.⁹ Consequently, spirituals such as "Oh, Freedom" inspired a spirit of hope and resistance.

Oh freedom! O freedom!
Oh freedom over me!
An' befo' I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

This profound and defiant expression of faith was unambiguous in its call for both spiritual and physical liberation. The spirituals were a means of coping with the deepest despair and disappointment. Yet, the biblical message embodied in these songs inspired a sense of hope and assurance that the enslaved Africans would one day be free.

Today, the African American community must confront a myriad of challenges that seem insurmountable, such as racism, classism, sexism, discrimination, poverty, unemployment, poor access to education and health care, economic and political disenfranchisement, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. However, the Bible in song still embodies a message of assurance, and confidence in the power to overcome hopelessness. It has happened before. During the civil rights movement, African Americans transformed many spirituals into protest and freedom songs that empowered the African American community to struggle against racism, injustice, and discrimination. Continuing to reinterpret the spirituals for contemporary African Americans, I believe they can be a way to engage critical issues facing the African American church and community. Certainly, the role they played during the antebellum period and the civil rights movement suggests their renewable power and application in the cause of resistance against contemporary forms of oppression.

The African American Christian experience reflects a history of survival, resistance, protest, and resilience. The spirituals, carrying biblical themes that still resonate with the black Christian community, embody that legacy. To forsake these unique songs, the gift of this music and theology, would

be to lose an important message of hope that can empower the African American community to trouble the waters of injustice and to struggle for a better day.

Yolanda Smith, Assistant Professor of Christian Education at Yale Divinity School, is author of *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Pilgrim Press, 2004). An ordained Baptist minister, she is now collaborating in a research project called “‘Been in the Storm So Long’: Yale Divinity School and the Black Ministry—One Hundred and Fifty Years of Black Theological Education.”

Notes

- 1 Adapted from Yolanda Y. Smith, “Christian Education and the African-American Spirituals: Recommended Resources,” *Religious Education* 101, no. 4 (fall 2006): 533–34, reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>). Excerpts also from Yolanda Y. Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 30, 38, 78, 107, 112. Copyright 2004 by The Pilgrim Press. Adapted by permission.
- 2 E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 12. Quoted in Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 85.
- 3 See Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (1975 reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1990), 12–15.
- 4 Ella Mitchell, “Oral Tradition: Legacy of Faith for the Black Church,” *Religious Education* 81, no. 1 (winter 1986): 99–104; Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831–1865* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 191–205, 207–8.
- 5 Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- 6 Mitchell, “Oral Tradition,” 106.
- 7 Thurman, “Deep River,” 11–12.
- 8 Thurman, “Deep River,” 29.
- 9 Thurman, “Deep River,” 25–30.

UNHOLY SONNET

by Mark Jarman

Today is fresh, and yesterday is stale.
Today is fast, and yesterday is slow.
Today is yes, and yesterday is no.
Today is news, and yesterday’s a tale.
The grave is empty. Last night it was full.
The glorious means of death was once a shame.
Someone is God who had a common name
That you might give a child or animal.
It happened overnight. The world is changed.
The bottles in the cellar all decant.
The stars sign the new cosmos at a slant.
And everybody’s plans are rearranged.
Today we meet our maker, in a flash
That turns the ash of yesterday to flesh.



Remembering for the Future: Interpreting Paul Today

By Diana M. Swancutt

Before the shattered glass of World War II could begin to be swept away, the haunting images of carnage and cataclysm—including the murder of 6 million Jews—provoked unprecedented outrage in the Christian West.

The questions were predictable: “How could they...? What kind of monsters would...?” But slowly, with uneasy consciences, European and American Christians acknowledged the truth “that there was something more going on here than simple inhuman brutality.”¹ “They” were “us.”

Beneath the question of European Christians’ direct involvement lay the cultural bedrock of their unwitting complicity in the attempted extermination of the Jewish “race.” Christians had laid its groundwork, in part, through centuries of scriptural interpretation, especially of Paul.

We may ask how this fact is relevant in the ninth year of the twenty-first century—and what Paul and his place in Holocaust history have to do with “us.” I shall give no simple answer here. My goal is rather to tell a story about Paul and lost kinship, to show how interpreting Paul can be a moral act that calls us both to self- and culture-criticism and to works of loving-kindness—toward enemies as well as friends.

A History of Slander

“History” is not objective fact but the living memory of a people—their sacred story. It is continuously retold in order to make sense of a people’s present life and future hopes. So is scriptural interpretation.

According to Scripture, the history of Israel is a long story of national hope discovered in the interstices of political oppression. Israel became a distinct people under the reign of other governments—Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Babylonian, Greek, then Roman. Likewise, Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew born under Roman control of Palestine, who witnessed Roman abuses of power and publicly proclaimed God’s approaching judgment of imperial rule. From

a Roman point of view, then, Jesus was a rabble-rouser, a “terrorist threat.”

Straining to understand the Romans’ subsequent execution of their Messiah, some of the first believers (who were Jews) blamed not just Jerusalem’s leadership—who were beholden to their Roman overlords—but Israel itself. Their censures were written in texts that later became Christian Scripture. So, part of Christians’ sacred heritage is the slander against their Jewish forebears for Jesus’ death, which was at the hands of Roman oppressors—John’s denigration of “the Jews,” and Matthew’s curse of Israel, “May his blood be upon us and upon our children.”

The Apostle Paul, too, wrestled with fellow Jews (and Greeks) over the precise significance of Jesus, and in his letters struggled “in light of Christ” with the question of the relevance of the law, the fate of Israel, and the justice of God’s intention now to embrace Christ-confessing Gentiles in the covenant. So powerful was Paul’s gospel to non-Jews in the Roman Empire—his vision of multi-ethnic inclusion in the covenant and his subsequent voice in the Christian canon—that for almost all of Western Christian history, Paul has been interpreted not just as a Jewish “apostle to the Gentiles” but as “the founder of Christianity.”

But is this an apt description of the figure scholars call the “historical Paul,” since there was no non-Jewish religion called “Christianity” in Paul’s day? The answer—No—is the first part of the story I wish to tell: Paul gained his reputation as Christianity’s founder in the centuries after his death, when a majority of Gentile Christians in the West renounced their ethnic and religious kinship with Judaism in Christ, and instead embraced identities as citizens

of (God's) empire. Taking their cues from the power centers of the wider culture, they Hellenized and Romanized Western Christianity and reinterpreted Paul's mission to the Gentiles as Christianity's religious supersession of Judaism.

It may surprise modern Christians to learn just how late this split with Judaism occurred. Even in the third century CE, Jews and Christians were not completely separate groups. Christians attended Jewish festivals and went to synagogues for worship and biblical education. We know this because church leaders from Tertullian to John Chrysostom roundly

Confronting the past is a crucial moral act. As a kind of scriptural interpretation it is an act of *chesed*, loving-kindness to others.

denounced the practice and the Jews who allowed it. This means that well into the third and fourth centuries Christians and Jews defined themselves *in relationship to each other*, in everything from commerce and education to community worship, as rival sibling groups vying for meaning, identity, and (as oppressed groups in the empire) for safety and a bit of cultural clout. But with Emperor Constantine's embrace of Christianity (313 CE) and Theodosius I's declaration of Christianity as the imperial religion (380 CE), Christians began a political and theological shift in identity from a persecuted group under Roman rule to imperial power brokers. Over the next millennium highly placed Christians used that new-found power against Jews—who were now their political subjects.²

A Seismic Shift

The impact of this cultural shift on Pauline interpretation was profound. Portraits of Paul slowly morphed from that of an ethnic Jew and apostle to the nations into a religious convert to Roman Christianity, who proved that a “civilized” (Greco-Romanized) Jesus supplanted “primitive” Judaism, and replaced the old Jewish covenant with a new Christian faith. So, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE), reading Paul, sacralized empire by approving “just war” and depicting Christianity as the spiritual City of God (pre-Constantinian Christians were largely pacifists enduring as resident aliens in Roman lands). Like other church fathers, Augustine also “baptized” high-status Greco-Roman philosophical traditions and wed them to Christian theology. Finally, he asserted that Paul accused Jews of being hypocrites who judged others but dishonored the Creator God

(Rom. 2:1). It is a testimony to the blinding cultural power of this reading that Western interpreters asserted for 1,600 years that Paul censured Jews in Rom. 2:1, even though interpreters before Augustine univocally identified the objects of Paul's censure as non-Jews. Not until the 1990s did scholars seriously question this reading.

Augustine's conferral of political power on Christian theological anti-Judaism set the stage for Martin Luther (1483–1546). Wrestling with the cultural problem of Catholic religious excesses and governmental restrictions on people's freedom, he too read Romans, and out of it created the doctrine of justification by faith alone as a tour de force solution to what he saw as his society's politico-religious problems. In other words, the beating heart of *sola fide*, the seemingly self-evident central tenet of Pauline theology, actually emerged from Luther's response to the turbulent social conditions in his Germany—his embrace of individual freedom of conscience, and his belief that the Bible, rather than the church, was the only infallible source of religious authority.

Jews, Catholics, and Luther

Thus, Martin Luther read Romans with a critical eye on (Roman) Catholic rule and the sale of indulgences for salvation. He equated Catholic rule with Jews' supposed works-righteousness, and he contrasted both, together, with “Paul's” argument that salvation rests on the divine gift of grace alone.

Luther also translated the Bible into the vernacular so lay people could read it. This act of political resistance to Catholic rule had a watershed effect on church and culture, helping to standardize the German language through the reading of Scripture. So Luther's interpretation of Paul served as a building block of modern German *Kultur* (culture). But because Luther's *sola fide* and interpretations of Scripture were inseparable from the stereotype of Jewish legalism he used to battle Catholic “oppression,” anti-Judaism was a natural ideological requirement of Luther's *Kultur*-making. Unsurprisingly, Luther's other writings about Jews, that synagogues should be burned, Jewish homes destroyed, property taken, and freedoms curtailed, were read (along with his Bible) in German Lutheran churches and revived in Nazi propaganda.

Interpreters of Paul were not unanimous in their anti-Judaism (see Calvin's emphasis, for instance, on the continued viability of the law). But the long-standing Christian strategy of denigrating Judaism in the reading of Paul and in Christians' cultural and political self-empowerment continued well into the Enlightenment era. Indeed, the Enlightenment

project of secular biblical scholarship added its own racialized imprimatur to Christian confessional anti-Judaism. As church and state divided in Western governance and the modern sciences (including the faux-science of race) emerged, the first modern biblical scholars interpreted Scripture through these lenses. But their project was not the disinterested

The pathos of this renewed commitment to reading Paul as a Jew is undeniable: the devastation that Christian oppression wrought on Jewish bodies and minds has brought Christians back into conversation with their Jewish kin.

interpretation of an objective past; it was rather Europeans' quest for their own origins, which they sought in Greco-Roman culture and civilization. The rise of biblical studies was a European exercise in culture-building that hellenized and "civilized" figures like Jesus and Paul in order to support an emerging ideology of European national supremacy over racial "primitives" like Jews and Africans.³ It portrayed human evolution as the "racial" progression from the age of the Jews to the age of Christ, and Paul as the Christian civilizer of salvation history beyond the racial primitivism of Judaism.

This soiling of the birth of biblical studies by anti-Semitism colored almost all pre-Holocaust scholarship on Paul, as well as the confessional theology that was built on it. Emil Schürer, Wilhelm Boussett, and Rudolf Bultmann all treated the Greco-Roman world as the source of "historical information" about Paul. At best, they ignored Judaism, and at worst, degraded it. A variety of commentaries similarly "colored" Jews. For instance, Sanday and Headlam's *International Critical Commentary: Romans* (1895, 1992)—still in print today—called Jews "sojourners among men" whose customs (circumcision, food laws) were racially inherited. Thus, the ICC depicts a "typical Jew" (in Rom. 2:1–3:6) as one who thinks his superiority is secured by virtue of descent from Abraham and possession of the law. Notoriously, in his 1969 article, "Paul and Israel," Ernst Käsemann made Jews the exemplar of human arrogance, saying that in Rom. 2:1–3:6, Paul "strikes at the hidden Jew in all of us, the man who validates rights and demands over against God."

This is a hard word to swallow. But confronting the past is a crucial moral act. As a kind of scriptural interpretation it is an act of *chesed* (loving-kindness to others), of faithfulness, which never forgets the future.

And so, we must say that even though Paul could not have founded "Christianity," the founding of Christianity was a culture-building project, and for subsequent generations of Christians whose culture-making depended on oppression of Jews, Paul was a prime architect of their success. This Paul, whose identity was shaped by their social locations and quests for political and religious identity, has been a critical weapon in the Western cultural elevation of Christianity over an (ethnically, politically, religiously, and then racially) "primitive" Judaism. This Paul has even been a tool in the rise of European hegemony over other nations and races. The irony is: as they became politically empowered, post-Constantinian Christians became blind to the corrosive role of imperialism and political oppression in both their interpretations of Paul and their own self-understandings.

A Post-Holocaust Paul

The good news is that the once-invisible is now visible. For the vivid images of the Holocaust broke the back of this history, compelling white Western scholars and laypeople alike to acknowledge its jagged edges, its violence, and to begin to re-view, remember, and re-tell the truths of a Paul freed from that violence.

In mainstream post-Holocaust Pauline scholarship, the pioneers of this retelling were Krister Stendahl and E. P. Sanders. In 1961, the late Krister Stendahl delivered a now-famous lecture called "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," a surgical dissection of modern Westerners' individualization and psychologization of Paul's letters. Stendahl argued that Luther's focus on "justification by faith" and Augustine's emphasis on Paul's "introspective conscience" have led interpreters to attribute to the "historical Paul" meanings that are completely opposed to what Paul said. Paul's first-century message, Stendahl argued, *had* to arise out of Paul's own Judaism and his conviction that the God of Israel had commissioned him as Jewish apostle to the nations.

In his monumental *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), E. P. Sanders built on the historical rapprochement to Judaism begun by Stendahl (and others) by uprooting the anti-Semitic "truth claims" of earlier Christian scholarship. Persuasively demonstrating (for example) that Judaism was never a religion of works-righteousness but a community of covenant faithfulness, he ushered in what James Dunn dubbed the "New Perspective" on Paul—a scholarly movement that has deepened our under-

standing not just of Paul's Judaism, but of the Jewish roots and worldview of his Christian gospel.

Paul, as these scholars see him, is a scriptural theologian of eschatological Israel, rooted in the righteousness of God, the faithfulness of Christ, the goodness of the law and prophets, and the enduring nature of God's covenant to all peoples through Christ. These scholars' vision of Paul's gospel is one whose universal welcome also makes the particularistic political claim that the Jew, Jesus Messiah (and not the Roman emperor), was Lord of both the Jews and the nations.

Power and Pathos

A profound advance over the scholarship of the first half of the violent twentieth century, the pathos of this renewed commitment to reading Paul as a Jew is undeniable: the devastation that Christian oppression wrought on Jewish bodies and minds has, in important ways, brought Christians back into conversation with their Jewish kin.

The post-Holocaust moral re-evaluation of Euro-Christian readings of Paul has also given voice to a new world of critical approaches that are deepening and challenging our understanding of Paul—from African diaspora and Asian interpretation to womanist, feminist, queer, and postcolonial criticism, and historical studies of ethnicity, empire, philosophy, and politics. So, what can this turbulent Christian history teach us in a new century?

First, politics and power plays between peoples are an inescapable dynamic of scriptural interpretation. White Westerners' recognition of some of our religious- and race-hatred can teach that our vision (of Scripture and each other) depends on where we are seated (our "point of view") and how well-appointed our seat is.

Scripture-reading is an ethical enterprise, with an interpersonal dimension, always involving others, however invisible they may be to us. And it can have a moral underside. Even when an interpretation (like "justification by faith") can breathe life into one group of people, it can do violence to others if their bones are the foundation upon which such interpretations are built—if they are a "them" to us rather than a Thou.

But these difficult truths can be a blessing, an opportunity to enter dialogues with those we believe to be unlike ourselves, to learn about ourselves in our strengths and weaknesses and prejudices and gifts, and about the rich places of Scripture in others' lives.

Second, if we are members of a culturally empowered group, we can learn that giving up our "front seat" for one in the back might better illumine Scripture. Israel, the Jesus movement, the Pauline mission, and earliest Christianity were all forged in the crucible of imperial oppression. Scripture is a story of the underside.

Especially if we are U.S. citizens or white or wealthy, this means that we can learn much about the cultural "truths" (e.g., about power or race and capital) that color our point of view from listening to the interpretations of those who are not. That whites may learn from the vibrant history of African American interpretation of Paul, North Americans from those in the South, Westerners from those in the East, those with money from those with less. Not to undercut their own engagements with Scripture, but to temper them in the fire of others' voices.

It also means that we can learn from Paul's instruction to our spiritual ancestors, his first auditors: largely Greek, upwardly mobile, but mostly poor folk and ex-slaves living under first-century Roman rule, they were unlike most of us. To them, Paul offered a

These difficult truths can be a blessing, an opportunity to enter dialogues with those we believe to be unlike ourselves.

message of strength for their struggle—so that they would take pride in their association with Judaism (which was culturally suspect, with a Messiah the Romans had killed), eschew the shiny baubles of Roman power, and remain united as they awaited God's judgment of the (Roman) world.

The primary emphasis of Paul's letters was therefore moral and political, focused on *deeds* of community growth and survival under Rome.⁴ Paul taught believers that God gave them the spirit of Christ, and thereby made them *interrelated* members of his material, resurrected Body. They had to enact their new identity, knowing that what they did affected everyone else in the Body. And so, Paul called believers, as Christ's arms and legs and feet and unmentionables, to live in Christ as Christ lived in them (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12-14). Instead of chasing wealth, lording it over others with knowledge, and arm-wrestling over the best seat at the table, they were to build each other up. To seek peace rather than vengeance, to elevate the lowly, to support the poor, and to act humbly toward others, knowing that such love fulfilled God's law and embodied the rule of God (Rom. 13:8-10; 14; 15:1-6; 1 Cor. 13).

In other words, Paul's word to our ancestors is a moral and political challenge from below. Meant to welcome non-Jews into Israel's covenant while requiring them to live peaceably with their once-reviled, Jewish kin, it likewise calls us to live into the tension between "us" and "them," to redefine "them" as family, and to imagine how God wants us to live, knowing better what the world looks like from our sister's or brother's point of view.

In short, this kind of Scripture-reading makes certain moral questions unavoidable: What might it mean for *us* to live the truth that we are intimately connected to every other believer, no matter what their race? To stand with the disempowered, knowing that they are as indispensable to us and to God as the mighty? To live peaceably, treating enemy as well as friend with love, because God is the taproot of creation's renewal?

Diana Swancutt, Associate Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School, is the author of an upcoming book, Pax Christi: Empire, Identity, and Protreptic Rhetoric in Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Notes

- ¹ Robert Egolf, "Review of *Reinventing Paul* by John Gager." The Paul Page <http://www.thepaulpage.com/Reinvent.html>.
- ² Over the next millennium, positioned Christians charged Jews with (among other things) blood libel (the idea that Jews sought to kill and eat Christians in such festivals as the Passover), kept them segregated in ghettos, and engaged in pogroms against them.
- ³ In his reading of Scripture, Gotthold Lessing wed the Romantic notion that every race had its own particular traits, language, and "spirit" to the Kantian idea of enlightenment as cultural education in order to argue that enlightenment was the civilization of naturally advanced peoples (Europeans) in a nation-state that fostered their unique abilities. Jews could be but a racial minority in such a nation state. Ernst Renan argued that the Greek language (utilized by Paul) was a symbol of Europeans' superiority to Semites.
- ⁴ Paul repeatedly said final salvation would be based on works (Rom. 2:1-16, 14:10-12, 2 Cor. 5:10). But as late as 2003, the New Testament scholar N.T. Wright could still detect "the massive conspiracy of silence" that guards the reign of *sola fide* over interpretations of Paul. N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul." http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_New_Perspectives.htm.

DAMASCUS

By Mark Jarman

Headlong in your career, breathing out threatenings
And slaughter against enemies, dictating trouble
For anyone advanced ahead of you, gambling
That you can stay ahead of your rep, checking off
The list of those to chop off at the top, and the place
Your name will be inked in, all the while businesslike,
Congenial with associates and flattering
To authorities and enforcers, bloody and obscene
Only in private mutterings and unspoken dreams,
On your way to yet another hanging, stoning, gossip-
Mongering swap meet of assassins, you're surprised
As much as anyone to be chosen—though it requires
A certain blindness on your part and such a change
You wouldn't know yourself—a vessel of grace.

Politics and Prophet Motives:

An Interview with Thomas W. Ogletree

Thomas W. Ogletree, Frederick Marquand Professor of Ethics at Yale Divinity School, has spent his career and ministry examining the interplay between the biblical witness, Christian social ethics, and the wider world of politics and social action. Across five decades, his inquiries have led him deeply into philosophic debates, political theory and the social sciences, while always engaging biblical history, the prophets, Jesus, and the church's mission. His next book, tentatively entitled Biblical Foundations of Christian Social Teachings, ventures a comprehensive examination of the ways in which Old and New Testament themes can address the public responsibilities of Christians today.

