

*The Bible in Seventeenth-Century
English Politics*

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The Bible has always been a potentially revolutionary book. There were fierce conflicts over the establishment of the canon for the early Christian church, as it transformed itself from a popular underground organization to the state church of the Roman Empire; and today the Bible is crucial to the liberation theology of Latin America. Countless radicals in between have turned to the Bible to support their cause.

In England in 1381 our first anti-poll-tax rebels asked

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

The couplet was repeatedly quoted by rebels —from Edward VI’s reign to the 1640s. In Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* Jack Cade said, “Adam was a gardener,” and his followers wanted the magistrates to be “labouring men.” When the second grave-digger in *Hamlet* asked if Adam was a gentleman he was recalling the same rhyme.

Throughout the Middle Ages the Bible was kept in Latin, readable only by the clergy and a very few exceptional laymen. Translation into the vernacular was forbidden. The English version was made by Wyclif’s followers, the Lollards, almost simultaneously with the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, was a prohibited document. It circulated in manuscript at underground discussion groups of peasants and artisans, from the late fourteenth century to the Protestant Reformation of the early sixteenth century.

The invention of printing, and the rapid increase of literacy among the laity in the sixteenth century, led to new versions, following the example of Luther’s German Bible. John Foxe the Martyrologist thought that the coincidence in time of the Reformation and the spread of the printing press was a divine miracle. Many of the earlier translators were burned, including William

Tyndale, whose superb version of the 1520s underlies all subsequent English translations. If Tyndale had survived to become a bishop in Edward VI's reign we should all have heard more of his translation.

The accident of Henry VIII's quarrel with the papacy in the 1530s made him suddenly permit publication of the Bible in English: though he was careful to insist that it should not be read by anyone below the rank of gentleman or lady and that it should not be discussed in unauthorized assemblies. But this attempt to abolish "diversity of opinions" was of no avail once the Bible was available in English. Resistance to the brief restoration of Catholicism under Mary showed that hundreds of ordinary men and women were prepared to suffer martyrdom for the faith which they believed they had found in the Bible. The Marian Martyrs came almost exclusively from the poorer classes; wealthy believers were able to escape into exile. But whilst many hitherto Protestant clergy and gentry conformed under Bloody Mary, the constancy of the humbler sufferers under persecution, glorified in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, established a myth and testified to the reality of a core of convinced Protestants in England. When Elizabeth succeeded Mary it was natural and necessary for her to clasp the English Bible to her bosom in a public demonstration of her devotion to it.

Under Elizabeth, the popular version was the Geneva Bible, produced by Marian exiles and sold in deliberately cheap, pocketable editions. It quite eclipsed the official "Bishops' Bible" in popular estimation and sales. Two specialties of the Geneva Bible, and a reason for its popularity, were its woodcut illustrations and its extensive marginal notes. The latter glossed the text in a radical, Calvinist, sense — as contrasted with the unadorned text of the official Bible used in all parish churches. James I particularly disliked the Geneva Bible. The point of the Authorized Version, published under his auspices in 1611, was to get rid of all marginal commentary and to leave the Bible to be interpreted by authorized parsons of the Church of England established in every parish,

and by the seventeenth century assumed to have sufficient education to be able to cope with this task.

One of the popular aspects of what we call Puritanism was its emphasis on household religion, in which the father of the family expounded the sacred text to his wife, children, servants, and apprentices. In many parishes “lecturers,” freelance preachers hired by town corporations or financed by public subscription, offered a theology more popular with their congregations than that supplied by the officially appointed vicar or rector. The hierarchy always disliked the popular element in the appointment of lecturers and tried to discourage them. Archbishop Laud for a few years in the 1630s was successful in suppressing them altogether. In discussions of sermons the Geneva marginal notes must have been very useful to those who lacked a university education: popular preachers expected their congregations to have their Bibles handy. The Geneva Bible was prohibited under Laud: Milton and Bunyan used both the A.V. and the Geneva Bible.

