

Review Essays

Going by the Book

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Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford UP, 2011), 326 pp., \$55.00 cloth.

One of the significant recent developments in American historical scholarship has been increasing attention to the demotic presence of Scripture throughout the nineteenth century. What once was known as a commonplace, and therefore unworthy of serious attention, is now being recognized as a commonplace, and therefore demanding serious attention. Major new books on the Civil War, for instance, which have anticipated the interest certain to surge throughout the conflict's sesquicentennial, are documenting the widespread extent of Bible distribution and Bible reference in all segments of national life. The first comprehensive history of religion in the war era, by George Rable of the University of Alabama, has expertly described the ubiquity of the Christian Bible as a physical object as well as a source for public rhetoric and private ruminations.¹ A different sort of testimony is found in David Goldfield's even more recent large-scale interpretive volume. Goldfield's main thesis is that the nation was so strongly affected by an excessively religious hyperventilation coming from the dominant evangelical denominations that both North and South willingly accepted a violent war that politics free from this religious infection might have avoided. Goldfield is not writing

about Scripture as such, but a byproduct of his effort is to show how often scriptural phrases, allusions, paraphrases, quotations, and references sprang to the pen and lip of many of the era's most visible actors, including John Brown, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Seward (Union Secretary of State), Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Alexander Stephens (Confederate Vice President).²

A remarkable burst of fresh scholarship is making the same point from the other end of the social spectrum. Over roughly the last decade, a host of deeply researched and cogently argued books have explored the pervasive scriptural presence among the United States' black populations.³ For many African Americans, the Bible was a more flexible or emblematic book than for well-placed public figures or well-respected theological professionals in the white community. Yet for the social sphere created by the slave experience, this newer scholarship has shown that both before and after African Americans enjoyed significant literacy, the Bible became a fundamental resource – as private encouragement; an inexhaustible treasure of stories to be sung, preached, and sung again; a repository of heroes bestowing hope; and, for some, a weapon to wield against slavery itself.

What the burgeoning of scholarship on American use of Scripture lacks, however, is a systematic scholarly account of the length, breadth, configuration, and meaning of an entire culture's immersion in Scripture. What is lacking, in other words, is the kind of study that Timothy Larsen provides in his recently published *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians*. If Larsen's book on The Book still leaves significant questions open concerning what the Victorian Bible-immersion meant for the sake of Scripture itself, it does an outstanding job charting the length, breadth, and configuration of that extraordinary Victorian fixation. In a word, the length extended everywhere, the depth revealed mind-boggling mastery of biblical content, and the configuration took in virtually all varieties of Victorian religious opinion.

The plan of Larsen's book is straightforward. He has prepared ten case studies of figures representing ten of the Victorian era's most prom-

inent religious (and anti-religious) traditions. The approach for each chapter is the same. Larsen first justifies treating the particular figure selected as representative of the tradition. For the Quaker Elizabeth Fry, as an example, he shows that her evangelical-leaning convictions were far more common among nineteenth-century English Friends than the liberal sentiments that were stronger with American Quakers at the same time. Larsen then systematically explores the person's published and often unpublished writings in order to observe how biblical allusions and quotations informed their discourse, what they might have said about the nature of Scripture itself, what writings they may have authored to encourage others to read the Bible, and how their use of Scripture functioned in the work for which each person is best known. Several of the chapters also include Larsen's scandalized comments about the modern scholars who ignore, deny, or trivialize the immersion in Scripture that all of his subjects displayed.

The book is particularly noteworthy for the extent of Larsen's research, his deliberate decision to feature several women as representatives of their respective traditions, and the depth of scriptural indebtedness where casual students of the period may have expected it least.