He was educated at Birmingham-Southern College, Garrett Theological Seminary and Vanderbilt University. His calling has from the beginning included parish ministry as well as teaching and writing. In the 1950s and 60s, before pursuing his academic career, he was a pastor of churches in Alabama, Wisconsin, and Tennessee. He was director of graduate studies in religion at Vanderbilt University (1978-81) and dean of the Theological School at Drew University (1981-90). In 1990 he came to YDS, where he served as dean until 1996.

His books are The World Calling: The Church's Witness in Politics and Society; Christian Faith and History: A Critical Comparison of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth; The Death of God Controversy; The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics; and Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding. He is coauthor of From Hope to Liberation: Towards a New Marxist-Christian Dialogue and co-editor of Lifeboat Ethics: Moral Dilemmas of World Hunger.

He retires at the end of Fall Term 2008.

Recently Prof. Ogletree was interviewed by Reflections editor Ray Waddle. The following is an edited version of their conversation.

REFLECTIONS: Your new book project takes a sweeping look at the biblical foundations of Christian social teachings. How do the political dramas in the Bible relate to our times?

THOMAS OGLETREE: One argument I make is that the Old Testament is the narrative of the faith pilgrimage of the people of Israel, who knew the ambiguities of social existence and confronted the complexities of life—the real world. Now to me, that's powerful because it reminds us we have to think about who we are as people of faith amid the complexities of the real world. You can't assume that we've got some kind of immediate connection to the absolute.

This is such an important theme in the Old Testament—the reminder that no system worked perfectly. This is a narrative of people living in multiple social systems over a thousand-year period—as slaves in Egypt, as a covenant community in the land of Israel, as an exilic community in Babylon, and in post-exilic struggles to renew the city of Jerusalem with its holy Temple.

The New Testament focuses on foundational events—Jesus' Galilean mission, the Gentile mis-

sion under Paul's leadership, the initial consolidation of the Christian movement. But if we look carefully at the way they are portrayed, we discover that they do not offer final answers to every question we might have. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides a model for creative thinking about complex issues, urging us to pay attention to our feelings and to work constructively with our fellow human beings.

REFLECTIONS: But aren't people tempted to look to Scripture for specific political solutions?

OGLETREE: One thing I emphasize is the way the early patristic writers, such as Origen and Justin Martyr, adopted Paul's words in Romans 13 as a model for thinking about the social world: "Be subject to the governing authorities," because they have been instituted by God. People were called to be obedient and responsible.

But the Old Testament has important models too. Augustine's account of the "earthly city," for example, is similar to the description of the "ways of a king" in 1 Samuel 8, though Augustine does not cite this text.

What's intriguing to me is how, when you get to Calvin and reformed Protestantism in the free cities, they started reclaiming the Old Testament covenant

tradition as a way of thinking about the social order. Calvin inspired his successors to look freshly at basic social structures—emphasizing the need for accountable government, and the need to separate the church’s mission from public affairs.

Also intriguing, of course, is that the Reformers played a very important role in influencing the formation of American democracy. Even so, the full emergence of the free exercise of religion was very slow and difficult. Most of our classic Christian tra-

Jesus was not a president, or a king, or even a governor. He was a prophet, and, above all, our Savior. Yet he never claimed authority to impose his view on others.

ditions have presumed that the ideal state of affairs is a socially cohesive society with an established religion backed by political powers. Even the principle of tolerance won only gradual acceptance, and tolerance meant putting up with your false beliefs so long as you also supported the dominant religion. Roger Williams was one of the theologians to articulate the free exercise of religion as a foundational faith principle.

REFLECTIONS: Do you think the Constitution’s Bill of Rights was inspired by biblical ideas?

OGLETREE: I love the fact that James Madison described the formation of the federal Constitution as the quest for “a more perfect union.” The Confederation of States was not working; states could not rely upon one another even in the face of serious external threats. Well, Israel’s tribal confederation faced the same problem. They became convinced that the only solution was to have a king. Madison was seeking a way to integrate the states in a more cohesive way while also preserving their independence. Remember, he studied with a prominent Puritan divine, John Witherspoon, at the “College of New Jersey.” They’ve changed the name. They now call it Princeton. So he was educated by Puritan divines. To me that connection is not trivial.

But we know the U.S. Constitution is not the same as Israel’s covenant tradition, which encompassed all aspects of people’s lives. It assumed a cohesive society. But First Amendment protection of the free exercise of religion is not a purely secular position. It recognizes that authentic faith must express our personal commitments, not beliefs imposed by state power. And that means I’ve got to honor your views. The free exercise of religion

means you must have no establishment of religions, lest the powers of the state be improperly used to violate liberty of conscience. So I contend that pluralism is actually at the heart of the Christian gospel if we read the New Testament carefully.

REFLECTIONS: That sounds counterintuitive.

OGLETREE: Consider Paul’s words, “I’ve become all things to all people, that I might win some.” Or recall the Pentecost narratives in Acts, where everyone heard the gospel preached in their own languages. Look at the churches Paul served: They were constantly conflict-ridden. How do they manage to work together, when the church cuts across class and status lines, and it’s culturally diverse? Well, it’s hard. But such pluralism is also central to Jesus’ mission, for he welcomed Gentiles and Samaritans even, who symbolized the lost sheep of the house of Israel. If you have an understanding of the gospel that excludes them, then you’re wrong. This violates our calling as God’s people.

That’s why in our contemporary world we’ve got to create a discourse ethic, an environment where we try to respect and honor one another. Here, I can cite Paul about being patient and forbearing. Paul stressed these attitudes not only for internal church relations, but also as a summons to reach out to enemies and even persecutors! Jesus offers a parallel message in the Sermon on the Mount. He initially focused on attempts to resolve conflicts between brothers, but he soon offers examples for coping with the demeaning and dominating practices of the powerful: turn the other cheek, give up your cloak, walk the second mile.

REFLECTIONS: So Paul and Jesus offer complementary visions of ethics, or do their “politics” compete?

OGLETREE: For Paul the church was a marginal and highly vulnerable community, so he mainly emphasized accommodating existing social structures because that was the precondition for the survival of the church. Paul focused his energies on building new faith communities. Jesus’ mission took place in a social context shaped by Jewish values, and he emerged as a radical prophetic critic of injustices and abuses of power.

Jesus openly acknowledged his mission was causing conflict, setting sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers. He warned those who would become his followers that they too would experience hardship and suffering, just like the prophets before them.

You find nothing like that in Paul. So you can’t make Paul alone the paradigm for Christian social teaching; otherwise you eliminate the prophetic

ATIONI
QUE LIT
BREVIST
OIO ET O
EPH

ALTERIC
CUM GASTICIS

ETUST
PLANATIO
VAT
S. SEXUS D
THOMAS



EAST ELEV. NEW SAN

Mountain
Lord

role. and you'd be presuming the churches have no meaningful access to public life. And that's not true. We do have access to public life, but we still must not attempt to use coercive state power to impose our beliefs on others. What we must do is promote justice and human well-being in our modern global, pluralistic, market-driven economy. Jesus called for justice and righteousness; he insisted that we must not exclude people. Even those who are considered outcast are beloved by God. Likewise, Jesus welcomed those who had married foreigners during the imperial dispersion of the people of Israel. We should not exclude them. Remember, Jesus was not a president, or a king, or even a governor. He was a prophet, and, above all, our Savior. Yet he never claimed authority to impose his views on others.

REFLECTIONS: Does the Bible show us how to establish right government?

OGLETREE: Any group that claims a political right to impose biblical teachings on particular human societies is taking a position that cannot be sustained by Scripture. The Old Testament reminds us that no system works perfectly. In important respects the tribal confederation was the most just. There you had extended family networks and assemblies of male heads of households who could act and potentially challenge the judgments of tribal elders. Elders were essentially grandpas. It is true that women were not given a public voice. They were expected to focus on bearing and raising children, a practice that had legitimacy when the survival of a people depended on having as many babies as possible. Beyond particular family networks people did not have strong attachments to neighboring tribes. The tribes did work together occasionally, but particular tribes could not always be relied upon to put their own young men at risk in order to protect other tribes facing external threats.

The tribes did have versions of a democratic system undergirded by powerful faith traditions, but they recognized that they needed something like "a more perfect union" in order to survive. They adopted monarchy, an act of realism, so the Old Testament clearly displays the complexities of social and political life.

REFLECTIONS: Your answer suggests the image of Reinhold Niebuhr in the court of King David whispering theological realism into the ear of the monarch.

OGLETREE: In my book I ask, why is David called righteous? The answer: he was penitent. What happened when a prophet confronted him for some wrong that he had done? He did not kill the proph-

et. He repented—publicly. Was that not stupid for a king to allow some prophet to call him to account for wrongdoing? It certainly violated conventional wisdom.

REFLECTIONS: Perhaps political ethics, at that moment, took a leap forward in history?

OGLETREE: Exactly! As I point out, however, only two kings aside from David and Solomon get a passing grade in the books of Kings: Hezekiah and Josiah. The others get F's. So, Reinhold Niebuhr did not invent Christian realism. It's in the books of Samuel and Kings. The point is that we must be prepared for the ambiguity of political systems.

REFLECTIONS: Because of those complexities, some believers have always concluded that Christians should wash their hands of politics. Are they right?

OGLETREE: No. But we need to recognize from the beginning that Christian involvements in politics are potentially problematic. The Scriptures remind us that any time we get too involved in politics we will probably be exploited and used by people in power. There can't be a simple transfer from values of the faith community to those values and standards that should be a part of public policy.

REFLECTIONS: How should we relate to politics?

OGLETREE: It's simply not the case that everybody can reach agreement on issues as subtle and complicated as those we always face in the political realm. We're going to be divided over those.

It's problematic for any particular religious tradition to establish itself as the standard for the whole society and attempt to control the power system. The story of the corruption of the church when it gets too closely involved in politics is repeated over and over. It is understandable, therefore, that people with exclusively secular commitments have attempted to remove religion from the public square. But I'm saying that there's another option.

What we must do is pay attention to how the various spheres of society work—the economic system, social system, political system, and cultural system. We must then discern appropriate ways to access those systems, and to see how wisdom or virtue might be integrated with values resident in existing systems. We seek to contribute to the good in ways that are compatible with existing social worlds.

Persons of faith need to know the limits of what they can appropriately do. They need to acknowledge this differentiation of spheres with special attention to civil society. Civil society is the place where Christians have the freest opportunity to be engaged in public discourse. Effective democracies depend on productive relationships between multiple commu-

nities. If particular racial or ethnic communities are isolated, then we have a conflict situation. Iraq, for example, is presently fragmented among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, rendering democracy virtually impossible. Democracy requires some form of civil society, where people can fully disclose who they are, share their views, and fruitfully engage in mutually respectful discourse.

As Paul would say, you've got to be patient and forbearing. Bear one another's burdens. You've got to try to hear and understand. If you have a viable civil society then you've got a basis for a democratic system.

In my judgment it is naive to think that we can impose democracy anywhere in the world. Even in the U.S. context democracy took form gradually, incrementally, step-by-step. The beginnings are shocking to us — that only males who owned property could vote. Slavery was accepted.

REFLECTIONS: How does prophetic tradition relate to this? Should believers disrupt politics?

OGLETREE: Sometimes you've got to have something like a civil rights movement or an antiwar movement or a feminist movement. Democracy does provide space for conflict, rendering feasible something like the prophetic calling. Prophecy often requires disruption, though ideally with constraint. When Jesus drove merchants and money changers out of the Temple, he disrupted Temple activities for the better part of a day. At the end of the day he left the Temple. He returned the next day and made himself available to Temple priests and scribes. His actions were apparently designed to get the attention of Temple officials, a form of militant nonviolent direct action.

The sit-in movement in the sixties pursued a similar strategy, breaking segregation laws by occupying lunch counters, yet accepting arrest and imprisonment. The aim was to make clear that segregation laws were not legitimate. Remember that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted Thomas Aquinas that an unjust law is no law. Jesus doesn't say submit to the powers—no, challenge them, but don't do it violently. He rejected the violent strategy. So, the issue is how you do the conflict.

REFLECTIONS: Finally, how can a church go about teaching the Bible in a climate of political division? Are there unifying themes in Scripture that we've overlooked in our culture war fevers?

OGLETREE: I find helpful Paul's counsel in 1 Corinthians 12-13 and Romans 12 and 13. He is addressing situations where there are troubles, and the task is to help people work together. These texts ask us to

face our conflicts, and learn how to deal with our differences directly and openly. I have also cited texts where Jesus acknowledges that his mission will cause conflict—yet he is committed to inclusion.

I remember an experience I had as a student pastor in Wisconsin, one that totally surprised me. At the beginning of my ministry I met with each family in the congregation. I wanted to learn what they cared about deeply, and how they might want to become more involved with the church's ministries. My goal was to help them discern their own gifts and discover their passions.

What caught me by surprise is that five or six families spoke about a women's prison that was located not far from the church. They were troubled by images of women behind bars because of crimes they had committed. I decided to help them start a prison visitation program, so they could hear the stories of these women. They soon discovered that these women did not fit common stereotypes of criminals. Instead they began to see that some people simply were not getting the chances they needed to live a decent and fulfilling life. There's no way that I could have persuaded families in the church to look critically at the full scope of social issues that ought to concern them. They began to discover many of these concerns on their own by responding to social realities in their own social worlds.

REFLECTIONS: By going face to face with strangers, taking a chance ...

OGLETREE: ... and welcoming them —

REFLECTIONS: ... they broke through to new community possibilities.

OGLETREE: But now we're facing a most challenging period. Building a strong social witness within Christian churches has become a harder undertaking given high levels of population mobility. In some settings, a congregation can lose as much as a third of its membership in a five-year period. People are also choosing their churches on the basis of their personal needs rather than shared visions of the greater good. I am intrigued by strong indications that people are asking probing spiritual questions, and struggling to discern the ultimate meaning of life. A rigorously secular view of life is simply not proving to be satisfying. My hope is people will seek a more comprehensive understanding of the Gospel message, one that empowers us to foster the common good among all the peoples of the earth, and a more careful stewardship of the earth as well.

Faith and those “Other Gospels”: What’s a Pastor to Do?

By PHEME PERKINS

Folks from church are used to the dazed look in my eyes when they come up in the parking lot or supermarket and begin a sentence with, “Did you read, hear, see...” followed by the latest mass-market Jesus “facts.”

John’s gospel concludes with a remark that the whole world couldn’t contain the books that would be written if everything Jesus did were recorded (John 21:25). And the evangelist hadn’t even met up with the World Wide Web!

By the end of the second century CE most Christians would have agreed with St. Irenaeus that the four gospels found in our Bibles represent the authentic witness about Jesus handed down from the apostles (*Haer.* 3.1). They confirm the fundamental truths about the one God, creator, and the Son and Savior, Jesus, predicted by the prophets, who died and has been raised to God’s right hand. At the same time, Irenaeus had to construct an argument that there had to be four gospels, no more and no less (*Haer.* 3.11). On the one hand, some might argue for a single gospel as the basis for Christian teaching and worship. On the other, the Gnostic sects appealed to other gospels said to convey a higher teaching that Jesus had given privately.

Just as our culture continually produces new versions of Jesus, so the widespread adoption of the four-gospel canon did not end the emergence of narratives about Jesus in the ancient church. The official gospels leave many gaps to be filled in by the imagination. What sort of child was Jesus? Sometimes his miraculous powers get out of control. A tantrum leads to the death of a playmate in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (ch. 4). What about the Virgin Mary? Anna and Joachim send the child of their old age to be brought up in the Temple (*Protoevangelium of James*). What really happened in Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate? Nicodemus turns up in defense of Jesus, so does the woman Jesus healed of hemorrhaging (*Acts of Pilate* 5-8).

One could go on. Whether it’s the popular media today or apocryphal gospels in the ancient and medieval church, Christian imaginations have roamed outside the canon. Even though the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (condemned at Nicea II, 787 CE) and the *Protoevangelium of James* (condemned by Gelasian Decree, late fifth cent. CE) were rejected by church authorities, they remained part of Christian piety. Unlike the canonical gospels, which are transmitted in a very stable textual form by the fourth century CE, the noncanonical gospels vary widely from one copy or translation to the next. The imagination remained at work even after a particular writing was in circulation. Phenomena such as the extra scenes and alternate endings on a movie DVD or interactive video game stories exhibit similar flexibility in today’s media market.

If flexibility and imagination are the name of the game, why have a four-gospel canon at all? Even church members who have never looked beyond their Bibles come up with statements about Jesus that they think are in the gospels but are not to be found there. Many a preacher, just after reading a gospel passage, delivers a sermon replete with details that are either taken from one of the other gospels or not in the Bible at all. I’m pleased when someone from the Tuesday Bible study whispers in my ear, “that’s not right, is it?” But such experiences show how much of our faith is attached to “other gospels” of some sort or other.

To put it more academically, the widespread adoption of a four-gospel canon is the necessary condition for the vast proliferation of apocryphal gospels from the second and third centuries on. Without something akin to official versions of the



life and teaching of Jesus, the other gospels, ancient or modern, are nearly unintelligible. Even the second- and third-century Gnostics, who alleged to have secret revelation from the risen Jesus, presumed some familiarity with the public stories being read in Christian assemblies. A secret tradition requires a public orthodoxy.

Heresy and Entertainment

Not all of the noncanonical gospels present themselves as secret tradition. The various infancy and childhood stories mix entertainment with legend. Early second-century tradition said Mark had collected the reminiscences of an aging Peter before the disciple's martyrdom in Rome (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.15). A quarter century earlier, according to Galatians 1:18, Paul had spent two weeks with Peter in Jerusalem, presumably acquiring information about

Working with a tenth-grade confirmation class on Palm Sunday, I discovered that their religious education version of Jesus' resurrection was loaded with details from the Gospel of Peter.

Jesus and his movement. The brief narrative in the Gospel of Mark could not embrace everything Peter had said about Jesus during those many years. A gospel attributed to Peter himself was circulating in Asia Minor during the second century CE. Initially, Bishop Serapion of Antioch considered this *Gospel of Peter* acceptable for reading and teaching in the church (*Hist. Eccl.* 6.12). Upon being informed that it included a heretical picture of Jesus, Serapion changed his mind even though much of the work in question accorded with the Savior's true teaching.

The selection from Serapion's letter preserved in Eusebius indicates that the bishop never thought this gospel had been written by Peter. The fact that he initially permitted its use suggests that the church in question did not have copies of the four canonical gospels. So we can imagine that for smaller communities at some distance from the urban centers of Christianity, knowledge of Jesus was dependent upon whatever gospel-like narratives were to hand. As long as such writings were in accord with the common rule of faith, as Irenaeus put it (*Haer.* 1.10.1–2), they did not pose difficulties for the faithful.

Expanded use of the four-gospel canon by the end of the second century CE meant that fewer com-

munities were using apocryphal gospels. Evidence for many of them is fragmentary or based on translations into other languages. *Gospel of Peter* was unknown until 1886, when an eighth-century codex that contains a passion account from the hand-washing scenario through a resurrection appearance at the sea of Galilee was found (see J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993] pp. 150–58).

Serapion claimed that *Gospel of Peter* incorporated the heretical views of “Docetae.” Various second-century groups held that the divine Christ could not die. Consequently, the one who died on the cross had to be different—either a Jesus abandoned by the inner spiritual self or a substitute like Simon of Cyrene. Though much of *Gospel of Peter* is an imaginative retelling of episodes from the four canonical gospels, one could consider its version of Jesus' death hospitable to docetic Christology. Jesus appears to feel no pain. His dying words might refer to such an inner self—“My power, O power you have forsaken me!”—but they could just as well be an oral variant on the familiar Mark 15:34.

Initially, scholars treated *Gospel of Peter* as a pastiche based on the canonical gospels. Some scholars now take the opposite view. They use *Gospel of Peter* to reconstruct a passion account earlier than the one found in Mark. In this version, for example, the criminal who admits his guilt and insists on Jesus' innocence never receives a promise of paradise from Jesus as in Luke 23:40–43. His protest causes the executioners to lengthen his suffering instead (*Gos. Pet.* 4:13–14).

Prime-time Apocrypha

Overall, the results have not persuaded most scholars. However, working with a tenth grade confirmation class on Palm Sunday, I discovered that their religious education version of Jesus' resurrection was loaded with details from the *Gospel of Peter*! Not even their teacher noticed that her story had no basis in the gospel stories we read in church.

But a modern habit of reading *Gospel of Peter* as though it were a movie script opens up a number of visual possibilities, similar to the expanded Jesus story running on Discovery Channel that same Palm Sunday evening. *Gospel of Peter* focuses more attention on events at the tomb of Jesus than any of the canonical versions. A formal guard was posted. Crowds came from Jerusalem in the morning. Unlike the official version, the resurrection events have what amounts to a TV crew on site, capturing new details. Angels descend from heaven. The tomb opens and, “they saw three men come out ... the

heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was being led reached beyond the heavens" (*Gos. Pet.* 10.40). After this drama has been reported to Pilate, who agrees to suppress the story, *Gospel of Peter* returns to the more familiar tale of Mary Magdalene and the women at the tomb. Notably, the seniors Bible group preferred the Discovery Channel version because it gave the impression of being "really historical" despite anti-gospel bits in its version of the crucifixion.

