

HOW JOHN WESLEY READ THE BIBLE

How did John Wesley read the Bible? The best-known passage where he answers this question is in the preface (§5) to the first volume of his *Sermons*, which begins:

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! ...Let me be homo unius libri [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.

"A Man of One Book" Comparatively!

Read in isolation, this passage could suggest that Wesley was a *biblicist*, relying solely on the Bible for all matters. But Wesley elsewhere responded to the claim, "I read only the Bible," with strong words: "This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul" (1766 *Minutes*, Q. 30). As he explained more carefully in *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (§10), to be *homo unius libri* is to regard no book *comparatively* but the Bible.

While Wesley was stressing the preeminence of the Bible over other books, one might catch hints here that he read the one Book itself *comparatively*. Wesley did not limit himself to the translation currently standard in the Church of England (KJV). He conferred with other English translations, as well as versions in French and German. And he valued over all of these the Bible in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek.

Going a step further, Wesley owned at least four versions of the Greek New Testament, because he knew that there was no pristine copy handed down from the earliest church. Among the versions he owned was John Mill's two-volume set, which gathered in footnotes the most complete list at the time of variant readings in various manuscripts. The English translation that Wesley provided

for *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* often corrects the KJV, by conferring with these variant readings and with the arguments about which might be most reliable.

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Finally, Wesley conferred as needed with scholarly tools like lexicons, concordances, and commentaries in reading the Bible. Perhaps most surprising is his use of the historical-critical resources that began to surface in the later seventeenth century. While he was uncomfortable with the reductive intent of some scholars who highlighted historical and literary parallels between the Bible and surrounding cultures, Wesley found that studies of the customs of the ancient Israelites and the early Christians enriched his reading of the Bible—so much so that he published an abridgment of one (by Claude Fleury) for his lay preachers.

Read Comparatively the Many Books in the One Book

Another characteristic often attributed to biblicism is the assumption that

Scripture is always clear (perspicuous) to the ordinary reader and uniform in its teachings throughout. Striking a different tone, Wesley's preface to *Sermons* continues:

Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? ...I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon, with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable.

Wesley recognized that readers often labor to understand particular scriptures, and that a central resource is consulting other parts (or books) of the one Book. He encouraged his followers to read a portion of *both* Testaments each morning and evening, rather than confining themselves to favored portions of Scripture. He also modeled conferring with the whole Bible. We have records of him preaching on texts from every book in the Protestant canon except Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Philemon, and 3 John.

Read Relying on the Inspiration of the Spirit

Before exploring more of Wesley's recommendations for our human role in reading Scripture, we need to return to the ellision (...) in my second extract

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WELCOME TO CATALYST

United Methodist (UM) seminarians have been receiving *Catalyst* since 1973. *Catalyst* is a project of A Foundation for Theological Education (AFTE). AFTE has a longstanding interest in theological education and renewal, and is best known for its leadership in providing fellowships for UM postgraduate students.

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from his preface above, because it contains one of Wesley's deepest convictions about Christian life in general and study of Scripture in particular. Here is the missing material:

I lift up my heart to the Father of lights: "Lord, is it not thy Word, 'If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God'? Thou 'givest liberally and upbraidest not.' Thou has said, 'If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.' I am willing to do, let me know, thy will."

Wesley's emphasis on the "inspiration of the Spirit" in Christian life is reflected here. His typical use of this phrase is broader than considerations of the production of the Bible. In the *Complete English Dictionary* (1753), he defined "inspiration" as the influence of the Holy Spirit that enables persons to love and serve God. This broad use of the word trades on the meaning of the Latin, *inspirare*: to breathe into, animate, excite, or inflame. The broader understanding is evident even when Wesley uses "inspiration" in relation to the Bible, as in his comments in *Explanatory Notes* on 2 Tim 3:16. He affirms God's guidance of the original authors, but his focal emphasis is encouraging current readers to seek the Spirit's inspiring assistance in reading and appropriating the truths of Scripture!

Read in Conference with Other Readers

Bearing in mind this dependence on the Spirit's empowering and guiding presence, let us push on in Wesley's preface. After encouraging his readers to pray for help and stressing the need to compare scripture with scripture, Wesley continues, "If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God, and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak." The crucial thing to note in this concluding line is not just that an individual might turn to other books to help understand the one Book, but that we as individuals need to read the Bible in conference with other readers!