The book's research includes full attention to published writings, which for almost all these Victorians was extensive beyond the capacity of even the most assiduous scribblers of our twenty-first century to imagine. But to that extensive coverage of published writings Larsen has also added significant archival explorations. Thus, for Josephine Butler, the evangelical Anglican well known as an opponent of England's misogynist prostitution laws, Larsen's use of an unpublished diary allows him to show how often "she correlates her experience to that of a biblical character" (228). Similarly, for the Unitarian Mary Carpenter, Larsen shows from unpublished correspondence how resolutely she rebuffed appeals from radical associates to give up her reliance on books promoting the singularly Unitarian defense of Scriptures (141). Most of Larsen's evidence does come from thoroughly mining the vast corpus of published Victoriana, including the multi-volume "lives and times" that the off-

spring of notable Victorians so often assembled with such excruciating thoroughness. Yet strategic use of unpublished material puts Larsen's main thesis about the near universal Victorian preoccupation with Scripture beyond the shadow of a doubt.

One of the signal achievements of the book, where it shares an emphasis with some of the best recent writing on the Bible for African Americans, is Larsen's decision to feature Victorian women, who turn out to be everywhere as committed to Scripture as Victorian men. Beyond Mary Carpenter (Unitarian) and Josephine Butler (evangelical Anglican), Larsen also features several other women whose memorizing, studying, reading, citing, and defending Scripture appears simply breathtaking. Catherine Booth, the co-founder of the Salvation Army, is Larsen's representative for Methodism, in which she was raised, and the Holiness traditions, of which the Salvation Army remains a sterling example. Catherine née Mumford was raised in a Wesleyan Methodist home where Bible reading was taken for granted. Apart from two years of formal schooling, she was self-educated, but a self-education that included reading the entire Bible eight times for herself before at age twelve those two years began. Her adult speaking was thoroughly shaped by what Larsen calls "biblical language and patterns of thought" (90). She defended the preaching of the American holiness evangelist, Phoebe Palmer, with a pamphlet given over to considering disputed New Testament passages, including several exegeted from the Greek. Her own sermons, which regularly lasted an hour or more, were expository or biblically hortatory. She defined the essence of the Salvation Army as a Christian movement that finally practiced real Protestantism by actually living up to Scripture. She appealed to the working-class audiences deliberately sought out by her husband William and herself by presenting biblical stories adapted to their level. And when she died, the inscription on her coffin read "The Mother of the Salvation Army/ More than Conqueror" (from Romans 8:37); on the coffin itself lay her Salvation Army uniform and her well-worn Bible.

Larsen's account of the Quaker prisoner reformer Elizabeth Fry is parallel in almost every respect. In Fry's case, her great work of trying to

humanize England's notorious prisons was carried out mainly by reading the Bible aloud to the prisoners.

As it proved for me, many readers will doubtless find Larsen's book most unexpected when it documents the intense Bible commitments of Victorians who were not in the evangelical camp and who, at least stereotypically, might have been expected to slight the Scriptures. The presence in the book of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, representing England's evangelical Dissenters, is no surprise in light of how well known Spurgeon's expository sermons remain and how much notice his strong defense of orthodox views of Scripture attracted in his own time and later. By contrast, the book's surprise is its long list of other eminent Victorians, not known for their orthodox Christian convictions, who were almost as preoccupied with the Bible as was Spurgeon.

Thus, the Anglo-Catholic E.B. Pusey, whom evangelicals regularly criticized for letting ancient church tradition take the place of Scripture, was a dedicated Hebraist whose major literary effort was an extensive defense of traditional interpretations of the Book of Daniel. (It was a defense that the Baptist Spurgeon commended highly.) Nicholas Wiseman, the Catholic bishop and later cardinal who accomplished the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England, was also a devoted student of Scripture throughout his life. Almost all of his responses to Protestants who attacked Catholicism as contradictory to Scripture turned the tables by defending Catholicism with extensive counter-exegesis. The atheists Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant repudiated the truth-claims that Christians of their era supported from Scripture. But they were both students of the Bible, scriptural language peppered their writings, and Bradlaugh devoted the last years of his life to a kind of anti-biblical commentary on the Old Testament. Florence Nightingale was a liberal Anglican who once said of the Lord's Prayer, "there is hardly a word of exact truth" in it (121). But her speech was filled with biblical allusions, and she regularly cited the Bible to support her appeal for developing a respected nursing profession. T.H. Huxley was famous in his own day for originating the word "agnostic," which he applied to people who