The anxieties over what had happened at Jesus' tomb, evident in *Gospel of Peter*, have their counterparts today. TV productions have focused on wild speculations about the "tomb" that have the same status in our popular culture as the apocryphal gospels did in theirs. Radical scholars like J.D. Crossan insist that Roman executioners would never have permitted a criminal to be buried. Bodies would be left to rot, then tossed in a common grave.

Parsing Judas

At the other end of the spectrum, every few years another "Jesus family tomb" story pops up in the bogus archaeology media. Most scholars and pastors are weary of both. Our creed says, "he died and was buried. On the third day..." Jesus did not escape any of those harsh events associated with death and burial. One can see the unusual tomb story in *Gospel of Peter*, affirming the triumph of

Many Christians today find a spirituality of inner transformation a more persuasive image of salvation than anticipating cosmic judgment.

God's power over multiple dimensions of death, protesting against the sparseness of the canonical reports. In that sense it affirms a truth of Christian faith even though it tells us nothing about the historical Jesus.

Another noncanonical gospel that had been completely unknown until the twentieth century created media buzz when the *Gospel of Judas* was published in 2006 (see Marvin Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. [New York: HarperCollins, 2007] pp. 755–69). Unlike *Gospel of Peter*, this text claims to be secret teaching that distinguishes elite believers (the Gnostics) from ordinary Christians who are captive to the ignorant teaching of Jesus' twelve disciples. Judas receives visions of Jesus' divine nature, the heavenly domain of those who know the truth, as well as fearful scenes in which the Twelve seek to stone him. All the events occur in the week before the passion. *Gospel of Judas* ends

abruptly with Judas showing authorities the room in which Jesus has gathered with the Twelve.

Scholars disagree over whether Judas is a fully enlightened Gnostic in this work or remains the despised outsider. This gospel contains a variety of scenes that involve Jesus and his disciples as well as sections of Gnostic mythology. It is not the Judas perspective on the passion events promised by National Geographic publicity, which had suggested a first-hand explanation by one of Jesus' closest followers. Its Savior mocks the Twelve, who are offering a "Thanksgiving" as well as sacrificial rites associated with the Temple. Jesus is not the Son of the creator god. Jesus' disciples respond angrily. Only Judas confesses that Jesus has come from a higher realm, "I know who you are....You have come from the immortal realm of Barbelo, and I am not worthy to pronounce the name of the one who sent you" (p. 761). *Gospel of Judas* rejects the ordinary Christian faith for a new version of God, of salvation, and of Christianity's Jewish heritage.

Two other gospels that often feature in the media also claim to represent private teaching that Jesus conveyed to an individual, *Gospel of Thomas* (*Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, pp. 133–56) and *Gospel of Mary* (pp. 737–47). Could Jesus transmit the highest spiritual teaching to or through a woman? Both texts depict Peter's opposition to that proposition. Jesus defends the possibility of a woman "making herself male" and thus becoming "a living spirit resembling you males" (*Gos. Thom.*, p. 153). In *Gospel of Mary* Levi defends Mary against Peter's anger, insisting that the disciples not question the Savior's knowledge of her true nature (p. 745).

Women today find the figure of Mary Magdalene an empowering symbol for their own struggles to attain spiritual and intellectual parity with male colleagues in the churches. At the same time both stories have ambiguous edges. Does "becoming male" or having a powerful male defender remain the price of entry?

The Imagination of Faith

Because *Gospel of Thomas* is a compendium of Jesus' sayings that preserves variants of sayings and parables found in the canonical gospels, it plays a role in discussions of early Jesus material. Some scholars find its focus on the image of the Kingdom of God within to be closer to Jesus than the apocalyptic motifs found in the synoptics. Jesus' exhortations to "become like little children" point toward restoration of a unified self prior to the differentiations of gender and culture. Disciples can achieve the eternal life for which humans were cre-

ated. Many Christians today find a spirituality of inner transformation a more persuasive image of salvation than anticipating cosmic judgment. But a collection of sayings and parables that lacks the narrative context that Matthew and Luke give deprives faith of an important point of reference, a lived example.

Who is the source of the wisdom hidden in these noncanonical sayings? For the disciple who perceives their truth, none of the human categories apply, not even “righteous angel” or “wise philosopher.” Thomas confesses, “my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like” (*Gos. Thom.* 13). Although this exchange challenges the canonical stories of Peter’s confession that Jesus is Messiah (Mark 8:27–30 par) or source of eternal life (*John* 6:68–69), it hints at the value of exploring other gospels. Jesus is always more than human languages or images can represent.

With the recent national survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life informing us that millions of Americans join congregations different from those in which they were raised, one can hardly be surprised by the popularity of noncanonical gospels. Similarly, pseudo-histories that celebrate women in the Jewish Scriptures such as *The Red Tent* or *Jezebel* are more inspiring to many than the Scripture itself.

What’s a scholar or pastor to do? Both the “other gospels” from antiquity and the assorted media and pop-culture variants today tell us something about the imagination of faith, about what feels credible to people. At the same time familiarity with the canonical Scriptures is eroding even among those who regularly attend services. So at the end of the day, perhaps the Paul-on-the-Areopagus approach is needed. Begin with their interests, their questions being sparked by the noncanonical stories, and reintroduce the genuine appeal of the Scripture itself.

PHEME PERKINS teaches in the theology department of Boston College. Her recent books include Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels (Eerdmans, 2007); Abraham’s Divided Children: Galatians and the Politics of Faith (Trinity Press International, 2001); Ephesians (Abingdon, 1997); Gnosticism and the New Testament (Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

A MAN IN HIS LIFE

By Yehuda Amichai

A man in his life has no time to have
Time for everything.
He has no room to have room
For every desire. Ecclesiastes was wrong to claim that.

A man has to hate and love all at once,
With the same eyes to cry and to laugh
With the same hands to throw stones
And to gather them,
Make love in war and war in love.

And hate and forgive and remember and forget
And order and confuse and eat and digest
What long history does
In so many years.

A man in his life has no time.
When he loses he seeks
When he finds he forgets
When he forgets he loves
When he loves he begins forgetting.

And his soul is knowing
And very professional,
Only his body remains an amateur
Always. It tries and fumbles.
He doesn’t learn and gets confused,
Drunk and blind in his pleasures and pains.

In autumn, he will die like a fig,
Shriveled, sweet, full of himself.
The leaves dry out on the ground,
And the naked branches point
To the place where there is time for everything.

A Truth-Teller for Dangerous Times

By Walter Brueggemann

We are learning—so slowly—from postcolonial readers that imperialistic ideological power imposes itself on our reading of reality and our reading of texts. Such domineering imposition skews our reading, and therefore our living. It imposes silence on all impulses that fall outside its domain.

It precludes hope for anything beyond its control. It reduces to sadness all those silenced and flattened by loss of hope.

Such a hegemonic imposition was intense in ancient Jerusalem in the seventh century BCE when Jeremiah appeared. The preferred explanatory narrative of Jerusalem elites was rooted in an unconditional divine promise to the Davidic house (2 Sam. 7:12-16) and in an unconditional promise of divine presence in the Solomonic temple (1 Kgs. 8:12-13). It was substantiated in the miraculous deliverance of the city of Jerusalem from the threat of Assyria in 701 BCE (2 Kgs. 19:35-37), from which it was concluded that the theopolitical establishment of Jerusalem had a perpetual guarantee. It turned out to be a guarantee, some judged, that authorized foolish and lethal policies, both economic and military.

It is inescapable, in my judgment, that contemporary readers of Jeremiah in the United States will come at this complex literature aware of our own national ideological power that generates and sanctions foolish and lethal policies, both economic and military.

One need not press parallels very far to see the ways in which the United States, as God's most "recently chosen people," imagines that it enjoys an immunity from the rules and norms of raw history. Consequently, we in our society are free to practice rapacious economics and heavy-handed anti-neighborliness, as did Jerusalem's ancient enterprise in cynical self-deception.

That ancient ideology—which functioned as a cover for economic self-indulgence—created a double disability in that ancient city and in its economic

sphere. On the one hand, it generated wholesale denial, a social practice that managed to disguise the facts on the ground (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). On the other hand, if or when one penetrated the denial, there arose wholesale despair, for those with eyes to see could discern that the Jerusalem enterprise was indeed headed for a dead end, a refusal to come to terms with the new realities that some said were the work of the holy God (Jer. 8:19-20).

Into that dangerous bubble of imagined reality, perpetuated by king and authorized by temple, came this Jeremiah! What we have are his words... "The words of Jeremiah..." (1:1). What is given us in the scroll is the unauthorized utterance of an uncredentialed nobody. He is an outsider from Anathoth, likely a descendant from that ancient priest Abiathar—also from Anathoth—who was banished from the capital city by Solomon (1 Kgs. 2:26-27). That family of priests had brooded and seethed for four hundred years until its burst of conviction erupted "in the days of Josiah" (1:2).

Public Lies and Poetic Vision

These are "the words of Jeremiah;" but, so the editors tell us, Jeremiah is the one "to whom the word of the Lord came" (1:2). The scroll that follows is not "the word of the Lord." It consists in the words of Jeremiah. But this Jeremiah, this poet, this agitator, this brooder, this defiant maker of images and phrases, is propelled by a hidden divine impetus to which we have no direct access. He had to say what he said, for it was like fire in his mouth (5:14), like a burning fire in his bones (20:9)—inflammatory indeed. He speaks an unauthorized word for which he claims a counter-authorization that is beyond the

reach of the managers of the dominant ideology. Right in the middle of the city where reside king and temple, he utters a counter-word (as in Jer. 7:1-15). Much of what follows in the scroll is a contest between this poet and those whom he exposes.

That is why the hegemonic enterprise of Jerusalem—and every empire and every frightened nation-state—tries to silence its poets and its artists (and even some of its preachers) from their odd voice that offers an alternative read of reality, that functions inevitably to de-legitimize the carefully constructed claims of hegemony. Jeremiah offers a counterword of reality that manifestly is not his own. He utters a word that comes from beyond himself.

Jeremiah's mandate, given in his "call," is to "pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow" (1:10). His only instruments for this negating task are words and "acted words"—that is, the conduct of theater. We see him, through the poetry and nar-

By the time this truth-telling, hope-telling poet finishes, listeners who engage him are ready for life outside the system of denial and outside the practice of despair.

rative of the scroll, impinge upon the imagination of Jerusalem by image and metaphor, poem and oracle. The purpose of his utterance is to draw Jerusalem out of the imposed ideology of immunity in order to discern the world in all of its stark reality. The hunch of such poetic imagination is that when reality is imagined differently, new initiatives of action and policy will break forth. Thus his imaginative utterance is designed to penetrate the shield of denial that was promulgated by the voices of officialdom that constantly declared "peace and prosperity," and anticipated a quick return to normalcy after catastrophe (see Jer. 6:14; 8:11; 28:3-4).

CNN and Sin

Against that systemic denial, Jeremiah is a truth-teller who works sometimes by direct utterance and sometimes by poetic inference. He describes a society of fickleness wherein all practices of faithfulness have been violated in wholesale ways, a fickleness that leads to abandonment (Jer. 3:1-3). He offers anticipatory scenarios of invading armies that will come upon the city that thought itself protected from such onslaught. Like the early CNN commentary that described in excited detail the first bombardments of the so-called Gulf War (1990-91), Jeremiah details the coming of a savage army that will

"devour" and show "no mercy" (5:15-17; 6:22-23). We know retrospectively that the poetic reference is to Babylon; but the poet withholds specificity for as long as possible and lets us imagine invaded bedrooms and raped women in the streets (4:19-20, 31). The poet weeps with YHWH over terminally ill "daughter people" for whom no medicine (balm) will suffice; the divine weeper is reduced to unimaginable tears (8:18-9:3):

O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people!
O that I had in the desert
a traveler's lodging place,
that I might leave my people
and go away from them!
For they are all adulterers,
a band of traitors. (Jer. 9:1-2)

Eventually, in poetic vision, we are left with the unbearable sight of dead bodies stacked up and abandoned (Jer. 9:22). This is only poetry! But what poetry, like a silent film of catastrophic burning and killing, while below the news images there crawls across screen in Jerusalem the assurances that "the surge is working," "the enemy is retreating," "the economy is strong." The statement of poetic subversion lets the viewer know that the stuff that is being sent out from the big house is a lie, a lie that carries with it the lethal future.

Faith after the Babylonian Invasion

Jeremiah's mandate is to "plant and build" (1:10). Alongside the devastating truth-telling that was judged necessary to penetrate the denial of Jerusalem, Jeremiah is a hope-teller. His work, most especially in chapters 30-33, is to tell hope that will cut through the despair of the displaced and sustain them until there is homecoming. Those deported imagined that they would remain in the grasp of the alien empire. Those who remained behind could not get the smoldering smell of the ruins out of their nostrils. But Jeremiah knows otherwise and says otherwise. As is characteristic in this text of ancient crisis, hope arises precisely in the zero hour. (In Christian parlance, Easter arrives on Saturday night.) Jeremiah constructs "a scroll" named by modern interpreters as "The Book of Comfort" or "The Book of Consolation," a collage of promissory utterances that came from the very lips of YHWH (Jer. 30-31). The sum of these utterances is to say that departure and disaster are "for a moment" (see Isa. 54:7-8). The displacement will not last. There will

be newness! There will be newness because, “Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.” (Jer. 31:2)

The transformative grace of God, since the gift of manna in the ancient memory, has always emerged in the crisis-of-life threat. There will be newness because YHWH is able to confess, albeit belatedly: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (Jer. 31:3)”

Counterintuitive Grace

The claim is counterintuitive. It had seemed exactly that divine fidelity had failed. But the hope-teller says otherwise. The hope-teller refuses the signs of abandonment just as the truth-teller had refused the signs of well-being. The settled practice of denial or the ready portrayal of despair are deconstructed by this unauthorized utterer of hope.

The result of this divine passion at the null point is a covenant grounded in forgiveness (31:31-34; 33:8), a new city rebuilt in well-being (30:18-22), a new land of safe houses, fertile fields, fruitful vineyards (32:15), and much dancing in well-being (33:11), all because the Holy One wills an overriding *shalom* (29:11).

By the time this truth-telling, hope-telling poet finishes, listeners who engage him are ready for life outside the system of denial and outside the practice of despair. His listeners are invited into the contest

In my judgment, contemporary reading of Jeremiah requires almost no interpretation. It reads like a scroll written yesterday.

with imperialistic ideology, to decide if his words are sufficient ground for new life in the world. The ones who trusted his utterance found, yet again, that life comes “fresh from the word.”

We are faithful to the scroll of Jeremiah if we take time to reflect on the one who utters, for the scroll itself pays great attention to the utterer. Jeremiah did not act to call attention to himself. Indeed he tells the court where he is on trial, “But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you.” (Jer. 26:14)

But our attention turns to him anyway, because his public presence is so contested and because his vocation is so unbearable. He himself recognized it as unbearable from the outset when he resisted the call (1:6). He finds himself facing hostility from his local companions (11:21). Eventually, perhaps

a bit paranoid, he knows about “terror on every side” (20:10). Having no visible support, he casts himself on YHWH, but YHWH turns out to be hard-nosed with him, reassuring but not very consoling (15:19-21; see 20:7-13).

There is, however, another reading of his personal life made possible by hints in the texts. He had powerful allies in the government, for Shaphan and his family are ready at hand to protect him (see 26:24; 36:20). He was connected with what appears to be the influential scribal family of Neriah and his sons Baruch (36:1) and Seriah (51:59). Even the most frightened king, Zedekiah, came to see him secretly counting on his council (37:17; see 38:14-28). Within the royal household, moreover, he is cared for by a functionary of the court, Ebed Melech (38:7-13; 39:15-18). Even so he is regarded by the advocates of hegemony to be a deserter (37:13), and a traitor (38:4), eventually taken where he did not want to go by those who had power over him (43:1-7).

In my judgment, contemporary reading of Jeremiah requires almost no interpretation. It reads like a scroll written yesterday:

It invites beyond the denial of the ideology of U.S. exceptionalism—an ideology so prized by some conservatives—to face the facts on the ground concerning practices of feudal and self-destructive brutalization in domestic and foreign policy.

It invites beyond the despair of self-sufficiency and self-securing—so powerful for some liberals—to reach bodily into the future for an alternative grounded in forgiveness.

And if plucking up and tearing down, building and planting—by word and by image—are the order of the day, I anticipate that the scroll is a tool for contemporary enactment.

The book of Jeremiah reaches out for new renditions of a counterstory. It reaches out for new utterers who, in a fresh time and place, can tell truth and can tell hope. It was because the truth is unbearable and the hope is impossible that the urban elites shredded the scroll (36:23); but the scroll persisted. The scroll is beyond shredding and will finally not be eliminated or silenced by any self-deceiving ideology, even that of the last superpower. There always appears yet again, by the mercy of God, a fresh scroll, new readers, and even new utterers who have not succumbed (Jer. 36:32).

Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, is the author of many books, including, most recently, Prayers for a Privileged People (Abingdon Press, 2008.)

Reading the Bible in a Sea of Signs

By A.K.M. Adam

I came to Yale as a refugee from the early days of the computer graphics industry. Business had been good, and would eventually get much better, but as soon as I set foot on campus and heard the clatter of late-summer typewriters settling the academic debts of spring semester, Yale drew me into the musty delights of the Higher Criticism, three different library classification systems, and Coffee Hour.

Once I settled into my seminary studies, however, I discovered that my fascination with biblical studies engendered a baffling problem: the more I learned in my biblical courses, the less my studies seemed to enhance my ministry and preaching.

Like any good academic apprentice, I tried at first to redouble my efforts. That only aggravated the problem; I knew more and more, but the technical apparatus of my learning always seemed to stand between me and the fluent, compelling, preach-able biblical theology for which I thirsted. My increasing technical expertise did not help me inhabit and proclaim the traditions I was studying.

My teachers at Yale Divinity encouraged me to keep chipping away at this complex of problems: in biblical theology with Brevard Childs, literary theory with Richard Hays, postmodernism with Cornel West, among others. Gradually, the puzzle pieces came together. Their inspiration and instruction helped me articulate a way of understanding interpretation that produced theologically rich readings of Scripture, but also allowed for a nuanced, historical-critical approach to the Bible.

A Postmodern Therapy

My way forward involved learning to explore the Bible and Christian tradition without participating in the ceaseless power struggle over whose interpretation is authoritatively right and whose is wrong. This means sidestepping—recuperating from—a fixation on the illusory authority of claiming the “correct”

interpretation. I offer instead a way of thinking about interpretation that still involves deliberation about better and sounder interpretations, but without pretensions to decisive interpretive authority. This proposal is unlikely to assuage our fiery passion to claim privileged possession of biblical correctness. But it may afford the incalculable advantage of clarifying the bases of our interpretations, and the bases of the relation of our interpretations to our dogmatic conclusions, our ecclesiology and our ethics.

Reflections will not permit space to spell out the whole scope of my response to this hermeneutical challenge. But at the risk of concealing vast intellectual debts, I'll summarize my postmodern therapy—a way out of the power struggle—in a quick tour of a promising alternative to the familiar landscape of modern critical biblical studies. Such an alternative may necessarily appear *unfamiliar*, and defy some deeply embedded imperatives of modern academic biblical study.

One distinguishing mark of this alternative approach is the shift from hermeneutics oriented around the written word, to the interpretation of signs (semiotics) that is oriented toward communication and meaning in general, of which the interpretation of words is but one instance.

This difference entails several powerful consequences, which stand to offer a welcome path forward toward a mode of biblical interpretation that more satisfactorily meets the longings that many modern readers express.

Once you shift the center of gravity *away from* the idea that “meaning” is an ingredient inside the text and *toward* the general phenomenon of signification, you first must come to terms with the unnerving prospect that *everything* signifies. You wake up in the morning: the character of the light in your bedroom provides information from which you infer time of day and weather conditions. You put on your clothing; the specific attire you choose

Everything signifies, and in the economy of signification, words make up only a small ingredient.

provides information about your social role (and your relation to it). You take a seat on the bus; your neighbor makes a face, perhaps indicating distaste or bigotry, perhaps indicating friendliness or attraction. None of these phenomena is verbal, but each exemplifies the sort of nonverbal communication that operates pervasively in daily experience. Nothing we encounter is intrinsically meaningless. Though we do not have the time or capacity to parse the significance of every detail that we perceive, we nonetheless make our way immersed in an ocean of signification. *Everything signifies*, and in the economy of signification, words make up only a small, specific ingredient.

A Plenitude of Meaning

The ubiquity of signification impinges on biblical interpreters even as we steadfastly fix our attention on written texts alone. For instance, people—including even some biblical scholars—treat their Bibles differently from the way they treat their beach paperbacks. Some select fine, leather-bound, elegantly printed Bibles and sequester them in a place of honor. Some carry Bibles with them wherever they go. Some handle their Bibles exactly as they would any other book—but even in making no observable distinction, these readers signify something about their relation to Scripture. There’s no way to escape implying something by the ways we handle our Bibles. In this, as in every other aspect of our semiotically saturated world, everything signifies.