Note that Wesley identifies consulting particularly those "more experienced in the things of God." His focal concern is not scholarly expertise (though he is not dismissing this), but the contribution of mature Christian character and discernment to interpreting the Bible. Where does one find such folk whose lives and understanding are less distorted by sin? One of Wesley's most

"to be homo unius libri is to regard no book comparatively but the Bible"

central convictions was that Christian character and discernment are the fruit of the Spirit, nurtured within the witness, worship, support, and accountability of Christian community. While the class and band meetings that he designed to embody this principle were not devoted primarily to Bible study, they helped form persons who were more inclined to read Scripture, and to read it in keeping with its central purposes.

But Wesley's emphasis on reading the Bible with others was grounded in his recognition of the limits of *all* human understanding, even that of spiritually mature persons. He stressed that, as finite creatures, our human understandings of our experience, of earlier Christian precedent, and of Scripture itself are "opinions" or interpretations of their subject matter. God may know these things with absolute clarity; we see them "through a glass darkly." Thus, in his sermon on a "Catholic Spirit" Wesley commended a spirit of openness in conferring with others, where we are clear in our commitment to the main branches of Christian doctrine, while always ready to hear and weigh whatever can be offered against our current understanding of matters of belief or practice—seeking together *more adequate* understandings of the topic being considered.

Moreover, it is vital that we do not limit our conferring to those who are most like us, or those with whom we already agree. We should remain open to, and at times seek out, those who hold differing understandings. Otherwise, we are not

likely to identify where our understanding of something in Scripture (usually shared with those closest to us) might be wrong!

Read in Conference with Christian "Tradition"

Among those outside of his circle of associates whom Wesley sought to include in conference were Christians of earlier generations. He particularly valued the writings of the first three centuries of the church, in both its Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) settings. In a published letter to Conyers Middleton, he insisted that consultation with these writings had helped many readers avoid dangerous errors in their interpretation of Scripture, while neglect of these writings could leave one captive to misunderstandings currently reigning.

Wesley tended to jump from the early church to seventeenth-century Anglican standards (which he viewed as closely reflecting the early church) in his consideration of Christian precedent. We would do well to extend his precedent by engaging in a critical appropriation of the *breadth* of Christian history.

Read the One Book in Conference with the "Rule of Faith"

Wesley's strongest interest in the ancient church was their model of Christian practice. But he also valued early precedent in doctrine. One deserves special attention. An emphasis emerged early in the church on reading unclear or ambiguous passages in the Bible in light of the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*—a Latin translation of Paul's advice in Rom 12:6 for exercising the gift of prophecy according to the "analogy of faith"). This was a summary of God's saving work revealed in Scripture, with particular attention to the implicit trinitarian form of this work (the Apostles' Creed is a key example).

The term "rule of faith" became a battle ground during the Reformation. Some teachings and practices had been advanced through the medieval period that Reformers judged contrary to biblical teaching. In response they championed "Scripture alone" as the rule of faith. But for most Protestants this did not mean rejecting the value of some communally shared sense of the central and unifying themes in Scripture when trying to interpret particular passages. They changed the name for this shared sense to the "analogy of faith" (reflecting Paul's Greek text) as one expression of their concern to stick close to Scripture.

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Catalyst

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But they typically defended under this label consulting at least the Apostles' Creed when interpreting Scripture.

Wesley's commitment to reading the Bible in light of the trinitarian (and other) themes affirmed in the Apostles' Creed is embodied in his advice: "In order to be well acquainted with the doctrines of Christianity you need but one book besides the New Testament—Bishop [John] Pearson *On the Creed*" (Telford, *Letters*, 4:243). Thus, Wesley's self-description as a "man of one Book" should not mislead us from recognizing that he read that Book in conference with the broadly shared Christian "rule of faith" and his specific Anglican commitments.

Read the "Book of Scripture" in Conference with the "Book of Nature"

One commitment that Wesley's Anglican upbringing nurtured was a higher emphasis than in some other Protestant circles for studying God's revelation in the natural world (the "book of nature") alongside of studying Scripture. Wesley's central interest in studying the natural world was to strengthen the faith awakened by Scripture and deepen our appreciation of God's power, wisdom, and goodness. But his reading of current studies of the natural world also

helped him test and reshape inherited interpretations of Scripture.