The Bible was not only read on Sundays, when all were legally compelled to attend their parish church. Men, women, and children encountered it on all sides — in the ballads they bought and sang and in their daily surroundings. Where today we would have wallpaper and paintings on the walls, almost all houses had hangings to keep out draughts and to cover up the rough surfaces. These often took the form of “painted cloths,” representing Biblical scenes. Biblical texts were painted on walls and posts in houses. All walls were covered with printed matter — illustrated ballads and broadsides, again often on Biblical subjects. “Godly tables,” printed especially for decorating walls, were described as “most fit to be set up in every house”: they regularly contained texts from the Bible as well as prayers and instructions to “godly householders.” Most of the population would first encounter both print and the Bible with such decorations.

So the Bible was omnipresent in houses. But houses include alehouses, which with churches were the main centres of commu-

nity life. Their walls too had painted texts and painted cloths and were covered with ballads, broadsides, and “godly tables.” Men and women who had never opened a Bible would be well acquainted with many of its stories and texts. Several generations of children in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries grew up in an environment suffused with the new print culture and the Bible in English. “The people of the Book” could come to know it well without reading it.¹

In consequence almost everybody in the sixteenth century and most in the seventeenth accepted that the Bible was the authoritative source of all wisdom —on politics and economics as well as on what we should today call religion. Opening the Bible at random was a favourite way of asking for divine guidance. When English sailors had lost contact with the Dutch fleet in 1653, a prayer-meeting in the flagship opened the Bible, and II Chronicles XX.16 gave them the answer. Biblical phrases could convey more than appeared on the surface, as in Thomas Hobbes’s apparently innocent remark “the apostleship of Judas is called his bishopric,” to which he carefully gave Acts I.20 as a reference. The cry “To your tents, O Israel!” was the title of a pamphlet published just before the outbreak of civil war; the phrase was used again as the conclusion of a near-Digger pamphlet in 1648, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*. There was no need to remind people that this cry had been the prelude to successful rebellion against the king. (I Kings XII.16; II Samuel XX.1).

The Bible was central to the political discussions which accompanied civil war: both sides appealed to its text. The Bible—and especially the New Testament—is fairly consistently in favour of obedience to the powers that be, who are ordained of God. But in the Old Testament there are few good kings. When James I tried to produce Biblical support for monarchy he was reduced to quoting the warnings of the prophet Samuel trying to persuade the

¹ I owe these two paragraphs to Tessa Watt’s most useful book, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Oxford University Press, 1991), chapters 4–6.

Israelites not to choose a king. Samuel listed the dreadful things a king would do to his subjects: James cheerfully cited this as a call for absolute obedience even to the worst of kings.

Bad kings in the Old Testament were mostly those who introduced idolatry. Since radical Protestants equated popery with idolatry, they made much of this point. Nimrod, allegedly the founder of monarchy, was described by Milton as a rebel who disrupted the “free equality, fraternal state” which preceded his rule.

The Old Testament had other attractions for people in the seventeenth century. A continuing theme is the extermination of the previous inhabitants of the Promised Land by the Chosen People who invaded it. The brutality with which this conquest was accompanied is not often emphasized. Moses, after a military victory over the Midianites, instructed his troops to kill all the men and women prisoners except virgins, whom they might “keep alive for yourselves” (Numbers XXXI.14-18). The unconcern with which Old Testament prophets advocated the slaughter of the heathen inhabitants seemed to justify the self-righteousness with which seventeenth-century English settlers extirpated the native inhabitants of Ireland —Papists, no better than heathens — and New England settlers on occasion massacred American Indians.

The most revolutionary Biblical concept was that of the millennium. In times of crisis throughout the Middle Ages it had been assumed that the end of the world and judgment day were at hand. But by the seventeenth century a consensus among Protestant scholars interpreting the Biblical prophecies seemed to have agreed that the 1650s were a probable date for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the millennium. We recall Milton’s phrase of 1641 —“shortly-expected king.” This was a heady notion, especially for less educated persons than Milton. As the date approached, the English civil war could easily be seen as the prelude to the last times depicted in Revelation.

One necessary condition was the overthrow of Antichrist. Protestants identified the pope as Antichrist, and in the 1630s there

were widespread suspicions of an international Papist plot against England's Protestant independence, in which Charles's Queen Henrietta Maria and his first minister, Archbishop Laud, were involved. In the civil war the royalists were labelled "the Anti-christian party."