Nevertheless, in such an environment, we can’t rely on an ultimate criterion to ensure the ultimate legitimacy of our interpretations. Though readers typically rely on the criterion of intention to distinguish sound interpretations from arbitrary, we can point to various spheres in which *unintentional* significations provide the vital clues for appropriate interpretation. Law enforcement, for instance, routinely depends on unintended signification to

arrive at its warranted conclusions, and psychoanalysis devotes special attention to unintended expressions as clues.

Biblical study already attends to certain sorts of unintended signification. One doubts that the (presumed) editors of texts such as the Pentateuch or the Gospels intended that their redactional work would be manifest to future generations of readers. Still less would they have deliberately left rough transitions, doublets, and divergent vocabularies as intentional indications of their work, as though to say, “Look here, Prof. So-and-so, this is where my first source breaks off and my second source begins.”

Still, biblical interpretation customarily restricts its attention to a narrow range of approved unintentional editorial characteristics. The ramifications of unintended meaning, however, extend far beyond the analytical purposes on which biblical scholars concentrate.

The very features of a published Bible, for instance, occasion interpretive responses independent of the actual words in the biblical texts. Some Bible editions include illustrations; the Bible I received at my ordination did. Such illustrations produce a powerful nonverbal commentary on the text they accompany. To take one prominent example, illustrations often suggest that Abraham and Deborah and David and Mary were as pale-skinned as contemporary Caucasian readers. Readers frequently conclude from such illustrations that the biblical characters are more properly depicted as European than as African, or Asian, or Native American.

A Bible’s binding, page design, cover art, graphs, charts, and typesettings are all nonverbal cues that inflect and alter a reader’s sense of how to interpret a text. The number of parties who thereby contribute to the preparation and dissemination of a text multiply the complications beyond controllable reckoning. The plenitude of signification defeats all our efforts to control signification.

Tensions and Intentions

Many interpreters vest a great deal of energy in determining whether the authors of biblical texts *intended* that their audiences arrive at certain conclusions. In such inquiries the ultimate authority for interpretation shifts away from the text as transmitted, and toward the supposed intentions of the author, or editor, or collector. But since even the best known of these figures remain more or less obscure to us, their intentions must remain even less clear.

Moreover, modern interpreters many times have sound reasons for projecting interpretations that



...it w...
...things...
...offered...
...Cain, thro...
...the testimony...
...ous, God testifyin...
...nd through...
...he still...

...All these die in fa...
...the promise...
...distance...
...that they were...
...on the earth...
...for the...
...make it...
...country of their o...
...ind...
...opportunity to return

Tom

...as an...
...as in a f...
...with...
...of the...
...looking f...
...foundations...
...builder is God...
...faith even *Sarah...
...ability to conceiv...
...proper time of li...
...red Him *faithf...
...also, there...
...maer

...But as it is...
...count...
...Therefore *God is...
...pulled their Go...
...d a city for the...
...By faith...
...tested, offer...
...had...
...dering up...
...It was...
...AC YON...
...CALLED...
...He...
...ise...

depart from what the producers of a text seem to have intended. The framers of the U.S. Constitution seem not to have *intended* that chattel slavery be abolished, that women and African Americans be permitted to vote. Likewise, the profound contributions of generations of theologians clarify our understanding of the God whom the Bible expounds, but they hardly constitute a straightforward exposition of the biblical authors' *intentions*. "Intention" informs, but still cannot control, the fluctuating tides of signification.

At other moments as well, intention fails us as a guide. Somebody who makes a gesture that inflames racial tensions may solemnly aver that she didn't *intend* to cause offense, but we criticize her insensitivity regardless of her intention. Proverbial wisdom notes that good intentions do not protect us from damnable error. Since intentions subsist somewhere inaccessible to public observation, they

A gentle touch on the arm may articulate a profounder understanding of Levitical hospitality than would an exegesis paper.

are always a problematic factor in upholding interpretative legitimacy. We are better situated to assess particular interpretations if we acknowledge that we can no more *control* signification than we can control the weather. The illusion that "meaning" lies within our control tends to blind us to how partially we understand our interpretations, even interpretations of our own words and actions.

We thus have no overarching criterion that separates legitimate interpretive sheep from misconceived goats. We can always *assert* that this or that interpretation passes muster—but we cannot display an ultimate criterion that gives decisive legitimacy to our favored interpretations.

A Transcendent Standard?

This should come as no great surprise. A truly universal criterion would meet with no dissent, since its status as a transcendent, universal criterion would render dissent incoherent. Critical readers have tried to define a hermeneutical method that results in unassailably legitimate interpretations, but none has attained a consensus that befits a *universal* or *transcendent* standard.

In fact, under the circumstances, the overwhelming prevalence of successful communication shows that we can manage quite satisfactorily *without* binding criteria of legitimacy. The absence of universal criteria doesn't hamstring legitimate interpretation

any more than the absence of a universal currency disables economic exchanges or the absence of a universal language prevents communication across different languages. In such cases, we negotiate rough-and-ready interchanges. International travelers may resort to sketches, sound effects, and mimed gestures. These cumbersome alternatives to a shared language do not derive their soundness from meanings intrinsic to arm-waving or stick figures, but from the pragmatic criterion of whether they result in an outcome that satisfies the interlocutors.

Mutual Generosity

Our communications function predictably and (on the whole) quite successfully because they rely on our participation in powerful patterns of shared behavior and custom. The more thoroughly one complies with one's neighbors' expectations, the more likely one's communication with these neighbors will play out to mutual satisfaction. These shared patterns include intonation, personal appearance and attire, adoption (or avoidance) of nonstandard usage (slang, pidgin, jargon), gestures, and shared indications of taste (the music one listens to, the literary sources one alludes to, the sports teams one follows). The complex of behavior, expression, taste, and attitude constitutes a *signifying practice*, a constellation of ideas and actions that decisively govern utterances and interpretations in particular circumstances.

Signifying practices constitute subcultures with their own rules of engagement, jargon, expectations, etiquette. We learn how to participate in these distinct practices by inhabiting them, acknowledging the extent to which the subculture's traditions and axioms prevail over our own bright ideas, and learning to express our ideas in the idiom of the particular signifying practice.

But signifying practices don't exclude one another. They coexist and permeate each other. A historical critic might see a particular biblical pericope as an example of Near Eastern erotic poetry, while a theologian might read it as a testimony to the soul's ardor for God. Each interpretation would be impertinent if we transplanted it to the other's signifying practices; neither one can lay claim to an authority that transcends the practices within which it arose. But they can learn from each other. They can both contribute to a larger symphonic reading of the biblical narrative.

In fact, the role of signifying practices helps clarify our difficulties over biblical interpretation. The

authors of biblical texts composed their narratives, oracles, laws, lyrics, and exhortations as seemed best to them (and presumably to the Holy Spirit)—but we have no more access to a uniquely legitimate or foolproof interpretation of these compositions than we do to the U.S. Constitution, to the latest director's cut of *Blade Runner*, or to a first date's shy smile. We respond to each according to conventions we share with other Bible readers, other Christians and Jews, other U.S. citizens, other aficionados of *film noir* and speculative fiction, other participants in courtship rituals. Immersed as we are in the unfathomable immensity and intensity of the sea of signs, we make our way as best we can (always subject to refinement and correction, whether from a slap across the face, a judge's verdict, or an ecclesiastical or academic authority).

The authority we honor resides not solely with academic experts, but also with the church, the lives of the saints, the generations who wrestled with the soundest, holiest, wisest ways to embody these texts.

The upshot: We have to get used to the idea that we have no access to an “objective,” universal criterion for deciding the absolutely right interpretation. We need to allow an elasticity, a mutual generosity, that neither historicists nor inerrantists can account for. We shouldn't be looking for “*the* right answer” but should rather arrive at answers by which we can live and, in the end, by which we can stand before God's throne of judgment. Each of us has to recognize that there are plenty of people smarter and more pious than you or me who will come to conclusions about Scripture that we won't like. So—thanks be to God—we who interpret Scripture in the church have centuries of the saints' teaching to show us ways of living, embodying, these answers.

Leaving the Ceaseless Struggle

I have made these points in public forums and time after time the upshot has been lost. What people hear and fear is relativism, chaos, indeterminacy. What I prescribe is a dose of skepticism about the long tradition of conceding unique authority to the experts and their technical readings. The authority we honor resides not solely with academic experts, but also with the church, the lives of the saints, the generations who wrestled with the soundest, holiest, wisest ways to embody these texts.

Modern models of interpretive authority perpetuate an unceasing struggle between schools of expertise, where one “overpowers” the next, which is then undermined by the next, or disproved by the next. The sort of postmodern reading I advocate here can help us out of this endless wrangle of winners and losers into a communion of sisters and brothers who order their lives so they can embody Scripture. Jesus did not bring the gospel by coercion. He laid out the gospel so that people were free to decide. God vindicated him, as God will vindicate all who in faithfulness perpetuate the gospel in their lives.

Once I let go the notion that verbal expressions *contain* meanings that it was my obligation to *bring out*, I could see vastly greater continuity between my words and my actions. I could recognize more vividly the congruence between saying, “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you,” and actually dropping some coins in the cup of a panhandler on Broadway, and refusing to devote my financial resources to clothing that costs so much that I have little left over to share.

Embodying Biblical Truth

There isn't some esoteric *meaning* in Jesus' sayings that takes an academician to explain; the gesture of teaching to give, the gesture of giving, and the gesture of living frugally all communicate something about how we put this world's resources to use. Thus, the disciplined study of the Bible and of its interpreters over the ages leads some practitioners to deeper, sounder faith, while it leads others to church-less skepticism. It's not the apparent facts that determine interpreters' reception of them, but the ways that interpreters fit them together—or can't. We all benefit from learning more Greek, more about the customs and expectations on which (and against which) the apostles and evangelists drew, but our adherence to a particular interpretation is always, in the end, a decision grounded in *fittingness*—and we are better served to draw the basis of that fittingness not solely on verbal configurations, but on how we live, and how we might live *better*.

Some interpreters will take this postmodern sensibility as a warrant to propound foolish, harmful readings. But if we are honest, we must admit that people have misused the technical apparatus of academic criticism, too. The entire history of the church has been characterized by a range of readings, some of which have been deemed absurd

by others, some harmful to the church by church leadership, some harmless, some just wrong, some just right—long before the academy developed its current technical methods.

We surely enrich our interpretive imagination by learning more about the biblical languages and the social, literary, political environments of biblical writers. Yet most of us reach a point when we understand the biblical text better by vesting our energies in actually *living that way*, so that another unit on the modal use of the participle or the nuances of Akkadian household organization will not further our efforts to know how to love our neighbors more wisely. A gentle touch on the arm may articulate a profounder understanding of Levitical hospitality than would an exegesis paper.

By shifting our interpretive attention slightly away from words' allegedly intrinsic meanings, and noticing the world's vast interwoven fabric of expression and apprehension, offering and uptake, we can recognize biblical writings as gestures on the part of generations of storytellers and lawgivers, authors and editors and scribes, toward helping us recognize God's ways and God's character. The earliest audiences for these gestures misconstrued them; subsequent generations misconstrued them; and we too are likely to misconstrue them. We cannot stave off error by intensifying our attention to methods and facts in a futile effort to impose or control correct interpretation. We can, however, work toward minimizing our errors by attending to the ways that saints and communities convincingly embodied the biblical truth that prophets and apostles handed down to them, by acknowledging our partiality and allowing that others may know better than we do. We can join in imitating them, and observe those who live according to the example we have in them.

When I take up the opportunity to preach these days, I draw on all that my YDS professors taught me—the signifying practices I imbibed there, and the ways they overlap and mingle and then broaden my sensibility. I peer into worlds that Lucian of Samosata mocked, that Dante limned, that James Cone excoriated, that Origen... originated. I hear Brevard Childs reading the last verses of the Book of Jonah, Joan Forsberg describing congregations and their peculiarities, Rowan Greer explaining Richard Hooker, Cornel West setting the intricacies of postmodern theory in the context of philosophers' lives and cultures. Through them, I hear echoes faint or forceful of Isaiah, of Egeria, of Cranmer, of Mary and Gregory and Flannery O'Connor. I hear

all this, and I begin to recognize common traits, rhythms, emphases, ways that God and the saints have expressed urgent truths that I hear also in the morning's lessons. And thus I preach.

A.K.M. Adam has taught at Eckerd College, Princeton Theological Seminary, and most recently at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, where he was professor of New Testament. His education includes two degrees from Yale (M.Div., 1986, S.T.M. 1987), and he has served parishes as an Episcopal priest in New Haven, Tampa, and Evanston. His books include Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World (Fortress, 2006).

PATMOS

By Mark Jarman

On a clear day you can see dark matter—
And still not know what you are looking at.
Or turn and see the simple heavens shatter
And make themselves into an alphabet
Of riddles wrapped inside of mysteries
Inside enigmas, coming from deep space.
What do you do when everything's a sign
And the goatskin of the universe uncaps
And pours its missing mass out like a wine?
I saw the script that glares inside rubbed eyes.
I felt the infrastructure of the face
That will endure though empires collapse.
I was astonished, I could hardly speak,
And wrote it all down afterwards, in Greek.

“Cast Your Life Raft Upon the Waters”

By Peter S. Hawkins

Quite by chance this Good Friday I stumbled into the antic world of Jay Leno’s Tonight Show. I was looking for a change of pace after a day spent awash in biblical narrative: my morning lecture to Boston University undergraduates on the Gospel of Matthew, a three-hour immersion in the Seven Last Words starting at noon, and then an evening performance of Bach’s St. John Passion. Ready, even desperate, for something else, I turned on the television

What I found, however, was more of the same—more Bible. But this time my encounter with Scripture was not in the solemn context of Holy Week but rather in the “reality” sideshow of popular culture. Leno was “Jaywalking,” a recurrent feature on *Tonight*, where he takes to the street and, microphone in hand, asks questions of passersby. It turns out that every year come Easter, when the media in general turn (if only momentarily) to Christianity, Leno administers a Bible Quiz to the unwitting souls who see a camera and hope for their fifteen minutes of fame.

Infamy is more like it, however, because the man or woman on the street, or at least those who make it into the final cut, flunk Jay’s test big time. Where was Jesus born? “Somewhere in Iraq.” What was the crown made of that he wore at his crucifixion? “Flowers” Who will inherit the earth? “The rich.” What two biblical cities did God destroy on account of their evil? “Pompeii and Atlantis.” Cast your *what* upon the waters? “Life raft.”

When the “Jaywalk” was over I found myself at once amused and saddened, but not surprised. For several years I have been teaching an entry-level course at BU on the Bible—the aptly titled “Religion 101”—and thereby discovered what my otherwise bright undergraduate students did *not* know. I asked at our initial meeting who had ever heard of the Twenty-third Psalm—surely the lowest common denominator of biblical literacy. Perhaps five hands went up. I then recited the text and asked my question again. This time the room was a forest of hands.

Whereas almost no one had heard of anything called “the Twenty-third Psalm,” just about everyone recognized it when they heard it—but not, as it turned out, as Scripture. For the first student I called on, it was a line in Pink Floyd’s *Sheep*; for a second, a reference in the rapper Coolio’s *Gangsta Paradise*; for a third, a refrain in *Pulp Fiction* (although here the text in question was actually Ezekiel 25:17—to some all Bible sounds the same!). Avid consumers of popular culture, my students knew their movies and their lyrics but not the biblical source of “the valley of the shadow of death.” They were shocked when I revealed it.

Consumer Heaven

How to square these demonstrations of biblical illiteracy with what is to be found on any trip to Barnes & Noble or Borders? For there, on the well-stocked shelves, you come upon Bibles not only targeted for men, women, and teenagers, but also, even more particularly, for “Moms,” “Dads,” and a subset identified as “Extreme Teens.” The *Promise Keepers Bible* vows to help men be all that they can be, whereas in the *Women of Destiny Bible*, “women mentor women.” For those Christians anxious about the usefulness of the Hebrew Scriptures there is the *Knowing Jesus* volume offering a “one-year study of Jesus in every book of the Bible.” Other study texts claim to foster African Heritage, Spiritual Formation, and Spiritual Renewal. There are also the “Ultrathin” and “Slimline” Bibles aimed at those for whom a highly portable Scripture is all-important—*not* pious

weight-watchers, as the titles might suggest. Finally, although the fool hath said in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1), it turns out that Dummies have a text just for them, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Bible*.

The flood of religious books then continues with books on "Christianity," "Judaica," "Islam," and "Eastern Religions"; beyond them, shelf upon shelf offer what might collectively be called "Spirituality": "Inspirational Fiction," "Magic," "Astrology," "Metaphysical Studies," and (my personal favorite) "Speculation."

Biblical ignorance is evidently something many people want to overcome; it is also, just as obviously, big business.

Again, how to reconcile the common perception that we have "lost" the Scriptures with this proliferation of Bibles and customized study guides? It may be, of course, that a great many more Bibles are owned than are ever read, and that the proverbial best seller is the equivalent of the latest piece of fitness equipment—purchased with good intentions, tried out, and then abandoned.

Yet, biblical ignorance is evidently something many people *want* to overcome; it is also, just as obviously, big business. Unlike the nonprofit Gideons, publishing houses do not give their Bibles away, they sell them. As a result, the availability of the Scriptures and the way they are presented depend on the marketplace and its values. Here, as everywhere else in our culture, the consumer has options and with them, the need to purchase further guidance. "How do you choose the Bible that's best for you?" asks a guidebook that promises just such a tailor-made solution (and for only \$4.99!). Different translations also compete with one another over accuracy, readability, and consumer interest, so that there is no longer any particular version in people's minds. No single text (like the King James of yore or the German of Luther's Bible) takes root in memory and thus is known by heart.

Writers Meet the Word

This latter fact has particular resonance not only for teachers of the Bible but also for contemporary writers who, at least on this side of the Atlantic, remain astonishingly in touch with the Jewish and Christian Bibles—and almost always in the King James Version.

Of course, being "in touch" with the Bible does not necessarily mean that our novelists and poets

are people of robust, let alone traditional, faith. Nor can even the believers among them count on the reader knowing the text, as did Dante, or George Herbert, or, for that matter, the skeptical Melville or Mark Twain. The relationship of our writers to the "Holy Bible" may represent an ancestral legacy that finally cannot be disowned—sometimes the case among Jewish writers—or may constitute a formidable literary presence that, for better or worse, one doesn't want to let go. The connection to Scripture may be vexed and stormy; it may involve humor and even spoof, may entail repudiation quite as much as respect for a living spiritual, as well as literary, tradition.

Precisely this range of reactions can be found among a wide sample of American writers willing to speak personally about the Bible in several collections of essays that have appeared since the late 1980s.

First came *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, which brought together thirty-seven contributors.¹ *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers and the New Testament* followed the format of this book-by-book series of reflections in order to carry on its often quite self-revelatory and idiosyncratic work.² It gathered twenty-three essays by the likes of John Updike, Mary Gordon, Annie Dillard, and Frederick Buechner. A more recent volume, *Joyful Noise: the New Testament Revisited*, anthologized what were then, in the late nineties, a group of thirtysomethings: Rick Moody (*Ice Storm*), Darcey Steinke (*Jesus Saves*), Benjamin Cheever, and Jeffrey Eugenides (*Virgin Suicides* and, more recently, *Middlesex*).³ Later came *Killing the Buddha: The Heretic's Bible* (2003), touted as "not so much a rewriting of the Bible as a supercharged hip-hop makeover."⁴

A Cloud of Poetic Witnesses

Prose writers predominate overwhelmingly in these collections of essays, but when it comes to poets who continue to wrestle with scriptural angels there is no shortage. I am thinking in particular not only of the late Anthony Hecht and Denise Levertov, but also of Louise Clifton, Andrew Hudgins, Jorie Graham, Allen Grossman, Kathleen Norris, Mary Oliver, Jacqueline Osherow, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Martha Serpas, Richard Wilbur, Franz Wright, and three recent colleagues of mine at Boston University, Geoffrey Hill, Robert Pinsky, and Rosanna Warren—a cloud of witnesses to the ongoing power of Scripture however it may be construed. With the exception of Geoffrey Hill I've restricted myself to American poets in this enumeration, but one can see how far the net extends beyond our shores by

looking at David Curzon's *Modern Poems on the Bible*, which includes work based only on the Hebrew Bible, and Peggy Rosenthals's *The Poets' Jesus*.⁵

None of the contemporary writers I have named above build on Scripture as could poets in the past. The more current use of the Bible is usually indirect, elusive, hard to evaluate, told "slant" (to recall the marvelously hard-to-pin-down Emily Dickinson). The place of Scripture is often complicated by irony, yet is no less powerful for being found as much between the lines as in them, for being difficult to evaluate or fully figure out.

Winging It

Take, for instance, Tobias Wolff's story, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," which first appeared in the 1981 collection of the same name, and which has just been republished in *Our Story Begins: New and Collected Stories*.⁶ Wolff's protagonist, Mary, is a familiar academic type: self-conscious, wary in the extreme, an untenured assistant professor resolved never to rock the boat. She is a historian whose one scholarly monograph opens with a hesitant phrase that sums up her life and work, "It is generally believed that..."