thought as he did, and for defending Darwinian evolution so vigorously he was called “Darwin’s bulldog.” Yet his speech was also definitively shaped by biblical usage, he supported the reading of Scripture when he served on a London school commission, and in that great age of phrase-making he uttered some of the most memorable phrases ever offered about the impact of Scripture: “for three centuries, this book has been woven into the life of all that is best and noblest in English history.... The Bible has been the *Magna Charta* of the poor and the oppressed ... the Bible is the most democratic book in the world” (210, 212). Thereafter, these words have been often repeated, although rarely with attribution to Huxley. In Larsen’s final chapter, where he gathers up notes for what could have been a much longer book, he sketches the lives of representative spiritualists and Jews who were as biblicistic as the other figures treated more extensively.

A People of One Book is entirely successful in its effort to document the near universal indebtedness to Scripture displayed by Victorian religious figures of every stripe. What the book does not do would be a fit subject for someone of Larsen’s facility in research and breadth of insight into the Victorian period. That task is to draw broader interpretive conclusions – about what the great Victorian immersion in Scripture meant for the Bible itself and also, requiring an even more complicated argument, how to explain why the Victorians’ biblicism deteriorated over the course of the twentieth century. A few hints as to where such broader interpretations might go are indeed found in the book. Almost in passing, Larsen alludes in several places to the interpretive crux posed when everyone was appealing to Scripture, but for purposes that might differ in detail (e.g., C.H. Spurgeon v. Catherine Booth) or in toto (e.g., E.B. Pusey v. Charles Braudlaugh). Thus, Larsen writes perceptively about the “awareness” that developed in Victorian consciousness “that some additional decisive factor needed to be identified” to explain the variety of biblical attachment. “This added component would help to account for why a commitment to Scripture had not kept one’s theological opponents from their errors. For Pusey, the formula was Holy Scripture plus patris-

tic patterns of interpretation; for Nicholas Wiseman it was Sacred Scripture plus the authority of the church hierarchy. Catherine Booth faced the same dilemma. Her solution was the Scriptures plus the Spirit" (108).

The reason for trying to fathom the implications of interpretive promiscuity is plain. If the Bible could be used for so many different purposes, is it possible to say that Scripture itself retained its own motive power? Or had it become only a universally treasured cultural artifact that was indispensable to deploy, but impossible to define?

This book contains many other insights, like Larsen's convincing case that the full weight of biblical higher criticism was felt decades later than scholars have traditionally suggested. He also provides in the book's last paragraphs a hint about how one might answer the larger question of pluralistic, or even contradictory, scriptural interpretation.

In closing this very useful book, Larsen suggests that modern scholars have been so preoccupied with Victorian responses to biblical criticism that they minimize the much more important devotional use of Scripture. What has been missed, in Larsen's words, is the extent to which "many, many Victorians experienced the Bible first and foremost as a richly abundant and life-giving source of spiritual comfort and divine promises" (297-98). To understand the substance of that experience, the conditions under which it took place, and the course of history that witnessed the abandonment of that experience is a desideratum that is now more pressing precisely because of the success of this book. For those of us who are interested in parallel aspects of American life and in contemporary attempts to write that American history responsibly, the mandate is just the same.

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Notes

¹ George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen People: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (U of North Carolina P, 2010).

² David Goldfield, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

³ These books include, as only a partial listing, Vincent L.

Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Joanna Brooks, *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literatures* (Oxford UP, 2003); Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (Yale UP, 2006); Katherine Clay Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible* (U of Georgia P, 2010); and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Harvard UP, 2010).