The concept of the covenanted Chosen People, which runs through the Old Testament, was taken over by English millenarians. From the days of Elizabeth England was a "beleaguered isle," surrounded by hostile Catholic powers. The forward-looking party among Elizabeth's advisers—Leicester, Walsingham, Drake, Sir Philip Sidney—aspired to lead European Protestants in a crusade against the papal Antichrist and Spain: Elizabeth showed no enthusiasm for such a policy, James and Charles even less, on good financial grounds. But others were eager, for a whole variety of reasons.

Such a campaign, as the sea-dogs well realised, might lead to the conquest of "new worlds, for gold, for praise, for glory," as Raleigh put it."² Plunder-trade with America and the Far East and the slave trade from Africa were open to any state which possessed a powerful enough navy. Gain and godliness were in an alliance which seems to us more uncomfortable than it apparently seemed to contemporaries. The attempts of James and Charles to come to terms with the great Catholic powers—Spain and France—by marriage alliance and political agreement seemed to convinced Protestants a shameful betrayal of the duty of a covenanted nation. A significant literature in the 1620s and 1630s cried out against this betrayal and insisted that God would turn against his Chosen People if they turned away from him. The idea that God was leaving England loomed large in the minds of many of the early emigrants to New England, where they expected to set up a Bible Commonwealth. When England and Scotland signed the Solemn League and Covenant in 1643, it was designed not only to

² Walter Raleigh, "The 11th and last book of the Ocean to Scinthia," in *Poems*, ed. A. M. Latham (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 27.

be a military alliance against Charles I but also to be “an encouragement to the Christian churches groaning under or in danger of the yoke of Antichrist” to join in a struggle for liberation.

There was always an inextricable link between the religious duties of the covenanted nations and their economic interests. John Pym was treasurer of the Providence Island Company, an outpost for plundering Spanish America, as well as leader of the Long Parliament and a convinced Puritan. Under Oliver Cromwell, when Parliamentary supremacy had enabled England to build up the strongest navy in Europe, the whole power of the state was put behind the attempt to break Spain’s monopoly of South and Central America and the Dutch monopoly of Far Eastern trade, as well as to suppress piracy in the Mediterranean. Charles I had forbidden English merchants to trade in the Mediterranean, because he could give them no protection against pirates: and so he frustrated the switch to exporting the light New Draperies which would compensate for loss of Baltic and North German markets for heavier English cloths. Under Cromwell Admiral Blake suppressed the pirate base in Algiers; England annexed Dunkirk, from which pirates had sacked English shipping even in the Channel. Economic policies, clearly; but rank and file participants in Cromwell’s Western Design in 1655 said they were engaged in extending the kingdom of Christ. I fear they believed it. Marvell’s poems about Oliver Cromwell glorify his naval aggression against antichristian Spain, in a millenarian spirit; Dryden’s *Annas Mirabilis* after the restoration continued to boost the new commercial foreign policy, but no longer in religious terms.

In the millenarian atmosphere of the revolutionary decades, utopian thinking about the forthcoming millennium was rife. But the price of utopia was eternal vigilance. When the civil war failed to usher in Christ’s kingdom, when it led indeed to disastrous divisions among the Parliamentarians which enabled Charles I to launch a second civil war in 1648, there was much heart-searching among the saints. Who was to blame? How had the

Chosen Nation fallen short of its responsibilities? The answer was found in Numbers XXXV.33: “blood defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.” Many others texts supported the idea that if the land was not purged of blood guiltiness by identifying and punishing the offender, the nation as a whole (including not least the Parliamentary Army) would remain responsible, liable to divine retribution.