Mary always wrote out her lectures in full, using the arguments and often the words of "approved" writers so as not to risk saying anything controversial. Once, while talking to a senior professor, she saw herself reflected in a window: she was leaning toward her colleague and had her head turned so that her ear was right in front of his moving mouth. The sight disgusted her. Years later, when she was forced to get a hearing aid, she suspected that her deafness was a result of always trying to catch everything everyone else said. Wolff writes: "Her own thoughts she kept to herself, and the words for them grew faint as time went on; without quite disappearing they shrank to remote, nervous points, like birds flying away."

Parallel to Mary's personal diminishment is the downhill course of her career. One job goes belly up along with the bankruptcy of a college; another is hopelessly waterlogged in the rainforests of academic Oregon. Then, suddenly, the possibility of deliverance comes out of nowhere: Louise, a former colleague, invites her to interview for a tenured position at an unnamed "famous college" in upstate New York—a campus so charming, so authentically pseudo-Gothic that supposedly it was used as the set for *Andy Hardy Goes to College* and a slew of later movies. Mary takes in the absurd medievalism of the place: the school's Latin motto that translates

roughly "God helps those who help themselves"; a chapel communion rail that is said to have been taken "from some church in Europe where Charlemagne used to go."

Full of hope, Mary travels to the crisp, picture-postcard northeast, and reads up on the history of the region. As a careful researcher, she knows that the campus has pre-Columbian roots: it stood squarely in the ancient domain of the Five Nations of the Iroquois. Yet, what seems at first to be a dream come true—a real job in a real place—quickly turns out to be yet another nightmare. Shortly after her arrival,

The ancient words of the Bible have an extraordinary ability not only to speak to readers who may not yet have heard them, but also to reach the rest of us who stand in need of hearing them again.

Louise lets it drop that as part of her interview process Mary must give a formal lecture. With nothing prepared, nothing in hand, she panics. Louise first recommends that Mary simply wing it, "You know, open your mouth and see what comes out. Extemporize." When Mary protests that she *always* works from a prepared lecture, Louise offers something she had once written on the Marshall Plan but gotten bored with and never published: Mary can read it, and no one will be the wiser. The idea of passing off someone else's work as her own at first appalls Mary, until she realizes that she had been doing the same kind of thing for years—and "this was not the time to get scruples."

One revelation leads to another. In the course of a campus tour, Mary's male student guide mentions offhandedly that while the college appears to be old-fashioned, it is not. "They let girls come here now," he says, "and some of the teachers are women. In fact, there's a statute that says they have to interview at least one woman for each opening."

Academic Apocalypse

When her subsequent meeting with the hiring committee proves to be absurdly perfunctory, Mary realizes that she has been had. They were never really considering her for the position. They already knew whom they were going to hire; she had merely been brought to campus to satisfy a rule. With these facts corroborated by Louise, Mary is led off to her martyrdom in a lecture hall where students are already spilling into the aisles and professors sitting in the front row with their legs crossed.

Louise calls the audience to order and announces the Marshall Plan as the subject of the speech to follow. She does not know, however, that Mary had decided that she would rather die than deliver it—that she would “wing it” after all.

“I wonder how many of you know,” she began, “that we are in the Long House, the ancient domain of the Five Nations of the Iroquois.”

Two professors looked at each other.

“The Iroquois were without pity,” Mary said. “...Because they had no pity they became powerful, so powerful that no other tribe dared to oppose them...”

Several of the professors began to whisper. Dr. Howells was saying something to Louise, and Louise was shaking her head.

“In one of their raids,” Mary said, “they captured two Jesuit priests, Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalement. They covered Lalement with pitch and set him on fire in front of Brébeuf. When Brébeuf rebuked them they cut off his lips and put a burning iron down his throat . . . While he was still alive they scalped him and cut open his breast and drank his blood. Later, their chief tore out Brébeuf’s heart and ate it, but just before he did this Brébeuf spoke to them one last time. He said—”

“That’s enough!” yelled Dr. Howells, jumping to his feet.

Louise stopped shaking her head. Her eyes were perfectly round.

Mary had come to the end of her facts. She did not know what Brébeuf had said. Silence rose up around her; just when she thought she would go under and be lost in it she heard someone whistling in the hallway outside, trilling the notes like a bird, like many birds.

“Mend your lives,” she said. “You have deceived yourselves in the pride of your hearts, and the strength of your arms. Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, thence I will bring you down, says the Lord. Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly.”

Louise was waving her arms. “Mary!” she shouted.

But Mary had more to say, much more; she waved back at Louise, then turned off her hearing aid so that she would not be distracted again.

On one level, it is easy to see—and to relish—what Tobias Wolff is up to. He knows his collegiate setting well: the debilitating caution of academics;

the terror of being forced, unprepared, to “wing it”; the pathos of those who want teaching jobs and the arrogance of those in a position to give or withhold them. With Wolff, we savor the sweetness of revenge, as Mary finds a desperate joy in rocking the boat, in setting a crowded lecture room on fire with scandal. Nor are we baffled by Wolff’s play with magical realism. When a faux Gothic lecture hall morphs into a Iroquois Long House, or when Mary, standing in a stained glass window’s “circle of red light,” becomes one with the Jesuits on their funeral pyre, we understand the method of the author’s madness.

All of this is easy enough to figure out; but what are we to make of that moment when Mary, at the end of her facts and on the brink of drowning in silence, suddenly hears “someone whistling in the hallway outside, trilling the notes like a bird, like many birds”? Earlier, Wolff said that Mary replaced her own thoughts and words with those of others, so that they “shrank to remote, nervous points, like birds flying away.” Now, as she “wings it” for the first time in her life, those words return to her, trilling en masse, and taking possession of the horrified lecture hall.

Micah Amid the Ruins

What then shall we say to all this “winging”? Is it the result of a hearing aid gone haywire? Are we witnessing a woman going mad? Or are we watching someone who went deaf after listening too intently to other people speak, now discovering the sound of her own voice and refusing to be distracted by any others? This interpretation is appealing in many ways, and yet for those “with ears to hear” it has its limitations. For what Mary actually says when her facts run out—the trilling birds she releases when she puts words in the dying Brébeuf’s mouth—is none other than the language of the Hebrew prophets. Her judgment against those who soar aloft like the eagle and make their nests among the stars; her injunction to do justice and walk humbly—everything that she says is derived from Amos and Hosea, Obadiah and Jeremiah, and, most especially, from the prophet Micah: “[The Lord] has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8, NRSV).

Mary’s “text” is not some boring lecture on the Marshall Plan, but it is also not her own speech. Rather, by telling her college audience to “Mend your lives,” she becomes Micah denouncing the corruption of a proud Jerusalem. Or she becomes Jean de Brébeuf—who knows?—speaking “one last time” to

the Iroquois chief about to eat him alive. Willy-nilly, then, the former parrot becomes an apostle, the anxious plagiarist a prophet going for broke.

Wolff's tone in this story is satirical and tricky, which makes it difficult in the end to speak with confidence about the role that Scripture plays here. After all, a witty revenge comedy sits uneasily with a jeremiad, and the smart critic does not want to make too much of a good thing. Still, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" shows us how Scripture is present in contemporary literature—how it can generate new fictions and in turn be reinvented by them.

Wolff finds a quirky way to tell the truth in a world in which almost no one says what she means or listens to what anyone else says. The biblical words detonate within that decorous lecture hall, and although we may laugh at the chaos that follows, no one can deny that something happened. Something truly new was said, even though Mary's incendiary words were in fact already ancient and canonical at the time that Jean de Brébeuf may (or may not!) have spoken them.

The prophet Micah also gains a new context in which his challenge can be heard again, not in synagogue or church, but in an academic lecture hall inscribed within a contemporary American short story. Wolff gains the moral weight that modern speech seems everywhere to have lost, while Micah gets a chance once more to ruffle feathers, shock and assault, to disturb the complacent and comfort the afflicted. We encounter the Bible afresh because we encounter it unexpectedly, out of the confines of its familiar context. It does not matter that the story is funny and the Scriptures cited are not; the humor disarms defenses and lets the words themselves both wound and heal.

What was Tobias Wolff expecting of his readers when he wrote this story? It is unlikely that most people who come to it—the folks caught on the street by Jay Leno's Bible Quiz, for instance—will recognize the voice of the Hebrew prophets when they read Mary's speech. Because of this, much will be lost through ignorance of the once canonical text, until in some future moment a teacher or an editor adds a footnote and thereby accords Wolff what Dante or Herbert or Melville or Eliot have also come to require—a connection made to allusion and source.

But not all will be lost, for the ancient words of the Bible have an extraordinary ability not only to speak to readers who may not yet have heard them, but also to reach the rest of us who recognize the prophetic injunction but nonetheless stand in need of hearing it again—disarmingly out of context, in a fresh assault, and as if for the first time. "Mend your lives. Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly."

Since 2000, Peter Hawkins has taught in the Department of Religion at Boston University. In July 2008, he rejoins the Yale faculty, where he had taught previously for 24 years. He will be professor of religion and literature at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale Divinity School. His books include, most recently, *Dante: A Brief History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006) and *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, co-edited with Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Fordham University Press, 2006).

Notes

Portions of this essay appeared in "Lost and Found: the Bible in Contemporary Literature." *Religion and Literature* 36, no.1 (Spring 2004): 1–14.

- 1 *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Harcourt, 1987).
- 2 *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, ed. Alfred Corn (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990).
- 3 *Joyful Noise: The New Testament Revisited*, ed. Rick Moody and Darcey Steinke (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997).
- 4 *Killing the Buddha: A Heretic's Bible*, ed. Peter Manseau & Jeff Sharlet (New York: Free Press, 2004). Quote by Daniel Asa Rose, *The New York Observer*, taken from jeffsharlet.livejournal.com, visited 4/21/08.
- 5 David Curzon, ed., *Modern Poems on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), Peggy Rosenthal, *The Poets' Jesus: Representations at the End of the Millennium* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 6 My citations are taken from the version of the story that appears in *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (New York: Ecco Press, 1981), 123–35. A very slightly revised version appears in Wolff's *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

“God is One, So Are We”: A Theo-political Hermeneutic

By Paul D. Hanson

The application of the Bible to contemporary politics has proven to be so controversial as to lead many thoughtful, peace- and justice-minded people to conclude that religion should be excluded categorically from the forum of public debate.

We shall cite examples of a political reading of the Bible by political leaders in recent decades that are reminiscent of Edward Gibbon's picture of the religions of the Roman Empire that “were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful.”¹ Then we shall seek to balance the scale by reminding ourselves of instances in which application of biblical themes and principles played a key role in social transformation and resistance to evil. Thus situating ourselves on the horns of a dilemma, we shall have no choice but to take a position and then offer criteria for justifying the use of biblically informed values and beliefs in public debate.

President Ronald Reagan maintained that the Bible contains “all the answers to all the problems that face us today.” He vividly illustrated his hermeneutic when in 1983 he instructed an Israeli lobbyist: “You know, I turn back to your Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if—if we're the generation that's going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of these prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through.”²

While Nancy Reagan was immersing herself in astrology, the president apparently was absorbed by Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth*, a popularized version of Dispensationalism that Lindsay updated when the end of the world failed to occur in 1982 as he had previously predicted.³

If Reagan resorted to the Bible in dealing with the Cold War, George H. W. Bush found light in the Bible to guide his response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. In the first two weeks of January 1991, he found himself in the uncomfortable

position of favoring intervention at the same time that his Episcopal bishop, Edmond Browning, was publicly expressing his opposition to U.S. military action against Iraq.⁴ On the eve of the January 15 ultimatum that Bush issued to Saddam Hussein, Billy Graham was invited to be an overnight guest at the White House. A year later, in an address to the National Religious Broadcasters, the former president expressed his gratitude, “I want to thank you for helping America, as Christ ordained, to be a light unto the world.”⁵

Why is it that examples of the unabashed application of the Bible to contemporary events cluster disproportionately around Republican leaders? The blue/red typology no doubt has some validity in its association of liberal-secular tendencies with Democrats and conservative-religious traits with Republicans. At first blush, though, one could point to the evangelical Jimmy Carter as counterevidence, but closer scrutiny indicates that his biblical rhetoric has been more effective in his post-White House years than during his four years as president.

At any rate, most Democrats since 1981 have seemed reluctant to enlist Scripture, with one notable exception: “I very much welcome the decision on the part of the Democrats to no longer cede this whole rich realm of conversation and debate to right-wing Republicans,” Harvard theologian Harvey Cox exulted after hearing Bill Clinton's 1992 Democratic Convention speech.⁶ That was at the beginning of Clinton's ascent to the White House. As first term led to second, however, the biblical theme of “covenant” and references to Scripture became less and less frequent, and finally an episode in the Oval Office (not entirely unbiblical in nature when one recalls the David/Bathsheba affair) placed on

hold the reclaiming of the “rich realm” of biblical religion by the Democratic Party.

This is not to say that ventures into religious rhetoric ceased entirely among Democrats. Such ventures, however, tended to fall into one of two categories, stiff and awkward (e.g., John Kerry) or blundering and humorous (will the name of Howard Dean’s favorite New Testament book ever be forgotten?!).

Surprisingly, that paradigm was broken in the 2008 primary debates, where biblical themes resurfaced in *both* parties with fresh vitality. Mike

Would that the “Battle for the Bible” could be resolved so easily.

Huckabee responded to a bating about his interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis with an answer that could have received a passing grade in an introductory Bible course at Yale or Harvard: The six days of God’s creation need not have been our twenty-four-hour days at all. Hillary Clinton’s appeals to the examples of Jesus and the Good Samaritan flowed naturally and sincerely from the lips of this former Methodist Sunday school teacher. Barack Obama declaimed about the moral complexity of issues such as race and poverty as one who has read with understanding both the Bible and the Niebuhrs.

So where does this mixed bag of examples leave us in response to those who argue that religion should be confined to the private sphere? It would be so simple if we could trump the contrarians by citing Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church’s resistance to Hitler, Martin Luther King’s biblical dream of brotherhood at home and peaceful relations among the nations of the world, and Oscar Romero’s payment with his life for daring to stand firm against the corrupt and oppressive leaders of El Salvador and their international sponsors. Don’t the cases in which the Bible served the cause of justice, peace, and equality outweigh instances of biblical hatemongering like Pat Robertson’s argument that the gays of New Orleans are to blame for Katrina?

Proof-text Temptations

Would that the “Battle for the Bible” could be resolved so easily! Unfortunately, the exegetical dilemma (placed in historical perspective by Willard M. Swartley, who documented the manner in which the Bible was enlisted with comparable force on both sides of the debates over slavery, Sabbath, war, and women) persists to our own time.⁷ The Bible does not offer unequivocal answers to every

contemporary problem. So what is to be done with the Bible?

The traditional answer of Roman Catholicism resided within the teaching authority of the church. Though many conservative Catholics remain dedicated to that solution, the issue for many others has grown more complicated since the Second Vatican Council. Among Protestants stemming from the radical wing of the Reformation, the solution has been found in a return to the primitive meaning of the Bible (especially associated with Jesus and the early church). But with growing awareness of wide diversity even within the first generations of Jesus’ disciples, the problem has become more complex. Lutherans tend to resort to the principle of *sola scriptura*, especially in conjunction with St. Augustine’s rule of *Scripture interpreting Scripture* and Luther’s own declaration of a *canon within the canon*, but here too the inevitability of selectivity and the role of presuppositions in interpretation remains.

Lurking Subjectivity

Liberal interpreters should also be wary of their facile dismissal of the methods of proof-texting and typologizing used by fundamentalists in light of the fact that for over two millennia of scholarship in Judaism and Christianity those methods guided the application of Scripture to contemporary issues. Did not the author of Daniel 7–12 extend Jeremiah’s seventy years of bondage to his own point in history with the simple mathematical formula of 70 x 7? Was not Moses’ extraction of water from the rock in the wilderness a sign of Christian baptism for Paul? Did not Numbers 24:17 supply Rabbi Akiba with a warrant for declaring Bar Kosiba God’s messianic Deliverer from Rome? Was not the Antichrist of I John 1:18–25 the Roman pope for Martin Luther?

Light broke through the fog of pre-modern biblical interpretation in the form of a new scientific approach to establishing the meaning of scriptural writings. The tools for this approach were provided by Reason, touted as the apex of the human capacity to banish superstitions that hitherto had held humanity in bondage. The resulting achievements of biblical scholarship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in unraveling the mysteries of the composition of the biblical writings and locating them in historical context are of lasting significance. But the moment of triumph was soon shaken by attacks on positivistic confidence on two fronts—the epistemology of Immanuel Kant and the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher. The ensuing century and a half of philosophical and theological hermeneutics added another monumental chapter

to biblical research. But lurking was a sinister possibility: a field of inquiry could be overwhelmed by the disintegrating effects of human subjectivity.

That historic challenge was met by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who masterfully synthesized the importance of tradition with the undeniable reality of

There is not a single biblical model for relating the realms of religion and politics, but six of them.

prior understanding in his depiction of a complex phenomenon he called “the fusing of horizons.” Even while Gadamer’s hermeneutic continues to offer a credible framework for the complex task of relating the alien world of antiquity to contemporary realities, the close scrutiny of hidden assumptions and aggrandizing ideologies both in ancient sources and contemporary interpreters by Jürgen Habermas, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and R. S. Sugirtharajah have destabilized the entire guild of biblical interpretation.

The challenge presented by a wide spectrum of hermeneutical strategies on the one hand and modern cultures riven by differences in gender, class, race, and religion on the other is daunting. In relation to the role of the Bible in the political sphere, the resulting challenge must be addressed on two levels of inquiry: (1) What method should one apply for discerning the significance of biblical texts for contemporary issues (biblical hermeneutics)? (2) How can it be introduced appropriately into public discourse (theo-political hermeneutics)?

Finding a Middle Way

Strategies of biblical interpretation today range from “reader response,” in which the creator of meaning is the modern reader, to a higher criticism that continues to seek to reconstruct original settings and meanings in the positivist mode as if Schleiermacher and Collingwood had never put pen to paper. In the book on Bible and politics that I am currently writing, I adopt a middle position in the attempt to recover as accurately as possible the world of the ancient texts and the long history of interpretation and reapplication that students of the Bible continue to attend. But I seek to balance a reasonable confidence that we can learn how beliefs intersected with political processes, with awareness that my own perspective (with its many layers of personal investment) will influence conclusions, despite serious effort to hear the testimony of the past in its own idiom and context.

In this article there is room to mention only two conclusions of my study:

1. There is not a single biblical model for relating the realms of religion and politics, but six distinct models: theocratic, monarchic, prophetic, apocalyptic, sapiential, and accommodationist.

2. Although the Bible testifies to the flexibility with which ancestral faith communities applied their beliefs to the realm of politics, it also gives clear evidence of certain meta-principles. Foremost is the categorical distinction between divine rule (ultimate) and all human institutions (penultimate). This cardinal principle governs the relation of the faith community to human regimes: In relation to divine rule, all human governments are relativized. Other implications follow: Human governments are legitimate only to the extent that they conform to the qualities of rule that are inherent in divine governance. The allegiance that the faithful can give to a human regime is also penultimate and contingent on the moral qualities of that regime.

How then does the student of Scripture introduce his or her biblical insights into public debate in a diverse, pluralistic society? A further question arises: How can a theo-political hermeneutic incorporate what appear to be irreconcilable conceptions—namely, that the religious dimension in the moral reasoning of people of faith is not something that a society can proscribe, and that fruitful public discourse requires a mode of communication in which all participants can be heard and the rights of none are violated?

The theo-political hermeneutic that I have developed seeks to resolve the problem by: (1) preserving the tension in a multi-stage hermeneutical process, and (2) preferring Jeffery Stout’s more discursive-pragmatic notion of democracy and tradition⁸ over John Rawls’s more theoretical-separatist notion of a “free standing” political liberalism.⁹

Worship as a Political Act

The theo-political hermeneutic I have in mind consists of five stages.

Stage one is worship, the most important political act in which believers engage, since it is the source of their essential identity and the polestar by which they calibrate their moral compasses.¹⁰

Stage two is inner-community dialogue, or, in the context of my own parish, the congregational forum that occurs at 10 a.m. between the morning services. Here believers gather to debate and study issues of “word and world,” such as human sexuality, the Iraq war, urban poverty, the Harvard Square

Homeless Shelter housed in our church basement, and the lections of the liturgical year. Here, believers produce and refine a discourse, a vocabulary for articulating political positions based on their religious convictions. Here, a communitarian like Stanley Hauerwas would feel at home: through the explicit traditions of biblical faith, and in language unapologetically Christian, the urgent issues faced by those striving to represent the way of Christ in the world are debated. The heat of debate is often intense, but the atmosphere of shared faith and trust is never lost.

Stage three marks the effort to move the theological hermeneutic into the public realm. The question is this: How can the moral passion, patience, and courage that Christians derive from their beliefs enrich the contribution they make to the public good without violating the principles of the First Amendment?