For an example, return to the preface of *Sermons* and note Wesley's line: "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven." Wesley is reflecting here a long development in Christian history. Although Scripture speaks of God's ultimate goal in salvation as the "new heavens and earth," a variety of influences led Christians to assume increasingly that our final state is "heaven above." The latter was seen as a realm where human spirits, dwelling in ethereal bodies, join eternally with all other spiritual beings (a category that did not include animals) in continuous worship of God. By contrast, they assumed that the physical universe, which we abandon at death, would be annihilated. Wesley was raised with this understanding, and through much of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic. But in the last decade of his life he began to reclaim boldly the biblical imagery of God's renewal of the whole universe, specifically championing the notion that animals participate in final salvation. What led to this change? A major factor was his study of some current works in natural philosophy (the closest term for "science" at the time) that utilized the model of the "chain of

beings." Central to this model is the assumption that the loss of any type of "being" in creation would call into question the perfection of the Creator. Prodded by this, Wesley began to take more seriously the biblical insistence that God desires to redeem the whole creation.

Here we can sense the dynamic of "honoring conference" that characterized Wesley's theological reflection at its best. Confronted by an apparent conflict between current human accounts of the natural world and his current (human) understanding of Scripture, Wesley did not simply debate which was more authoritative. He reconsidered his interpretations of *each*, seeking an understanding that *honored both*. In this way he upheld the authority of Scripture, while embracing the contribution of broad conferencing to understanding Scripture.

By Randy L. Maddox, William Kellon Quick Professor of Theology and Wesleyan Studies, Duke Divinity School, and author of *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Abingdon, 1994). This article distills: "The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible," *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 1–35.

PREMODERN BIBLICAL EXEGESIS: WHY DOES IT MATTER FOR PREACHERS AND TEACHERS TODAY?

A gap in the theological library of preachers and teachers of the Bible has begun to be filled in the last two decades, after nearly two centuries of neglect. A peculiarity of the modern biblical commentary—in its historical-critical and pietistic forms—is that it has paid little attention to the history of biblical exegesis. In contrast, biblical interpreters before the enlightenment generally considered historic biblical exegetes to be valuable companions in discerning the meaning of Scripture. In the Reformation, both Roman Catholic and Protestant interpreters continued to engage this history. But the effects of modernity have caused our era to lose touch with this valuable practice.

But now there are numerous biblical commentary series that present episodes in this history for us afresh: the Ancient Christian Commentary Series (InterVarsity) and the Church's Bible (Eerdmans) focus upon patristic exegesis; and the Reformation Commentary Series (InterVarsity) focuses on a variety of Reformation exegetes. Many more books give summaries of the history of

exegesis on particular biblical books and passages. But a preacher and teacher today is busy. Modern critical commentaries are still necessary and important. Why should today's Bible preacher or teacher take the time to read premodern commentaries as well?

*"premodern exegetes
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In my book, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2010), I give an extended account of why premodern exegetes are vital companions in the reading of Scripture. Here are a few summative reasons, drawn from that account.

(1) Premodern exegetes can supplement the work of critical biblical scholarship by showing us how Scripture should be received from within a theological framework that believes God is active in the world.

Christians should not assume that human history exists in an autonomous realm separated from God's work. Rather, human history participates in God's own providential activity, and we misunderstand history when we conceive of it as an immanent realm that is isolated from divine action. Thus, while Christians can appreciate the linear aspects of the "natural history" of textual origin provided in critical scholarship, Christians must insist that a theological framework is indispensable for understanding this history properly. Thus, the "original historical context" of a biblical text—including OT texts—is part of a history of God's own action that culminates in Christ. Moreover, Christians should trust that God continues to be active in the world, working to restore and redeem

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his creation in Christ through the power of the Spirit. The very process of Christians "reading Scripture" is taken up into this divine drama of salvation, bringing death to the old self and life to those united to Jesus Christ by the Spirit's power. Premodern exegetes often have a strong sense of these key theological realities when reading Scripture—seeing Scripture as fulfilled in Jesus Christ, forming us as disciples of Jesus Christ by the Spirit's power.

(2) Premodern exegetes help us see how the biblical canon is a unified book because of its narrative of God's self-revelation in creation and with Israel, culminating in Jesus Christ.

Apart from a canonical framework, the Bible may appear to be a book of disconnected writings. However, premodern exegetes remind us that there is a reason Christians read these diverse writings together, all in one book. This reason rests in the belief that the story of God's work in creation and in covenant with Israel finds its culmination in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of this, Israel's scriptures are received by the church as the "Old Testament," bearing witness to the new covenant in Christ even in places where the OT writers would have been unaware of any such witness. In this way, faith in the unique identity of Jesus Christ—the eternal Word made flesh—gives the entire Scripture its unity, for it is to Jesus Christ that Scripture points. Premodern exegetes can also help us see the ways in which the literal sense of the OT can lead to types and allegories of realities shown forth in Jesus Christ. While this should be done with care, such that the OT narrative is not annihilated but rather fulfilled in Christ, premodern exegetes show us various models and possibilities for interpreting Scripture christologically.