The answer found among the saints, especially in the Army, was that Charles I was the Man of Blood.³ For the first civil war Parliamentarians had blamed evil councillors rather than the king; but that evasion of the issue no longer carried conviction now that the imprisoned king, with no councillors about him, had unleashed the bloodshed and misery of a second civil war. Was there to be no end? First the rank and file, then the leadership anxious to maintain Army unity, convinced themselves that Charles I, the Man of Blood, must be brought to justice, in obedience to Biblical injunctions. This belief helped the generals and their supporters to summon up the audacity to commit so unprecedented an action. There was no *legal* justification for regicide. But the declared will of God must override mere human laws. “We will cut off his head with the crown on it,” declared Oliver Cromwell.⁴

Regicide was driven on by a group of Biblically inspired enthusiasts. Many believed that the time had come for the rule of the saints pending the Second Coming of King Jesus. “The saints shall judge the world,” said George Fox, later the Quaker leader; “whereof I am one,” he added.⁵

The democratic republican Levellers, more secular-minded, drew back from regicide, and one effect of the king’s execution

³ This paragraph is based on the pioneering work of Patricia Crawford, “Charles Stuart, That Man of Blood,” *Journal of British Studies*, 16 (1977); see also Elizabeth Tuttle, *Religion et idéologie dans la révolution anglaise, 1647–1649* (Paris: Edition L’Harmattan, 1989).

⁴ R. W. Blencowe (ed.), *Sydney Papers* (London, 1825), p. 237.

⁵ G. F. and J. N[ayler], *Sauls Errand to Damascus* (1654), pp. 10–11.

was to weaken Leveller influence with the separatist congregations and the rank and file of the Army. The beneficiaries were the generals, but only at the price of serious divisions among the radicals which ultimately led to their defeat. So the Bible can be held responsible for regicide, for the triumph of Oliver Cromwell and the generals, and for the ultimate failure of the Revolution. In 1660 the throne came to be occupied not by King Jesus but by Charles II, the Merrie Monarch.

A persistent Old Testament theme is the struggle against idolatry, into which the Chosen People were always liable to relapse under the influence of the heathen natives whom they had subjugated. This was closely analogous to still surviving Catholic sentiments in England, associated with shrines and holy places, as Old Testament idolatry had been associated with groves and high places. In the Elizabethan Book of Homilies (sermons to be read by all ministers incapable of writing their own) the longest was that against idolatry. "The nature of man," it said, "is none otherwise bent to worshipping of images (if he may have them and see them) than it is bent to whoredom and adultery in the company of harlots." The great Puritan Richard Sibbes agreed: "naturally all men are idolaters before conversion."⁶ All Papists are idolaters, which is why they cannot be tolerated. The kings of Israel and Judah lapsed into idolatry, often under the influence (or alleged influence) of foreign (heathen) wives. The parallel with Charles I's Queen Henrietta Maria was irresistible, and was often drawn.

With the collapse of censorship in 1640 there was a printing explosion. Ninety times as many books and pamphlets were published in 1642 as had been in 1640; the number of newspapers rose from 0 before 1640 — when they were illegal — to over 700 by 1645. Pamphlets and newsbooks did not reach only the literate: they were read aloud in alehouses, in marketplaces, and in the Army. It is difficult to grasp the significance of this sudden revolu-

⁶ *Complete Works*, ed. A. B. Grosart (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862–64), vol. 2, p. 386.

tion. One aspect of it has perhaps not been sufficiently emphasized. After 1640 *anyone* could get into print who could persuade a printer that there was money in his or her idea. For the first time in English history significant numbers of persons (including women) who had no university education, often no grammar school education even, could publish their thoughts. Demand was insatiable.

So reading matter was no longer monopolized by people with a shared classical education who assumed that discussion must be conducted according to formal rules, starting from a syllogism. The new writers were oblivious to all that. Cobbler How's *The Sufficiency of the Spirits Teaching without Humane-learning*, published in 1640, was a manifesto. He argued that while learning might be useful to scholars, lawyers, and gentlemen, uneducated men were more desirable than scholars in the pulpit, since the Spirit's teaching was all that mattered for understanding "the mind of God." All men should read the Bible and decide for themselves, not as the learned told them. So the Bible liberated the hitherto inarticulate, whose views on politics and morality were not necessarily those of their social superiors.

In the next twenty years 20,000 or so books and pamphlets were published, the majority of which were by authors who were "illiterate" in the eyes of academics. The rules of logic which structured academic controversy were ignored. University scholars treated the newcomers with contempt, and this in its turn fuelled opposition to the universities as such; the whole classical curriculum and the conventions of academic argument were called in question. Indeed, were universities of any use at all?