Remembering the World's Well-being

Stage three signals a divergence of my position from that of the communitarians in integrating insights from John Rawls and in drawing on the works of theologians and ethicists working within the liberal democratic tradition like Ron Thiemann, Arthur Dyck, and Max Stackhouse. It expresses an attitude toward civil structures that differs from that of descendants of the radical Reformation and is instead at home within the Reformed, Catholic, and Lutheran churches. The person of faith is burdened with responsibilities not only to the “peaceable kingdom” of God’s eschatological reign, but also to the broader world and its imperfect forms of governance. It is too narrow an understanding of vocation to maintain that our moral responsibility is fulfilled by preserving explicitly Christian virtues as resident aliens within a hostile world. This is not to deny that Hauerwas’s call to Christians to give witness as a pilgrim people to Christ’s way preserves an important biblical theme. Nor is it to detract from the force of his allegation that requiring people of faith to hide the religious foundations of their moral principles impoverishes public discourse. It is simply to define in different terms the relationship of Christians to fellow citizens of different faiths or no faith. Biblical tradition contains much that *can* be restated in terms comprehensible and even convincing to secular ears. Moreover, I believe that loving concern for all of God’s family and for the health of diverse political institutions is part of the vocation of children of a heavenly Father who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain

on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45).

Thus stage three can be pictured as a prism through which the political lessons of a faith tradition pass so as to render them coherent to nonadherents without diminishing their poignancy and power.

I have found that Jeffrey Stout’s model of democratic pragmatism provides that prism. In his debate with Hauerwas,¹¹ he has insisted that religious communities bear a responsibility not only for their own purity, but for the welfare of a society as a whole. At the same time Stout differs with Rawls at a crucial point: Moral arguments,

The Bible cannot be handled as we would Betty Crocker’s recipe book when setting out to bake a cake.

deriving from the entire spectrum of the religious and humanist communities, are as welcome as all other types of argument, if they are presented in a civil manner respectful of all other points of view and if they remain focused on the shared goals as defined by the larger society.

Stage three, thus understood, allows the religious individual or group to move from its communitarian practices of worship and study to open political discussion without being forced to diminish into something less than a moral agent enriched by its first love and ultimate commitment.

In stage four, the individual or group enters into the actual give-and-take of political process. This they do with civility, intellectual integrity, and rhetorical persuasiveness, all the while benefiting from the illumination and passion welling up from their religious traditions and faith communities. This dialectic is essential to the health of religious communities and political institutions alike. Commitment to the source of one’s identity and purpose does not exclude mindfulness of the limits of one’s understanding or the enrichment that awaits when one enters into debate with those who come from other religious and philosophical perspectives.

Enriched, chastened, and reminded of the inadequacies of one’s own understanding, stage four sends the conscientious believer/citizen back to worship and study, eager to share the new insights and questions from the public debate within the safety of the communitarian setting. The health of the republic is reinvigorated by this dynamic hermeneutical circle much as the human body is

replenished through the circulation of the cardiovascular system.

Stage five, finally, provides the vision of universal reconciliation and *shalom* that is life's final goal. This stage serves as a constant reminder of the one ultimate priority by which all other endeavors find their meaning and against which they are will be judged. This *telos*, or eschatological vision, fosters humility, patience, steadfastness, and an eagerness

Biblical tradition contains much that can be restated in terms comprehensible and even convincing to secular ears.

to cooperate with all fair-minded fellow sojourners in integrating the justice, compassion, and peace of God's reign into the structures of human society. It is also the antidote for burnout and despair when the best of human plans and efforts come to naught, for the faithful have submitted their lives to a goal transcending the limits of their imagination.¹²

Bumper stickers can be hermeneutical lessons on wheels. Unitarian Universalists offer a very open hermeneutic: "Where the Question Is the Answer." Fundamentalists eschew equivocation: "The Bible Says It, I Believe It, That Settles It." But neither option satisfies the conditions we have set out for an acceptable political reading of the Bible. In the former case the devil is in the ?, in the latter in the *It*.

Bible as the Path to Shared Prosperity

So do our choices narrow down to "?" vs. "*It*"? After much theoretical discussion, are we not in the dilemma of the lost traveler in a remote area of northern Maine who stops to ask a native for directions? The native finally concludes with a gruff, "You can't get there from here." Can we get from the Bible to contemporary political issues?

With two concluding points, I hope to convince the reader that we are not lost and that we can get from there to here, but not without precautions. The first point is inspired by the Unitarian question mark and is iconoclastic in nature: The Bible cannot be handled as we would Betty Crocker's recipe book when setting out to bake a cake. The kind of proof-texting that we illustrated earlier simply forces the Bible into the role of a lackey subservient to whatever policy or agenda we seek to defend. It is a potentially lethal exercise, and people of faith must oppose it.

Such crude use of the Bible is an enemy of authentic biblical faith. How vast are the numbers of educated citizens who dismiss any notion of the

Bible contributing to contemporary realities on the basis of the only exposure they have had to a political reading of the Bible, a reading that insults their intelligence and shocks their moral sensitivities.

Properly understood, the Bible is a classic that perhaps more than any other can guide people along a path leading to shared prosperity, universal health, even-handed justice, and conditions leading to international understanding and peace. But to realize its potential, diligence is required on two levels:

1. A biblical hermeneutic must be applied that enables readers to understand both the specific setting and meaning of its parts and the overarching significance of the whole. The former places restraints on the range of possible readings of biblical passages. The latter provides the context within which the abiding truths and values of the Bible can be grasped.

2. A theo-political hermeneutic must be followed that enables believers both to exercise their civil duties with the full benefit of their spiritual resources and to honor the constitutional rights of fellow citizens, regardless of their beliefs or non-beliefs. The proper use of the Bible places on the individual or group the same level of diligence as does any other important area of life.

The Example of Human Rights

The delicate ground between the "?" and the "*It*" can be illustrated succinctly. Consider the international debate over human rights.¹³

Let us recall two comprehensive biblical themes: (1) The Bible unequivocally establishes a categorical distinction between the one universal divine government and every human government. From the perspective of biblical faith, no nation can claim a privileged status. (2) With equal force the Bible, both in narratives and in statutes, defends the dignity of every human and inveighs against those who would justify exploitation of the weak and vulnerable by claiming special privilege.

Guided by the principles of a divine government that relativizes every human regime and a concept of human dignity that refutes every justification of inequality, the individual or group moving from a foundation in worship and biblical study to the public debate over human rights will join the ranks of those advocating for a positive definition. This position will be defined by the specific biblical themes of compassion for the alien and the oppressed and divine justice and equality uncompromised by considerations of rank and power. But at the same time it will be expressed in terms familiar to all participants in the international debate and with reasonableness

of argument that eschews special pleading and is respectful of the contributions of other traditions.

Though we have compressed our illustration into a brevity bordering on incomprehension, it is still too long for a bumper sticker. Or maybe we could compress it one step further: *God Is One, So Are We*. But to this suitably brief declaration, I suspect we should have to add a dozen footnotes, lest we be misunderstood. Reading the Bible politically remains a task amenable to no simple solution.

Paul Hanson (B.D., Yale Divinity School, 1965), is Lamont Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School, where he has taught since 1971. His many books include *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (Westminster John Knox, new edition 2002).

Notes

- 1 *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1 (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1932), 25-26.
- 2 *The Jerusalem Post*, November 4, 1983, p xx; John Herbers, "Religious Leaders Tell of Worry on Armageddon View Ascribed to Reagan," *New York Times*, October 21, 1984, p. 32; "Armageddon View Prompts a Debate," John Herbers, *New York Times*, October 24, 1984, p. A1.
- 3 Lindsay at least has been shrewd enough to avoid a fellow Dispensationalist's blunder of advertising his date for the end of the world in a book's title (Herbert K. W. Armstrong, 1975 in *Prophecy*, 1956).
- 4 *Bush: Life of a Lone Star Yankee*, p. 476.
- 5 Andrew Rosenthal, "In a Speech, President Returns to Religious themes," *New York Times*, January 28, 1992, A17.
- 6 Renee Loth, "Democrats Use Old-Time Religion," *Boston Globe*, July 26, 1992, National/Foreign Section, p 1.
- 7 *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983)
- 8 *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 9 I believe the approach I adopt also addresses concerns that Michael Sandel raises in relation to liberal democracy's tilt toward proceduralism. See *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 10 See my *Religion and Politics: (Mis)interpreting the Bible* (Manilla, Philippines: CBAP, 2005). In nuce point is this: For a person of faith to make her

unique contribution to public debate on any issue, she must be clear as to her essential identity, a clarification that occurs in worship. For the Christian, worship revolves around word and sacraments, but this stage in the theo-political hermeneutic applies to all religious communities through the practices in which they experience communion with their transcendent Reality.

11 Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 147-161.

12 Cf. Rom. 8:18-39.

13 The debate revolves around the contrast between negative and positive definitions of human rights. Defined negatively, a human right is anything that does not infringe upon the rights of others. Defined positively, human rights mandate all that is necessary for humans to attain to their full potential, which would include adequate nutrition, education, health care, personal safety, and so forth.

The Empire of God and the Postcolonial Era

By Stephen D. Moore

During the past decade or so, a steady stream of books with the terms “empire” or “imperial” in their titles issued forth in biblical studies, mainly in New Testament studies: Unveiling Empire, The Bible and Empire, The Roman Empire and the New Testament, God and Empire, Jesus and Empire, Matthew and Empire, The Gospel of Matthew in its Roman Imperial Context, John and Empire, Paul and Empire, Paul and the Roman Imperial Order, Empire and Apocalypse, and so on.

A related flow of books, meanwhile, with the terms “postcolonial” or “postcolonialism” in their titles has also issued forth: *The Postcolonial Bible, The Postcolonial Biblical Reader, Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading, Postcolonial Biblical Criticism, Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation, Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism, A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings, A Postcolonial Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus, John and Postcolonialism*, and so on. Welling up behind these monographs and edited collections is a much larger number of related articles, essays, conference papers, and doctoral dissertations-in-progress. How to explain all this activity?

The eruption of interest in empire among biblical scholars reflects the dramatic rise of the interdisciplinary field of postcolonial studies, a sprawling academic phenomenon that has produced a massive scholarly literature. Within postcolonial studies, the term “postcolonial” ordinarily refers to the complex geopolitical realities that the mid-twentieth century ushered in. It was in connection with the dissolution of the European empires in the wake of World War II and the widespread achievement of independence on the part of former colonies that the term “postcolonial” was first coined.

Not until the early 1990s, however, did postcolonial studies fully emerge as an academic field. The context then was that of a one-superpower world and the emergence of an unprecedented form of empire, epitomized by globalization, that was more fluid, expansive, and efficient than any empire of the past. In this climate, biblical scholars have been turning with intensified interest and concern to the issue of empire.

Being biblical scholars, however, few feel qualified or inclined to address contemporary geopolitics head-on in their work. Postcolonial criticism within New Testament studies more often takes the form of critical reflection on the relations between early Christianity and the Roman Empire. Such reflection is hardly novel. For centuries, scholars have been attempting to re-situate the New Testament writings in their original historical and socio-cultural contexts. And the Roman Empire has always represented the outer limits of these contexts.

But if postcolonial criticism does not represent a first look at the New Testament and empire, it does represent a fresh look. Such analysis now has at its disposal the tools of postcolonial theory and criticism—an extensive, interdisciplinary body of reflection on such interrelated phenomena as empire, imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization. Being

biblical scholars, however, many prefer to revisit empire with critical tools native to biblical studies rather than venture across disciplinary borders to read in neighboring fields.

More fundamentally, what makes the current intensified preoccupation with New Testament and empire genuinely new is a concern with the question of whether or to what extent New Testament texts can be said to resist empire.

Throughout its history, the New Testament has been used more often to prop up empire than oppose it.

Throughout its history, the New Testament has been used more often to prop up empire than oppose it. All of its constituent writings were produced in the margins of empire. But when Rome was officially Christianized, the margins moved to the center. Jerome's Vulgate translation of the Bible finally fixed a previously fluid and unstable canon, but it did so under the aegis of empire. The Vulgate was the first official Bible of imperial Christianity. And locked in its embrace, the primary function of the New Testament texts became that of legitimizing the imperial status quo.

Empire elicits resistance, and so counter-readings have never been lacking. However, even the invention of critical biblical scholarship in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Europe coincided with the inexorable expansion of the European empires to their outer limits. The possibility, indeed, that the emergence of biblical criticism was at least a by-product of European colonialism and imperialism has yet to be properly investigated. It is only in recent decades, first through liberation theology and liberation hermeneutics, and more recently through empire studies and postcolonial studies, that biblical critics have turned in earnest to the task of disentangling the New Testament texts from the embrace of imperial Christianity.

Hermeneutical Hallucination

The New Testament's historic default function of legitimizing the imperial status finds iconic expression in our own cultural moment in the early-morning, Bible-reading regimen of the man who, for millions of non-Christians around the globe, is simultaneously the representative face of twenty-first century Christianity and twenty-first century empire (and it is not the current occupant of the Vatican whom I have in mind). It is not enough for postcolonial

biblical critics simply to reclaim the biblical texts as signal instances of unequivocal anti-imperial resistance literature. What such one-sided readings fail to explain is why the Bible does not spontaneously combust in President Bush's prayerful hands. Such readings fail, in other words, to account for a single inconvenient but colossal fact—namely, that certain honorable exceptions aside, the vast majority of Christian interpreters through the ages have managed to read these texts as supportive of empire, if not as actual divine warrants for inexorable imperial expansion.

Rather than dismiss this incalculably influential interpretive trajectory as the product of systemic misreading on a monumental scale, if not of mass hermeneutical hallucination outright, I tend instead to assume that this mode of reading, like all other modes of reading, is merely selective, elevating certain textual data at the expense of other textual data. And so the enigma of how a disparate set of texts written in the margins or underside of the Roman Empire eventually became the charter document of imperial Christianity—also the enigma of how one Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean peasant nonentity, became, primarily through the agency of these same unlikely texts, a new Romulus, the founder of a new Rome—demand our critical attention.

Empire of God vs. Kingdom of God

Why New Testament texts at times lend themselves to be read as vehicles of resistance to empire and at other times as obstacles of resistance to empire may be better appreciated by appraising the complex contours of the Empire of God in the earliest canonical gospel.¹ (In common with a small but growing number of interpreters, I hold that the Greek term *basileia* in Mark, as in other early Christian texts, is at present better rendered in English by the defamiliarizing term “empire” than by “kingdom,” a term whose political edge has been rubbed smooth by centuries of theological usage.)

On the one hand, the present Empire of God, as delineated in Mark, seethes with countercultural valence. “The time is fulfilled, and the Empire of God has come near,” Mark's ragtag peasant protagonist proclaims (1:15), marching through the remote rural reaches of southern Galilee, and drawing assorted other peasant nonentities in his wake, fellow builders-to-be of this latest and greatest of empires. The surreal unlikelyhood of this Empire of empires begs elucidation, and as such is virtually the sole topic of Jesus' first extended public address in Mark, namely, his parables discourse (4:1–33). The parables of the Seed Growing in Secret (4:26–29) and of the Mus-

tard Seed (4:30–32) contrast the present concealment (cf. 4:11–12) and seeming inconsequentiality of the Empire of God with its impending and impressive public manifestation, as does, to a lesser degree, the parable of the Sower (4:1–9, 14–20).

A later cluster of occurrences of the term *basileia* in the narrative again plays on the paradoxically inglorious character of the present as opposed to future Empire of God. Physical deformity will pose no obstacle to membership in the new imperial ranks (“it is better for you to enter the Empire of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna”—Mark 9:47), nor will childlikeness (which, on the contrary, will be a necessary qualification: “whoever does not receive the Empire of God as a little child shall not enter it”—10:15).

However, social status, epitomized by wealth, will pose a near-insurmountable stumbling block to membership (“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Empire of God!”—10:23), which is to say that those who have benefited most egregiously from Caesar’s empire will be least eligible for admittance to God’s empire.

The pronouncement on wealth occurs in close proximity to others that proffer servanthood and slavery as the supreme models for Christian existence, in marked contrast to the practices of the Gentiles (read: the Romans). This cluster of counter-cultural sayings and anecdotes (9:30–10:45 *passim*), in the absence of anything else approximating a Markan “Sermon on the Mount,” gives substance to its singularly unimperial concept of divine empire, as it translates into Christian practice.

A Countercolonial Christian Ethic

So far so good. But is the present Empire of God in Mark ultimately domesticated and defused by the coming Empire of God in Mark? Is the Markan Jesus’ self-proclaimed ethic of self-giving and self-emptying (“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...”), culminating in his voluntary submission to torture and execution (“...and to give his life as a ransom for many”—10:45), finally but the means to an end—his attainment of incomparable personal power and authority (“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory”—13:26; cf. 8:38–9:1, 14:62)? In other words, does Mark’s Christology stand in tension with Mark’s ethics? By insisting on returning “with great power and glory” (13:26), does Mark’s Jesus unmask Mark’s own latent desire for a top-heavy, authoritarian, universal Christian Empire, an über-Roman Empire, so to speak—the kind that will arrive all too soon anyway, unbeknown to Mark, long be-

fore Jesus himself does? By insisting on returning in imperial splendor (however muted, compared with Revelation or even Matthew), does Mark’s Jesus relativize and undercut the radical social values that he has died to exemplify and implement? Can radical apocalypticism, in other words, only ever stand in tension or outright contradiction with radical ethics? Or to put it yet another way, can radical apocalypticism only ever mirror imperial ideologies, so that what was oppressively oversized to begin with now towers above the heavens: “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds”? Or can radical apocalypticism be consonant with a counterimperial or countercolonial ethic?

These are the kinds of questions that arise when we resist the temptation to acclaim Mark too swiftly as unequivocal anti-imperial resistance literature. And similar questions arise when we bring similar strategies of reading to bear on the other gospels, or the Pauline letters, or even the Book of Revelation, notwithstanding the fact that the latter seems, on the face of it, to be an altogether uncompromising, fang-baring attack on imperial Rome. Personally—and I am by no means alone in this—I am interested neither in reading individual New Testament texts as consistently unequivocal anti-colonial resistance literature, on the one hand, nor in reading them as consistently compromised literature, on the other hand, that always reinscribes and replicates imperial and colonial ideologies even while appearing to resist them. And I believe it is precisely between this Scylla and Charybdis—wishful projection on the one side, excessive suspicion on the other—that postcolonial biblical criticism will increasingly need to navigate as we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Stephen D. Moore is Professor of New Testament and Chair of the Graduate Division of Religion at the Theological School, Drew University. His books include Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2006), and Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections (edited with Fernando F. Segovia; New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005).

Notes

- 1 The following three paragraphs summarize certain arguments set out in my book *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006).

Seeking Truth Together: The Yale Bible Study Series

By Ray Waddle

The Congregational Church of New Canaan, Connecticut, faced a problem familiar to thousands of other twenty-first century congregations: how do we teach the Bible so it becomes more central to our lives?

For years, the search for an answer took New Canaan into the wilderness. Leaders of the 1,750-member church organized marquee-name lecture series. They tested curriculum materials created by various denominations.

Yet nothing quite delivered the staying power needed to connect laypeople to the life and drama of the ancient text. Something was missing.

"A dozen years ago, few in the mainline were giving enough attention to Bible study," says Skip Masback, the church's senior minister and a member of the Yale Divinity School Board of Advisors.

"The mainline was letting it go. But if the mainline doesn't do robust Bible study, then people who do want it will migrate somewhere else."

A decades-long trend of mainline church ambivalence toward Scripture fueled an American religious drama—generations of mainline church turbulence marked by protracted debate about politics, war, sex, secularism, and the authority of Scripture. Along the way, many churches lost confidence in the relevance of the Bible's story, its witness, its truth.

"But now the pendulum is swinging back," Masback says.

Last year, New Canaan church members discovered something old and invented something new. They discovered the power of small-group dynamics, a communal model as old as the apostolic age. They gathered laypeople willing to trust each other and talk together about life-and-faith issues. Not least, they found a way to present biblical expertise in a compelling, practical format. They called on Masback's old school—YDS—for help.

The church arranged to tape a series of Bible conversations between YDS Dean Harold Attridge and YDS professor emeritus David Bartlett, capturing

their give-and-take discussions, usually in fifteen-minute segments, on DVD. The church sponsored the cost and distributed the discs to the small study groups (up to a dozen people each), which committed to meeting regularly for eight weeks.

The first series featured the Gospel of John. Volunteers assembled big binder notebooks of support materials for anyone who wanted them—notes by the two professors, bibliographies, copies of articles on relevant themes. Momentum surged. About 110 people have joined in, creating their own small groups.

Initial popularity led to a second Attridge-Bartlett taped conversation, this time on First Corinthians. Luke's gospel is in the planning stages for later this year, then Romans.

New Canaan had found a way to bridge two worlds that so often move in wary mutual isolation—academic expertise and lay attention.

"We were hungry for the information and didn't know how to get it," says Lynne Bolton, a laywoman at New Canaan who helped shape the series. "We wanted to get a bird's-eye view of these two minds at work. We wanted to listen in on two highly literate experts talking. And they were willing to discuss terms in ways laypeople could understand."