(3) With difficult Scripture passages, premodern exegetes show us that discerning God's word to us in Scripture is often not easy; yet they give models of ways to struggle faithfully with Scripture and God, its mysterious author.

Premodern exegetes model the way exegetical difficulties are not simply problems to be fixed, but mysteries of God's word to be discerned. Premodern exegetes believed that all Scripture is God's word to the church in Christ; but they held that conviction with the awareness that it is not always easy to discern how it is true. How is a psalm that curses the psalmist's enemies

bearing witness to Christ, who teaches love of enemies? How are the passages of rape, abuse, and violence in the Bible seen as the word of the God shown forth in the self-sacrificial love of Christ? Premodern exegetes struggle greatly with questions such as these, and even where we do not agree with their reflections, they have something to teach us about approaching the Bible as Scripture.

For premodern exegetes, discerning the meaning of difficult texts requires more than a good lexicon and a "Bible-background" commentary. It requires a life of prayer and worship before a holy and mysterious God. In light of this, we can see how premodern practices such as allegory need not be seen as a strategy of "erasing textual difficulty" but of "shifting to and preserving a certain sort of difficulty: that of seeing Christ, who may be difficult to see, in a place where we believe he must be present" (Brian Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" *Communio* 29 [2002]: 203-04). For example, when Origen encoun-

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ters the senseless death of Jephthah's daughter based on her father's rash oath (Judg 11), he seeks to discern how this relates to the mystery of Christ. When he calls her a martyr, he says she presents a sacrifice that prefigures the death of Jesus as the Lamb of God. Origen's account does not make the narrative of Jephthah's daughter neat and tidy, however, for he insists that martyrdom is not a visible triumph—but appears to be a senseless, terrible defeat. Jephthah's daughter's martyrdom, like Origen's father's martyrdom (and later his own), does not appear to be a glorious victory. Origen's spiritual reading of Jephthah's daughter does not soften a difficult text, but it contextualizes the silences and conundrums of the text within the larger mystery of God in Christ.

(4) Reading premodern exegetes reminds us of the contextual location of all interpretations, as well as the sinfulness of all interpreters. Even when we disagree with premodern interpreters, they can help us become

more self-aware and self-critical readers of Scripture.

All interpretation of Scripture takes place within a particular context, and reading exegetes from various contexts can provide mutual enrichment and also call into question our own idolatries. This point is particularly true for the history of interpretation and the reading of premodern exegetes. If we want to become aware of the shaping—sometimes idolatrous—force of modernity, we need to read premodern exegetes. Just as Americans who move to China for a year discover previously unrecognized ways in which they are distinctively American, reading premodern exegetes reveals to us that many of our assumptions about the world are not "just the way things are" but have a distinctively modern perspective on the world. At times, reading premodern exegetes can help to unveil our own modern idolatries.

Yet at other times the historical distance that we have from premodern interpreters can make obvious a fact that we should keep in mind as interpreters of Scripture: all exegetes are sinful, and not above a certain degree of suspicion. The historical and social location of contemporary readers of Scripture tends to highlight two sins of premodern exegetes in particular: a frequent anti-Jewish polemic and patriarchal attitudes that sometimes belittle women, reducing them to narrow, stereotypical roles. While I believe that these examples should not make us jettison premodern exegesis, they should poignantly remind us that, while we should read the Bible together with the community of faith through time, that community is also a sinful community—and we are among them, as sinners.

While we should be open about the sinfulness of premodern exegetes on these points, we should also seek to understand their positions on their own terms, not prematurely absorbing their views into totalizing categories such as "anti-Semitic" or "misogynist." Indeed, as strange as it may sound, renewed interest in premodern Christian exegetes has actually fueled interest in Jewish interpretation among many recent scholars, and the patristics, far from being simply "patriarchal," have been mined in profound ways by prominent Christian feminist scholars. These contemporary movements of retrieval do not simply accept anti-Jewish polemic or belittling comments about women; but they still find a great deal of value in these premodern Christian thinkers. On the issue of anti-Jewish polemic, premodern Chris-

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tian authors should not be understood as advocating a racial inferiority or other deficiency based on "blood," as recent anti-Semitism has done. On a theological level, premodern polemics are driven by an anti-Judaism that claims the inferiority of the law and the Temple as a way to be the people of God. On this particular point, premodern writers were right at least to realize that they would understand the OT differently in light of Christ. Unfortunately, this theological point was often infused with cultural stereotypes that scapegoat and demonize Jews. Contemporary Christians should openly confess the centrality of Christ, but we should recognize the depravity of our own community and mourn those times when a clear proclamation of Christ has been tarnished with the scapegoating of the Jewish community.