Men like Gerrard Winstanley stressed proudly that they got their ideas not from books, or from other men, but direct from God, from the Bible, or from common sense. Common sense told Winstanley that co-operation was better than competition, and so a communist society better than a competitive one. Writers like Cobbler How, the Leveller leaders Lilburne, Walwyn, and Wild-

man, the Ranters Clarkson, Coppin, and Salmon, the Quakers Fox and Nayler, and many, many others, could beat the academics at their own games. Many of those I have named were important opinion-formers. They were supported by university men like William Dell, who joined in the attack on academic education. "Antichrist chose his ministers from the universities," Dell said.

It was a significant turning point in English intellectual life. In the short run the Bible triumphed over the classics and logic; in the long run neither side won. But the universities never recovered their monopoly of correct thinking; the ultimate victor was laicization. John Bunyan was still deeply hurt by academic sneers at him for daring to preach and write without a proper education. He consoled himself with the thought that God's own "are not gentlemen. . . . cannot with Pontius Pilate, speak Hebrew, Greek and Latin." When it came to prose style he could beat them all. The uneducated laity had broken through into opinion-forming and —with Bunyan —into literature.

Liberation of the press made possible publication of new interpretations of Biblical myths. The democratic implications of Adam the gardener were emphasized. "We may see Adam every day walking up and down the street," Winstanley said. The story of the apple was only a legend, at which the devils laughed in *Paradise Lost*: for Winstanley it was allegorically true of all men and women. Traditionally the stories of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, had been used to illustrate the inscrutability of God's will in predestinating some to eternal life, others to damnation: God loved the trickster Jacob but hated simple-minded Esau. For Levellers and especially for Winstanley the younger brothers Abel and Jacob stood for the oppressed classes in society, tyrannized over by their elder brothers, who would ultimately be overthrown. Primogeniture was a target for Leveller and Digger attack because of its tendency to concentrate property in the hands of the eldest son to the detriment of younger sons and daughters. This was a grievance affecting younger sons of the gentry as well as of

yeomen and peasants. The fact that David and Solomon, like Abel and Jacob and Joseph, were younger sons was emphasized: so too were the self-made men who rose to prominence in the Bible —David, Gideon, Samson.

There were two views of Samson in the seventeenth century. According to one interpretation he was a violent man whose claims to divine support were unfounded, and he died a reprobate in the useless destruction of the Philistines. The other interpretation saw him as a predestined saint, who fell into temptation and sinned, but who suffered, repented, and was given divine strength to seize his opportunity to destroy God's enemies —the Philistine aristocracy and priests. The former view —Samson the terrorist —was by and large that of conservatives; the latter —Samson the freedom-fighter —was that of the radicals, including Milton in *Samson Agonistes*. Some modern critics still defend the conservative view.

Another multifaceted myth is that of the wilderness, in which the Israelites, on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, languished for many years. The wilderness is neither as bad as the lands of captivity nor as good as the still unreachable Zion. It became a potent consolatory symbol for men like William Sedgwick and William Erbery. The saints “are in a wilderness, in a desolate barren estate,” Sedgwick said in 1648 as he awaited the time when the saints would judge the world. “Satan and wicked men have reigned long, but they shall reign no longer.” God will shine forth, significantly, “in those that are the lowest of the people.”⁷ Erbery — like Milton — thought that the church had been in the wilderness since the time of the Apostles and that the saints would be “bewildernessed” until the Second Coming, which Erbery awaited with growing despair. Only “after the fall of Rome shall there be new heavens and new earth.”⁸

⁷ Sedgwick, *Some Flashes of Lightnings of the Sonne of Man* (1648) ; *A Second View of the Army Remonstrance* (1649), p. 15.

⁸ *The Testimony of William Erbery* (1658), sig. (a); cf. p. 65. Both passages are by John Webster, editor of this posthumous collection of Erbery's works. A not unfair summary of Erbery's views is given in Thomas Edwards's *Gangraena* (1646), part I, p. 78, part II, pp. 89–90.