Bolton is a former White House communications specialist and also an actor with Broadway stage experience. She knows something about stagecraft, production values, and public communication.

"I knew this content is interesting, and there had to be a way to show that," she says. "We wanted to see an unfolding conversation."

Bolton's epiphany about such a study series happened in 2006. That's when she got her first exposure to a seminary-style handling of biblical is-

sues by attending a YDS summer course, the dean's class on John's gospel.

Soon enough, Attridge and Bartlett were paired for the series.

"These two scholars are friends," Bolton says. "We saw how good they were together, how intrigued they were with each other's opinions." (Bartlett is now professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia. At YDS Attridge is also Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament.)

"An important part of learning about the possible meanings of a text of Scripture emerges through dialogue with friends who may have a slightly or radically different 'take' on the text," Attridge says. "One of the things I try to do in teaching the Bible is to encourage that kind of dialogue. David and I, in our presentations for New Canaan, try to model what that dialogue might be like."

All agree New Canaan's success with the YDS Bible Study is aided by a strong community-building dimension.

Masback joined the New Canaan staff fourteen years ago and soon initiated his own Bible-teaching strategies. Eventually, though, he witnessed the power of small-group chemistry.

"The small-group model seemed to be the perfect forum for relational connection and working through issues of life and faith," he says.

"There's a sense of walking together. They come to hear the experts, but they come back for each other. It invites adult conversation about things that count."

Groups organize themselves around friendships or common interests. A businesspersons circle meets early Monday mornings. A young mothers

"The Bible is more than informative. It's formative. We're shaped by the narrative." —Skip Masback

group meets Wednesdays. Groups assemble in homes or in church classrooms. The studies are lay-led; no experts preside. Participants find their own comfort level of involvement. Some do all the reading prep, others very little.

One week last March, a Wednesday night group was discussing First Corinthians, the passage where Paul said women should "keep silent in church."

In a group of seven people, someone mused, "If that passage wasn't in there, how would history be different?"

The conversation turned to the role of women in other denominations, Protestant and Catholic, and

The Meaning of Resurrection:

a conversation adapted
from the YDS Bible Study Series:

HARRY ATTRIDGE: So, David, we turn to First Corinthians 15, where Paul is dealing with issues connected with the resurrection.

DAVID BARTLETT: I'm glad we're having this conversation because I've wrestled with this for as long as I've wrestled with New Testament texts. I'm clearer on what he thinks the solution is than what he thinks the issue is. The solution is to insist on the reality of Jesus' resurrection as being central to Christian faith and to insist that following Jesus, believers will also be raised. What's he worried about? My impression is—and I really want your response to this—this is a group of people who believes in Jesus' resurrection, but for whatever reasons they're not convinced that they, too, will be raised at the last day. It seems the point of his argument is not so much to convince them that Jesus is raised as to convince them that because they believe Jesus is raised, they then need to believe in the general resurrection, or they can't make sense of the claim that Jesus is raised.

ATTRIDGE: I think that's right. The way I've tried to imagine what's going on in the minds of the Corinthians is to look forward into the second century and to look back to the first century BCE. We know in the second century there were some people who were denying the physical character of the resurrection. They're probably coming out of a Greco-Roman philosophical milieu that emphasizes the immortality of the soul. So it may be that these Corinthians believe in the resurrection of Christ, but interpret it in that way. Another indication can be found in the Wisdom of Solomon, a text written in Jewish circles probably in Alexandria, probably first century BCE, that talks about the souls of the just being in the hands of God and therefore they don't have to worry. There you see the language of Greco-Roman culture being taken over in a Jewish environment affirming some sort of immortality but not so much the resurrection of the body. I think that's what Paul is trying to counter.

BARTLETT: Disembodied Christianity is one of his big concerns from beginning to end: Our hope is not that we escape from our bodies but that our bodies be raised as Jesus has been raised. Then we get his almost oxymoronic claim that we'll be raised not as physical bodies but as spiritual bodies. I've puzzled

(continues on p.74)

about that a lot, and I think I'm clearer on its pastoral implications than its philosophical rootings. The pastoral implications have to do with the claim that when the dead are raised it's still we who are raised. It's not some spiritual emanation from ourselves or some reductive essence but the real Harry Attridge who will be raised, the real David Bartlett who will be raised. Somehow, just as Christ has been glorified, so we will participate in some richer glory in that day coming.

ATTRIDGE: This is another case where Paul seems to address both sides of a debate and tries to affirm something on both sides to bring them together. Later on (verse 50), he'll say "flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God." This seems to reaffirm the position he's already criticized—the Corinthians who deny the objective reality of future resurrection. So how does he do that and at the same time emphasize the body? Through a reflection (verse 35 ff.) on what kind of bodies there might be. I think he does two things. He uses the metaphor of a seed being sown and the plant that grows up from the seed looks very different from the seed. Then he turns to science or philosophy and says there are different kinds of bodies—earthly and heavenly bodies. He's calling on notions from Aristotelian cosmology, widespread in the Hellenistic world, that there are different elements—the familiar four, earth, air, fire, water, but also another kind, the substance of the stars, the ether, what later in the Renaissance would be called the quintessence, the fifth essence. So if stars are made out of this ethereal substance that looks a lot like the spirit that pervades all things, that, Paul says, is more like what our bodies will be. It's a different kind of body from what we experience in this sub-lunar sphere, but it is nonetheless an objective body.

BARTLETT: With that in mind, let's reflect back on the rest of the letter and see how often he says: God has made us as bodies, as embodied persons. So sex counts, and how you treat your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ counts, because this is not only part of God's creation but part of God's redemptive plan. What God intends to redeem is not that little spiritual part of you that can simply be immune from bodily concerns, but the real you, which is body.

in Islam and other cultures. Near the end, a female participant declared, "Where is agape in this passage, or was Paul having a bad day?"

Masback needs no convincing about the power of Bible study. He came to Christian ministry at age forty-three after a busy career as a Washington, D.C., trial lawyer and Democratic Party insider.

In those years, however, he was an indifferent churchgoer who worked hard to ascend the success ladder but often at the cost of family time and spiritual identity. By 1987, he reached a point of crisis: he was struggling through bouts of uncontrollable weeping, triggered by despair.

He turned to Scripture, desperately thumbing through it in search of relief. The angel's words early in Luke that announce Jesus' birth—"Fear not"—surprised him as a breakthrough to hope. Soon after, so did a mystical encounter with Jesus. So did reading Romans 7 on the commuter train one morning, when he saw Paul's tortured words, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

"I realized Paul was truer to life than the Enlightenment account of life," Masback recalls. "Unfettered rationalism is not the path to reason. So I realized I'm not smarter than that book. We don't stand over Scripture. We stand under it."

A furious faith quest deepened, and Masback's search eventually brought him to YDS, where he received an M.Div. degree in 1994.

"The Yale school of thought says Scripture is not just information, it's a shaping mechanism for the way you see the world," he says.

"Being Christian means living in a daily engagement with Scripture that shapes the way you see. So, our Bible study here is not just, 'Hey, the Puritans used to read Scripture so we ought to.' We are laying a foundation. A conversation about homosexuality or some other controversy will be different after people encounter Bible study. The vision of life learned in John they are doing in a group. The issues confronted by Paul they are doing in a group. They're getting scriptural lenses for knowing how to do church.

"The Bible is more than informative. It's formative. We are shaped by the narrative."

Ray Waddle is editor of Reflections.

Scripture, Conflict, and a New Theological Humanism

By William Schweiker

Though painful for some and baffling for others, history plainly shows Christians read the Bible in different ways.

Some see it as a book of rules; others cleave to the story of redemption. Many turn to Scripture for comfort and others see it as a text about the origin and end of the world. Scripture itself designates how it can and ought to be read. The reader is told to inscribe the law on one's heart, for instance. In 2 Tim, 3:16-17 we read: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Given the myriad approaches to reading Scripture, it is no surprise that there is heated debate about the proper use of the Bible for orienting Christian life.

The question of how to read Scripture is pressing not only for Christians. Every religion with a tradition of scriptural commentary is struggling with how to read sacred texts in an age of colliding faiths and worldviews. In these reflections, I will explore the relation between a new version of Christian humanism, what I call theological humanism drawn from Christian sources, and how the Bible needs to be read in this global era.¹ I hope to persuade readers to adopt a specific way of living the Christian faith in our wild, dangerous, and exciting times.

The Long Reach of Christian Humanism

One defining feature of our age is the conflict between broadly humanistic visions of life and heightened religious fervor. For some people "humanism" is antireligious. (Admittedly, it is in some, but not all, cases.) Fundamentalists in most religions attack the supposed relativism and nihilism of Western secular humanism. Conversely, many humanists champion the advance of science and democracy but cannot imagine looking to sacred texts for insight into the meaning and purpose of human life. They find religion a source of ignorance and violence that drives people to fear heavenly illusions, demons, and gods.

(It is in some, but not all, cases.) And there are those who castigate both humanism and religious convictions as naive, anthropocentric, and dangerous. (Again, they are in some, but not all, cases.) Among Christians, the connection between the Bible and humanism is contested ground.

However, with a little historical reflection things appear more complicated than current opinion seems willing to admit.² Christian humanists traditionally insisted that the core of the Christian witness is God's gracious condescension to our condition, most radically in Christ's incarnation but also through Scripture so that the gospel could be known in human ways. Nothing human is scorned by the God of Christian faith. Little wonder, then, that with the flowering of Christian humanism during the Reformations and Renaissance, thinkers like Erasmus and Thomas More but also Protestants like Melancthon sought to wed classical learning with a return to Scripture. Erasmus no less than Luther saw in the Scriptures the path to the simplicity of the gospel and what it means to live freed from encrusted doctrines and ecclesial laws.

The interest among Christian humanists in history, languages, and the moral life naturally flowed into a renewed appreciation for the place of Scripture in the Christian life. There were differences, of course. Erasmus remained in the Roman Catholic Church and drew on the allegorical method in his reading of the Bible. Luther and Calvin demanded reform and insisted on what they called the literal meaning of the text. Some spiritualists sought mystical ways of knowing God. The point remains, however: the conjunction of humanism and Scripture is a historical fact and continues even today.³

While acknowledging the importance of doctrine, Christian humanists understand the core of faith practically, more a matter of life than dogma.

The proper response to God's love is a life of love rather than assent to dogmatic formulas. But they recognized there is something grand, mysterious, and also dangerous and flawed in human freedom. And on freedom Erasmus and Luther split. Erasmus asked: without freedom how can one struggle to live by the gospel? Luther thought that human freedom was a burden too great to bear. The deeper point, granting this difference, is that human freedom is not self-orienting; human beings need guidance in how to orient their lives. Where to look? The church? Dogma? Priests, popes, and pastors? For the Christian humanist one looks to Christ and Scripture in which God's word takes human form.

So, at the core of Christian humanism is a question: how ought we to orient our lives freely through love? Should we love only our self, seek the increase of our self-love, as many thinkers, ancient and modern, have argued? Maybe we should direct our lives solely by the love of the Good, as Plato and some contemporary thinkers hold. Perhaps the love of the other (as postmodern thinkers put it) or the neighbor (as traditional Christians say) should orient life. Maybe we are to reverence all life or the system of nature or being itself. Though love is self-evidently good, it is not self-orienting. We have to ask whom we should love and how we should love.

Classical Christian humanists answered this question by turning to the two great commands: love God with one's whole heart, mind, and soul, and love one's neighbor as oneself. The second command was further elaborated in terms of the love of enemy, the most radical love that Jesus lived. The commands have a specific relation. The love of God is *total*: love God with the whole of one's heart, mind, and soul. The love of others is *reciprocal*—to love others as oneself—and therefore utterly different from the love of God.

A Practical Theology

The double love command provided a way, practically speaking, to orient human life, a norm that is incarnate in Christ and elaborated throughout Scripture. One interprets Scripture, then, in order to orient life around these two loves, so that love of God anchors the love of neighbor. Erasmus even wrote that, "The precepts of philosophers are innumerable, and the commandments of Moses and of kings are many; but [Christ] said, 'My precept is but one: that is that you love one another.'"⁴

What is the purpose of a life of love? Classical Christian humanists thought the purpose of love was peace. A life directed by the double love command is meant to stop the warring madness in the

human soul, between people, and between human beings and the living God. One thereby interprets Scripture under the norm of the double love command but for the sake of this peace. The interpretation is *humanistic* because it arises out of God's condescension to human flesh (Christ) and language (Scripture) for the sake of peace. It does not scorn

Love of neighbor is the sign of a proper love of God. The love of God cannot be true if the neighbor, even the enemy, is not loved.

human aspiration or deny the distinctive character of humans as creatures who bear the joy and burden of responsibility. The outlook is humanistic also because of its practical, rather than dogmatic, orientation and concern for the whole realm of *human* meaning and worldly existence.

This outlook offers a distinctive account of Christian faith and also an agenda for interpreting Scripture. Yet there are problems with the Christian humanist outlook that have become clear in our age. This is largely because "humanism" in the West arose in pre-modern societies and then spread within the early modern world. Early Christian humanists lived in a society unified by the church despite the conflicts of Reformation. They saw reality divided between the church and the world, described from God's perspective as revealed in Scripture; love of God has priority in all human loves. Early modern humanists did not assume the domination of the church, but they did endorse, as Enlightenment thinkers held, the unity of the human race. They did not grapple deeply with human diversity.

In our global situation today one can neither assume the authority of the church, although some conservatives seek it, nor the unity of the human race, although some rationalists proclaim it. What then is the meaning of a humanistic outlook within religious communities?⁵ We need, I think, a critical revision of Christian humanism for global times, one that ensures the freedom to inhabit faith traditions in ways that resist authoritarianism and ignorance that pit people against one another.

Given the spread of differentiated societies, it is no longer plausible to believe or to insist that any faith or religious institution provide the coherence of the social order. Though there are people in every tradition who seek a theocracy or the dominance of their religious outlook, that agenda leads to tyranny and conflict. In the name of peace, then, Christians must reread their texts in nontheocratic ways. And

this means reinterpreting how we understand the “lordship” of Christ. I am, obviously, a Christian theological humanist, but in our situation I must reinterpret my tradition in ways that lead to peace even when that means dethroning the church’s social power. No nation, not America or any other, is or ought to be a “Christian nation,” both because this violates the differentiation of the social order but also because it leads to violence and thus violates the great commands. By the same token, the church should not try to rule science or the economy in ways that threaten knowledge or human creativity. I pray that humanists in other religious traditions will do the same work of reinterpretation and engage in the theological humanist task.

Humanizing Faith in Wartime

In a time when peoples increasingly interact, theological humanism drawn from Christian sources must rethink the two great commands in ways intimated by Erasmus. The love of God cannot be true if the neighbor, even the enemy, is not loved. Love of neighbor, we might say, is the sign of a proper love of God. Living by the second command is a lens through which to understand the first. Are there good reasons for this move? Consider the scriptural warrants. Jesus taught that the Sabbath was made for humans and not human beings for the Sabbath. In the letters of John the claim is made that anyone who hates the neighbor and claims to love God is a liar. Recall the prophetic denunciations of cultic purity when it is used to trammel the poor, the weak, and the outcast. Theological humanism is rooted in the insight that the lives of others utter a claim, a demand, to respect and enhance their integrity. It is expressed in the Christian Bible through the two great commands. But now we must read Scripture from the vantage point of responsibility for and with others; one must work to humanize faith in a world at war.

Finally, it is important to remember the richness of the English word “humanity.” “The root word is, quite literally, humble (*humilis*), from the Latin *humus*, earth or ground; hence *homo*, earth-being, and *humanus*, earthly, human.”⁶ The Bible depicts the creation of human beings from the dust of the earth; many myths and stories tell that the deepest failure of human beings is the prideful assertion of power beyond our finite capacities. In scriptural terms, human beings are dust that breathes—breathing and longing for peace, for meaning, and for what is sacred and true. We are creatures “in between” dust and breath, finitude and infinite longing.

A theological humanist views her or his religious tradition—and all traditions—with a double vision.

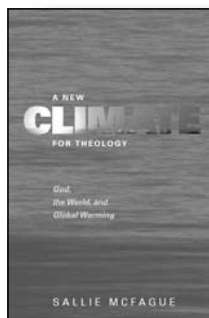
One is mindful of human dust—the weakness, fallibility, fault, and the hope of finite existence. One says “yes” to this life in its pain and hope. A Christian theological humanist does so because, again, God does not scorn the human lot. Yet as mere dust, humility and not pride should rule our lives; the affirmation of life, not domination, should be the rule of social existence. The theological humanist also insists that human dust breathes: the human spirit seeks meaning and freedom in forms of culture and this quest reaches out to the living God. Any form of social existence, any ideology or faith, that denies the transcendent reach of existence narrows human reality. If one is a *humanist* in the awareness of our dust, one is also a *theological humanist* aware of the reach of human aspiration. One reads Scripture to glean the mixing of dust and breath in human existence. One challenges ideologies that deny our fallibility or suppress the spirit.

Theological humanism among Christians continues the venerable legacy of Christian humanism while acknowledging new global realities. The task of reading Scripture is to isolate those points where revision is needed and to which we are now called for the sake of the integrity of life. It is also to discover a word spoken to us, a word of divine grace and demand. That word, found in all too human form, is a hope of peace within a mortal, whirling world.

William Schweiker is Edward L. Ryerson Distinguished Service Professor of Theological Ethics and director of the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago. An ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, he is the author of Religion and the Human Future: An Essay in Theological Humanism (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), and other books.

Notes

- 1 See William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004), and David E. Klemm and W. Schweiker, *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
- 2 R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991).
- 3 John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2006).
- 4 Erasmus, “The Complaint of Peace” in *The Essential Erasmus*, trans. and ed. by J. P. Dolan (New York: Meridian, 1983), 184.
- 5 See *Humanity Before God: Contemporary Faces of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Ethics*, ed. W. Schweiker, M. Johnson, and K. Jung (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2006).
- 6 Tony Davies, *Humanism* (Routledge: 1996), 125.



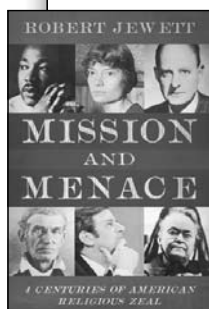
A New Climate for Theology

God, the World, and Global Warming

SALLIE McFAGUE

Traces the distorted notion of unlimited desire that fuels our market system and describes what a just and sustainable economy might mean.

978-0-8006-6271-4 176 pp pbk \$19.00



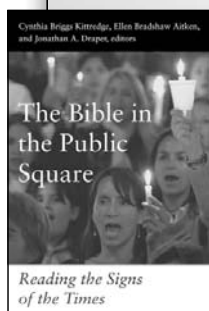
Mission and Menace

Four Centuries of American Religious Zeal

ROBERT JEWETT

The American mythology of divine mission remains one of the most important forces affecting the United States' role in the world today.

978-0-8006-6283-7 hc \$29.00 • 978-0-8006-6284-4 pbk \$22.00



The Bible in the Public Square

Reading the Signs of the Times

CYNTHIA BRIGGS KITTREDGE, ELLEN BRADSHAW AITKEN,
JONATHAN A. DRAPER, Editors

How engagement with political issues is reshaping biblical scholarship and challenging American civil religion.

978-0-8006-3859-7 240 pp hc \$26.00

At bookstores or call 1-800-328-4648 fortresspress.com

FORTRESS PRESS
An imprint of Augsburg Fortress



ANNOUNCING

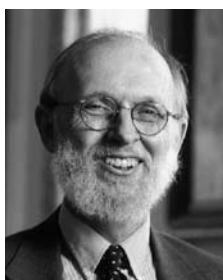


THE YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL BIBLE STUDY SERIES

The YDS Bible Study Series is an eight-week study program for small groups embarking together on the adventure of encountering God's word much as the disciples did. Each small Bible study group not only reaches a deeper understanding of Scripture, but also develops and deepens relationships with fellow pilgrims.