In contrast to this tendency, many contemporary and well as key historic exegetes find it fruitful to read Jewish as well as Christian premodern exegesis. By reading alongside another community of faith—each with its own distinct theological and practical commitments—we learn more about areas of common ground, but we also learn what it means to be a distinctly Christian interpreter of Scripture.

With the second issue: How should we evaluate the male-oriented bias of premodern exegetes? Given the prejudices of many premodern authors about the roles and capacities of women, one might expect that contemporary women readers and feminist scholars would have ignored premodern authors. But that is not the case. There has been considerable engagement and interest in premodern exegetes by women scholars.

Why have feminist scholars and other female exegetes drawn deeply from

the premodern exegetes despite their patriarchal assumptions? First, though premodern male authors could certainly not be regarded as "feminists," many of them display profoundly humanistic intuitions. They show considerable empathy for and understanding of other human beings, particularly ones who suffer injustice or maltreatment. When it comes to the history of exegesis, J.L. Thompson has shown how male premodern authors often parallel contemporary feminist critics in their empathy, concern, and admiration for women of the Bible, even women who appear to have marginalized roles, such as Hagar, Jephthah's daughter, and other victimized women in the Old Testament (cf. *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* [Eerdmans, 2007], chs. 1-2).

Second, feminist theologians have found that certain premodern thinkers have theological ideas—even ideas about gender—that can call into question contemporary forms of patriarchy. Part of this involves taking a step behind the patriarchy of the Enlightenment itself—and the ideal "man of reason" that the Enlightenment promulgated. Engaging premodern exegetes makes possible the appropriation of a broad diversity of scriptural interpretation that often eludes particular aspects of contemporary patriarchy. Significant scholars such as Kathryn Tanner, Ellen Charry, Francis Young, and Sarah Coakley have all made substantial use of patristic exegesis and theology in their own theological accounts. In addition, other scholars such as Amy Oden have helped to revive interest in previously neglected premodern women voices (cf. A. Oden, ed., *In Her Words: Women's Writings in the History of Christian Thought* [Abingdon, 1994]).

In the end, we should read premodern exegetes in particular not because we will always agree with their positions; indeed, they often disagree with each another. Nor should we read them because they replace or make obsolete the insights that come from critical studies of the Bible. Premodern interpreters are fallible and limited, as are we. But they also reflect the work of the Spirit in the past, and they show great insight into how to interpret all of Scripture as God's own word in Christ. United Methodist pastor and scholar, Jason Byassee, says it well when he speaks of how his own discovery of premodern biblical interpreters grew out of "the experience of leading a congregation."

As a preacher I spent a great deal of fruitless time seeking biblical commentaries to help me read Scripture well for the sake of the church. I have found modern commentaries helpful for certain things—in clarifying historical events or linguistic problems with greater confidence than ancient commentators could, for example. But I found ancient commentators more helpful in doing the most important thing that Christian preaching and teaching must do: drawing the church to Christ." (*Praise Seeking Understanding: Preaching the Psalms with Augustine* [Eerdmans, 2007], 1)

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TEENAGERS AND THE ART OF TRANSLATION: PARENTS MATTER MOST

The deplorable, miserable conditions which I recently observed when visiting the parishes have constrained and pressed me to put this catechism of Christian doctrine into this brief, plain, and simple form. How pitiable, so help me God, were the things I saw; the common man, especially in the villages, knows practically nothing of Christian doctrine, and many of the pastors are almost entirely incompetent and unable to teach. Yet all the people are supposed to be Christians, have been baptized,

and receive the Holy Sacrament even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments and live like poor animals of the barnyard and pigpen. What these people have mastered, however, is the fine art of tearing all Christian liberty to shreds. (in Martin Luther, preface to *The Small Catechism* [1529], translation by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod; http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/LCMS/small_catechism.pdf [accessed August 16, 2007])

Luther's *Small Catechism*, widely regarded as an educational masterpiece, located teaching in households, not congregations. He was convinced that Christian formation began with youth ministry, and he was convinced that youth ministry started at home. Even before his break with Rome, Luther wrote "If ever the church is to flourish again, one must begin by instructing the young" (cited in M. Albrecht, "The Effects of Luther's Catechisms on the Church of the Sixteenth Century" [lecture, Dr. Martin

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