Many sectaries followed the Bible in contrasting the wilderness of the world with the garden of the church, separated by its hedge of discipline and doctrinal orthodoxy. An analogy was the enclosure of land from the waste. This was relevant to the English enclosure movement and to the colonization of Ireland and North America. It was the duty of the saints to bring the earth under cultivation and to bring the heathen into the church. Here was justification not only for enclosure and eviction in England but also for expropriation of the natives in Ireland and New England. Radical Protestantism was strong among the Elizabethan sea-dogs and among colonizers of Ireland and New England.

Some radicals reacted against the heavy Old Testament Bibliicism of traditional Puritans, perhaps disliking the vengeful cries of Old Testament prophets calling for extermination of the heathen. They put new emphasis on the sceptical subversiveness of Jesus of Nazareth, his questioning of accepted shibboleths. William Walwyn specialized in this line of approach, but Milton, Gerrard Winstanley, and Clement Writer pursued the same line of thought. Arguing against the orthodox who attacked the radical Family of Love, Walwyn asked them innocently, "What family are you of, I pray?"⁹

Conflicting interpretations of Biblical stories and of the lessons to be drawn from them led to an intensification of Biblical scholarship and growing doubts about the absolute infallibility of the Bible as a guide to action in all spheres of life. Under Elizabeth, Raleigh, Hariot, and Marlowe called traditional Bibliolatry in question in their "school of atheism." At a time when exploration and trade expansion were bringing English merchants into contact with different civilizations and religions, it is perhaps no accident that Raleigh and Hariot were enquiring explorers and colonizers and that Marlowe had a wider historical and geographical imagination than any other Elizabethan dramatist —as witness *Tambur-*

⁹ *The Writings of William Walwyn*, ed. J. R. McMichael and B. Taft (Georgia University Press, 1989), p. 79: *The Power of Love* (1643).

laine and *Faustus*. Such awareness surfaced after 1640. In 1649 the Koran was translated into English.

I quote words attributed to Walwyn: “the Scripture is so plainly and directly contradictory to itself” that he could not believe it to be the Word of God.¹⁰ It was a historical document to be interpreted just like any other. Winstanley made great use of Biblical myths, but thought that whether there were such happenings as the Gospel narrative tells us “it matters not much.”¹¹ Ranters like Abiezer Coppe and Joseph Salmon also distinguished between “the history” and “the mystery.” Some Ranters were said to believe that the Bible “hath been the cause of all our misery and divisions, . . . of all the blood that hath been shed in the world.”¹² Thomas Tany publicly burned the Bible to make the point.

The Worcestershire clothier Clement Writer produced serious works denying the infallibility of the Bible because of its many errors and contradictions. “The Scriptures report the miracles; can the miracles reported by the Scripture confirm that report?”¹³ The most impressive summing up of this sceptical scholarship was *The Rusticks Alarm to the Rabbies*, published by the ex-Baptist Quaker Samuel Fisher in 1660. Protestants, he said, had believed that “all would be unity itself among them” once they had replaced the traditions of the church by the text of the Bible; he might have been referring to Milton’s *Areopagitica*, published in the more hopeful year 1644. But in fact, Fisher continued, “dark minds diving into the Scripture divine lies enough out of it to set whole countries on fire.” The Bible, he declared, was read too

¹⁰ [Anon.], *Walwins Wiles* (1649), in *Leveller Tracts*, ed. W. Haller and G. Davies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 298.

¹¹ Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 232: *Fire in the Bush* (1650).

¹² My *The World Turned Upside Down* (Penguin ed.), p. 262.

¹³ Writer, *Fides Divina* (1657), *passim*; *An Apologetical Narration* (2nd ed., 1658), pp. 62, 78.

much and quoted too often. We must “turn to the light and Word within.”¹⁴

Fisher’s huge tome was published too late to be publicly discussed in England: strict censorship of books of that sort was restored with Charles II. But he was read by Spinoza, and through Spinoza the attitude toward the Bible of Fisher and his predecessors in England passed into the European Enlightenment.¹⁵

Later in the century, from a more radical Protestant angle, M.M. (M. Marsin or Mercin) also dealt cavalierly with the text of the Bible. Its statements, she said, should be divided into two kinds: doctrinal, which are binding on Christians; and historical, which are of interest but of no binding authority. Among the latter is St. Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians that women should not be allowed to preach. This was because St. Paul had lost his temper with some Corinthian women and is of no general significance. Immediately following this, M.M. hinted that when God sentenced all women to subjection to men because of Eve’s transgression he too may have overreacted — just like St. Paul. She doesn’t actually say that, but it seems to me to be implicit in the way she puts it. Women found their subordination “intolerable,” she added.¹⁶ We have come far. Now the Bible is used to subvert traditions hitherto supported by the Bible.