ATTRIDGE



BARTLETT

Featuring discussion of the Gospel of John and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians between:

Yale Divinity School Dean Harold Attridge, Lillian Claus
Professor of New Testament

and

David Bartlett, J. Edward Lantz &
Ruth Cox Lantz Professor Emeritus of Christian Communication

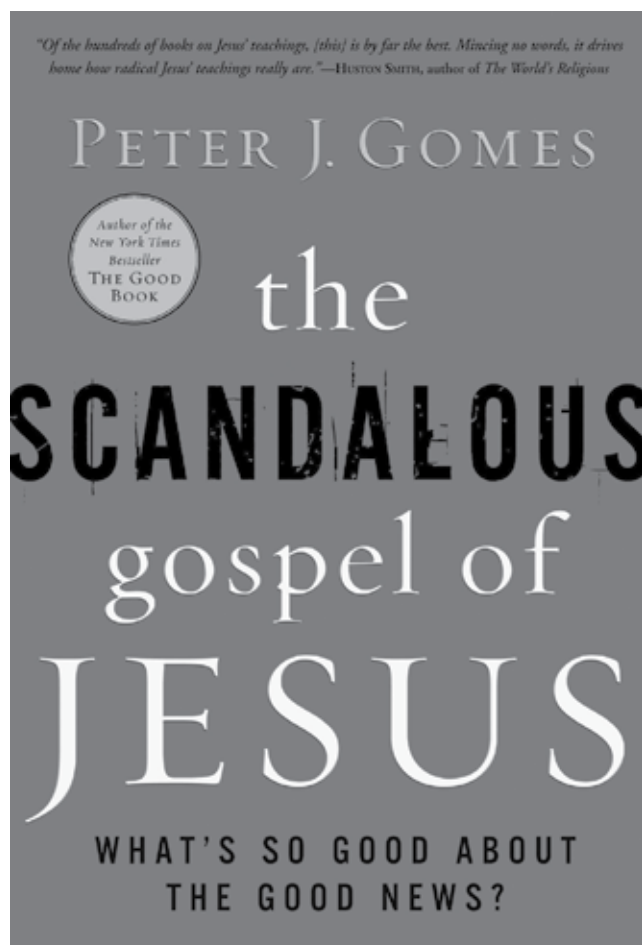
The Series is available now for viewing at:

www.yale.edu/reflections/YaleBibleStudy

Coming soon: The Gospel of Luke and Paul's Letter to the Romans.

Produced by the Congregational Church of New Canaan, CT.

Bestselling Author Peter J. Gomes Tells Us Why the “Good News” Is Still Good



“Of the hundreds of books on Jesus’s teachings, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* is by far the best. Mincing no words, it drives home how radical Jesus’s teachings really are.”

—Huston Smith, author of *The World’s Religions* and *The Soul of Christianity*

“Gomes is an iconoclast, and his book is an alternately eloquent and folksy attack on everybody who’s sure of the right answer.”

—*Newsweek*

“A daring and subversive book, taking Gomes and his readers further out on a limb than they’ve been before. There’s nothing conventional about it.”

—*New York Review of Books*

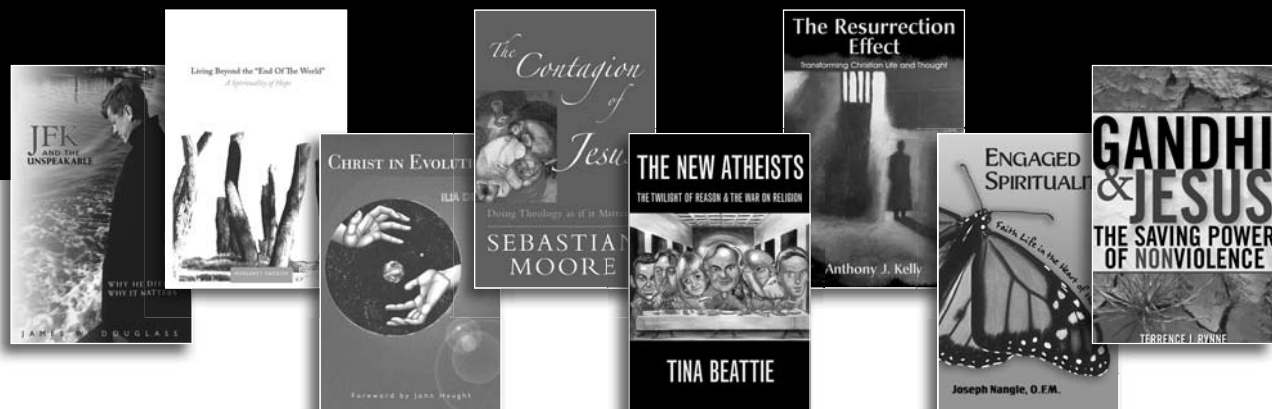
BROWSE INSIDE THIS BOOK AT WWW.HARPERONE.COM



HarperOne

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

New Faith and Life Reflections



JFK and the Unspeakable

Why He Died and Why it Matters

JAMES W. DOUGLASS

"This is the most thoroughly researched and documented book ever written about President Kennedy's determination to prevent a nuclear war—and how his success in that struggle cost him his life." —Don Mosley, co-founder Jubilee Partners

978-1-57075-755-6 hardcover \$30.00

Living Beyond the "End of the World"

A Spirituality of Hope

MARGARET SWEDISH

In this chilling forecast of ecological catastrophe Margaret Swedish outlines the moral and spiritual resources we will need to survive.

978-1-57075-767-9 paperback \$18.00

Christ in Evolution

Ilia Delio

Drawing on both mystics and theologians, Delio shows the unfolding love of God at the heart of a total physical, spiritual, cosmic, and cultural redemptive process.

978-1-57075-777-8 Paperback \$18.00

The Contagion of Jesus

Doing Theology as if It Mattered

SEBASTIAN MOORE

Moore provides "a passionate rather than rigorous theology," representing his enthusiasm for a theology based on a loving God, a saving Christ, and a church of friendship and discipleship.

978-1-57075-781-5 paperback \$20.00

The New Atheists

The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion

TINA BEATTIE

A Catholic feminist theologian responds to the new wave of best-selling atheists by shifting the debate to an approach to religion that emphasizes the realm of symbol, imagination, and creativity.

978-1-57075-782-2 paperback \$20.00

The Resurrection Effect

Transforming Christian Life and Thought

ANTHONY J. KELLY

This lively, penetrating exploration of the Resurrection reveals how that event sheds light on all of theology, both changing and focusing our vision of the whole of Christian existence.

978-1-57075-770-9 paperback \$30.00

Engaged Spirituality

Faith Life in the Heart of the Empire

JOSEPH NANGLE, O.F.M.

Sharing the lessons of years in Latin America, Nangle shows how the radical challenge to "love God and our neighbors as ourselves" can transform our understanding and practice of faith.

978-1-57075-763-1 paperback \$16.00

Gandhi & Jesus

The Saving Power of Nonviolence

TERRENCE J. RYNNE

An original exploration of the life of Jesus and the teachings of Gandhi that puts nonviolent action at the very heart of Christian salvation.

978-1-57075-766-2 Paperback \$20.00

At your bookseller or direct:
Visa/MC Order Online! www.maryknollmall.org

A World of Books that Matter



ORBIS BOOKS

Maryknoll, NY 10545

1-800-258-5838



The Anchor Yale Bible

The Anchor Bible Series, a prestigious collection of more than 115 volumes of biblical scholarship, has recently been acquired by Yale University Press. Yale University Press will publish all backlist and new volumes in the series, to be renamed the Anchor Yale Bible, going forward.

New titles in The Anchor Yale Bible series to be published in fall 2008

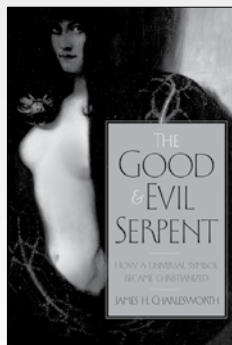
The Good and Evil Serpent

How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized

JAMES H. CHARLESWORTH

This pathbreaking book explores in plentiful detail the symbolic meanings of the serpent from 40,000 BCE to the present, and from diverse regions in the world. In doing so it emphasizes the utter creativity of the biblical authors' use of symbols and argues that we must, today, reexamine our own archetypal conceptions with comparable creativity.

The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library



No Ordinary Angel

Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus

SUSAN R. GARRETT

"At once magisterial and accessible, Garrett's book moves with grace between ancient and modern depictions of angels—never dismissive of popular beliefs, yet showing their indebtedness to modern ideologies."

—Dale B. Martin

The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library

\$30.00



I Corinthians

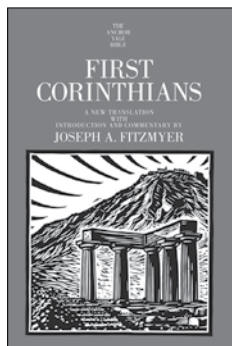
A New Translation with
Introduction and Commentary by
JOSEPH A. FITZMYER

This new translation of First Corinthians includes an introduction and extensive commentary that has been composed to explain the religious meaning of this Pauline epistle. Joseph Fitzmyer discusses all the usual introductory problems associated with the epistle, including issues of its authorship, time of composition, and purpose, and he also presents a complete outline.

The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries

The New Testament

\$50.00



Philippians

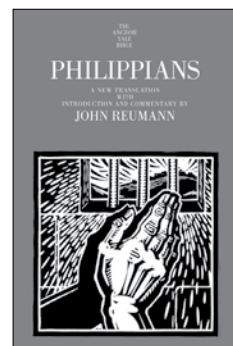
A New Translation with
Introduction and Commentary by
JOHN REUMANN

Reumann offers both classical approaches and new methods of understanding this New Testament book, including fresh commentary on the social world and rhetorical criticism, and special focus on the contributions of the Philippian house churches to Paul's work and early Christian mission.

The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries

The New Testament

\$45.00



YALE University Press • yalebooks.com



Faith and Intellect Yale Divinity School

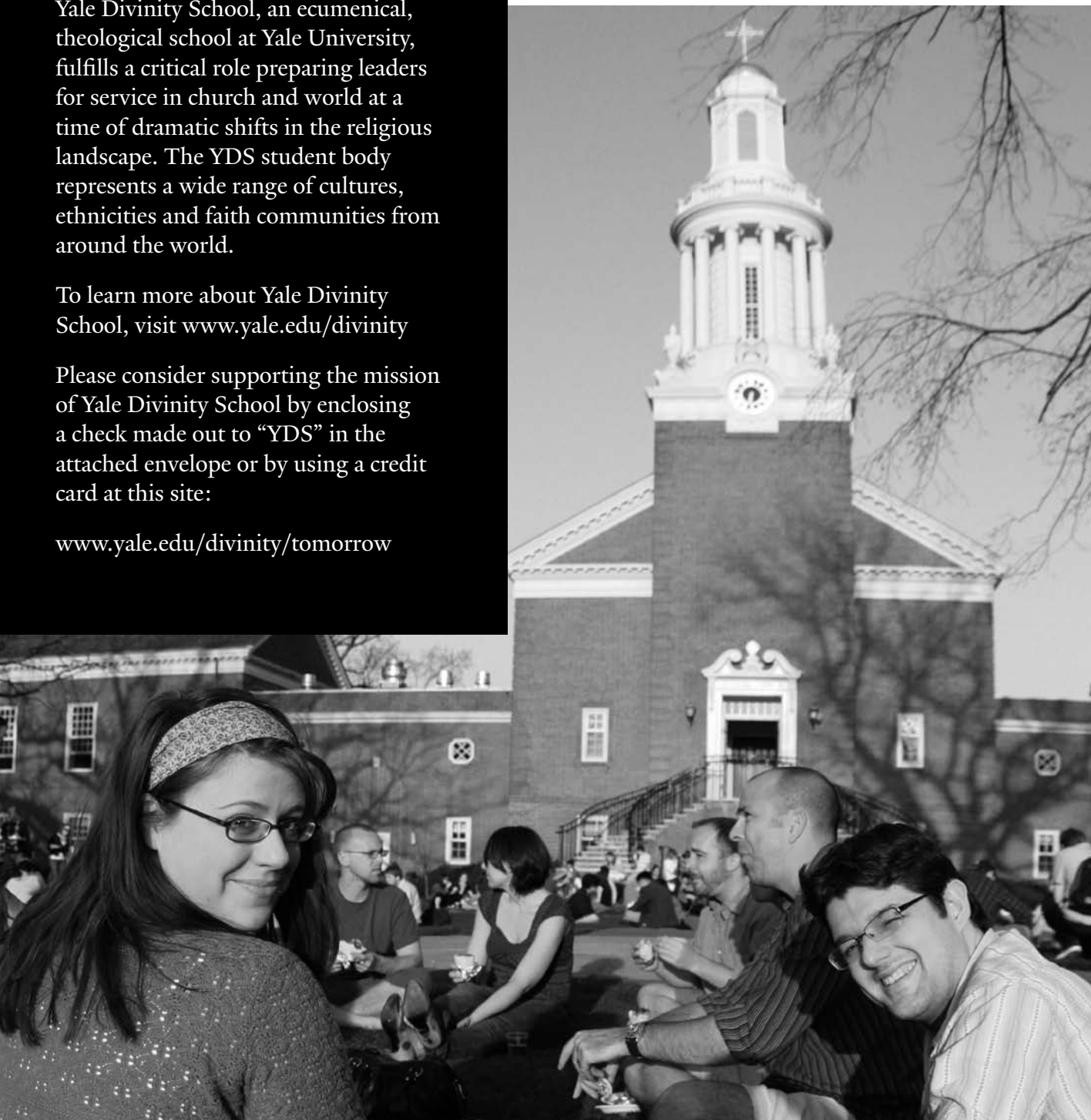
We hope you have enjoyed receiving *Reflections*, a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry published by Yale Divinity School.

Yale Divinity School, an ecumenical, theological school at Yale University, fulfills a critical role preparing leaders for service in church and world at a time of dramatic shifts in the religious landscape. The YDS student body represents a wide range of cultures, ethnicities and faith communities from around the world.

To learn more about Yale Divinity School, visit www.yale.edu/divinity

Please consider supporting the mission of Yale Divinity School by enclosing a check made out to "YDS" in the attached envelope or by using a credit card at this site:

www.yale.edu/divinity/tomorrow





GIFTS OF A LIFETIME

*Building a Solid Financial Future
for You and for Yale Divinity School*

...through a Planned Gift

Contact Constance Royster, 203.432.8127 or constance.royster@yale.edu

<http://www.yale.edu/divinity/donors/Give.Lifetime.shtml>

From the Editor: Soli Deo Gloria

By Ray Waddle



For a century now, the term “modern art” has acquired certain associations in the public mind—abstract, rebellious, playful, willfully obscure, an art at war with the past and ambivalent about its own audience.

From Picasso onward, modernism was a revolutionary art—turbulent, breathtaking, jarring, shrouded in strangeness but forcing us to see the world anew.

Yet for all its daring iconoclasm, it was always curiously squeamish about a particular subject: religion. The theme of faith was somehow banished early on, tabooed, written out of the script by practitioners and critics both.

We could offer sociological reasons (or excuses) for this. The devastations of World War I tainted all social institutions that had loudly promoted the war, including churches. The result was a new sort of alienation announced by the era’s poetry (Eliot and Pound), music (Stravinsky and Schoenberg), and visual arts (the modernist camp).

Around the same time, urbanization—electrification, motorization, mass transit, new population densities – quickened daily routine and crowded out the past. The anxious grain of urban life, the new economic booms and busts, gave people a secularized sense of self-sufficiency—or powerlessness. Suddenly tradition’s questions and answers looked stale. The “shock of the new” eclipsed the themes of old.

Artist Carol Bomer is certainly familiar with this history. She admires the giants of high modernism. She is intimate with their methods. But she’s not terribly impressed by their underachieving scorecard on questions of faith. Bomer creates her own very contemporary canvases by claiming an inspiration unusual in the art world even now – the power of God, the God of the Bible.

“In modernism, faith was pretty much outlawed,” she says. “But I love abstract art and realist art too – God created both. I think the modernists, whether they knew it or not, were looking for the One who held it all together. I think all artists are trying to find the One. But it’s right there. It’s Christ holding the world together.”

I got acquainted with her work through the remarkable Museum of Biblical Art (MoBIA), located near busy Columbus Circle in New York City.

MoBIA is dedicated to reviving an old conversation that was interrupted by the last hundred years of mainstream artistic taste-making—a dialogue about the perennial power of religious art. The museum is especially devoted to the Bible’s place in shaping the history of art. Through its various exhibits, the museum’s mission is to demonstrate how Scripture continues to stir artistic creativity and visual culture in the twenty-first century. (See mobia.org).

Bomer is a native Canadian who has lived in North Carolina since the early 1980s. She is a teacher, a married mother of two, a devout Christian—also an artist eager to seek bridges between faith and intellect, spirit and flesh.

She started out as a landscapist and watercolorist, but her deepening faith of the last two decades sent her into other realms of artistic inquiry – more ambitious, often more abstract, but in the service of expressing the presence of God in the world.

“I had been painting beautiful landscapes, but I also wanted to deal with issues of truth. I wanted to try to show Christ, find the mystery of Christ, explore the issue of authority, the power of the Word.”

She still does landscapes, portraits and commissions, but her new “postmodern” materials include mixed media, collage, symbolism, the human body in mystical aspect, bits of newspaper or computer code or fragments of sacred text or hymns. Her work *Purified Lips* (Zeph. 3:9), from her *Global City Babel Series*, appears on the cover of this *Reflections*. Her work suggests the noisy human condition after the Tower of Babel drama in Genesis. She borrows a famous tower image from Bruegel, but undergirding the frenetic scene is the notion of divine foundation. The texts you see in the work are from Zephaniah and the Gospel of John in English, French, and Swahili, emphasizing the power of the Word to regather a fractious world. The bold divine “I AM” shoots vertically down the left side.

She is keen to convey the dualities of existence but also question their mutual antagonism—the split between imagination and intellect, faith and science, language and silence, purity and impurity. These polarities have defined western intellectual debates for four hundred years, fragmenting the ego, fragmenting the world. But Bomer witnesses to the overwhelming divine power that oversees the human fray and beckons humanity back to peace and wholeness. She sees healing potential in Scripture itself. Reading and meditating on the word of God is a decisive source of her own inspiration.

Indeed, the name of her studio is Soli Deo Gloria – for the glory of God alone.

“To reclaim the holism of imagination and intellect, spirit and flesh, I believe that artists must find direction and truth in the richness of the Holy Scriptures,” she writes in *The Next Generation: Contemporary Expressions of Faith*, a book produced by MoBIA in conjunction with a 2005 exhibit that included Bomer’s work.

Against a church culture that often nurtures its own suspicions of the imagination and settles for triteness in Christian art, Bomer insists believers should look to art as a window on the great cosmic dramas.

The essays and dispatches in this *Reflections*, wrestling with some of the same perennial dichotomies of faith and reason, or tradition and innovation, make their own plea for fearless inquiry, a commitment of passion, imagination, intellect and faith.

“People are so often afraid of imagination,” Bomer says, “but you need intellect and imagination working together. God gave us both.”

CREDITS

ARTWORK

Copyright Carol Bomer, used by permission of the artist (www.carolbomer.com)

POETRY

Grace Schulman teaches at Baruch College (CUNY) and is former poetry editor of *The Nation*. Her latest book of poems is *The Broken String* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007)

“God’s Letters” excerpted from *Days of Wonder: New and Collected Poems* © 2002 by Grace Schulman. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

David Shumate, poet-in-residence at Marian College in Indianapolis, is the author of a new volume of prose poems, *The Floating Bridge* (University of Pittsburgh Press).

His poem in this *Reflections* issue, “Drawing Jesus,” appeared in *The Best American Poetry* 2007.

“Drawing Jesus” from *The Floating Bridge* by David Shumate © 2008 by David Shumate and reprinted by permission of University of Pittsburgh Press.

Dan Pagis (1930-1986), Romanian-born survivor of the Nazi period, was a renowned Israeli poet.

“Autobiography” from *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, by Dan Pagis (Stephen Mitchell, trans.; University of California Press) © 1996 and reprinted by permission of The Regents of the University of California.

Mark Jarman is a poet who teaches at Vanderbilt University. His books of poetry include *To the Green Man*, *Unholy Sonnets*, and *Questions for Ecclesiastes*. His latest volume is *Epistles* (Sarabande Books, 2007).

“Unholy Sonnet,” “Damascus” and “Patmos,” which appeared in *Unholy Sonnets* (Story Line Press, 2000), are reprinted by permission of the poet.

Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) is considered one of the greatest modern poets of Israel.

“A Man in His Life” from *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, by Yehuda Amichai (Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, editors) (c) 1996 The Regents of the University of California. Reprinted by permission of the University of California Press.

Virginia Hamilton Adair (1913-2004) was a California poet whose work included *Ants on the Melon* and *Beliefs & Blasphemies*.

“The Lost Gospel” from *Beliefs & Blasphemies* by Virginia Hamilton Adair, copyright © 1998 by Virginia Hamilton Adair. Used by permission of Random House, Inc.

THE LOST GOSPEL

By Virginia Hamilton Adair

At dawn you give your upper garment
to the wretch shivering by the roadside.
At noon you are knocking on doors;
some open, some slam.
The day smiles on you;
you give thanks for its warmth.
Fever departs from the bedridden one
flowing into the sun
descending its bright ladder into darkness.
You have no food;
but look, a little windfall apple
has rolled into the ditch, offering itself.
You give thanks and eat.

The cold hands of night reach for you
across the desert
and together you whisper to the stars.
All the immensity of darkness draws close
around you, covering you like the garment
you gave away in the dawn.
You are like a child whose father
bends down to comfort him into sleep.

Tomorrow you will walk to a hill
with others following, eager to hear something new.
And the words of blessedness will be blown
on the breath of that simple day,
around and around the world forever and ever.

BACK COVER:

They Built Into the Sky to Catch the Light



Printed on recycled paper



Yale Divinity School
409 Prospect Street
New Haven, CT 06511
www.yale.edu/divinity

Non profit org.
U.S. postage
PAID
New Haven, CT
Permit No. 526