Consideration of the literary importance of the Bible is too vast a subject, but it must be mentioned. Popular Biblical drama helped to spread Protestant propaganda, from John Bale onward. It helped early London theatres to win audiences, though once the novelty had worn off it yielded to more secular plays in face of

¹⁴ *The Rusticks Alarm*, in Fisher, *The Testimony of Truth Exalted* (1679), pp. 440–41.

¹⁵ R. H. Popkin, “Spinoza, the Quakers and the Millennium, 1656–1658,” *Manuscript*, 6 (Brazil, 1982); “Spinoza and the Conversion of the Jews,” in *Spinoza’s Political and Theological Thought*, ed. C. De Deugd (Amsterdam, 1984).

¹⁶ M.M., *Good News to the Good Women* (1700), pp. 14–16. I am deeply indebted to Tim Hitchcock of the Polytechnic of North London for introducing me to M.M.

Puritan hostility to the stage. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* was never intended to be acted. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ballads, madrigals, and lute songs draw heavily on Biblical themes, now newly available in the vernacular. Translations and paraphrases of the Psalms formed a significant literary genre from Wyatt to Milton, preparing the way for metaphysical poetry and the poetry of meditation. The paradoxes of the Bible —comparing the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed, referring the slug-gard to the ant, contrasting the lilies of the field with Solomon in all his glory, welcoming home the prodigal son with the fatted calf, declaring that the poor shall inherit the earth, that wisdom is folly and folly wisdom, and that death is the crown of life —these are startling effects of contrast which delighted those who eagerly read Donne and his followers.

Nor ever chaste unless you ravish me.
 Created sick, commanded to be sound.
 Here in dust and dirt, oh here
 The lilies of his love appear.
 [Christ came] leaping upon the hills to be
 The humble king of you and me.

The “double heart” of the metaphysical poets derives from Psalm XII.2 and the Epistle of James I.8. The paradoxical element in the Bible fitted the conflicts and contradictions of a society in transition such as England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Song of Songs, because it was held to be an allegory for the love affair between Christ and his church, gave a new respectability to erotic poetry: few were the poets who did not try their hand at paraphrasing it. Paraphrase of other books of the Bible led on to a spate of Biblical epics, a tradition which culminated in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and faded away in the mock epics *Absalom and Achitophel* and Samuel Pordage's retort, *Azariah and Hashai*.

We miss much that is significant in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature if we ignore the Bible. Royalist theorists applied the

text “Touch not mine anointed” to kings, whereas in fact —as was recalled in the revolutionary decades —the Bible applies it to believers, who are not to be molested by political authorities. Shakespeare nearly always uses the phrase ironically in relation to divine right theories. The usurper Richard III described himself as “the Lord’s anointed.” The king who uses the famous phrase “such divinity doth hedge a king” is the usurping regicide Claudius in *Hamlet*. Whenever Richard II makes a particularly eloquent speech about “the balm” which “not all the water in the rough rude sea can wash . . . from an anointed king,” we know that something dreadful is just about to happen to him, until finally “with mine own tears I wash away my balm.”

Boys and girls learnt to read from the Bible; then they went on to Biblical chapbooks, ballads, and madrigals. Biblical epics based on stories from the Old and New Testaments provided reading matter for the eagerly curious newly literate, a gap which was ultimately to be filled by the novel. The Bible offered an easy fund of stories for literary hacks to draw on until the material had been exhausted. Then Defoe took over.

Since I have emphasized radical use of the Bible for innovatory purposes, perhaps I may suggest some areas in which the Bible was not a source of innovation but of defence of the status quo.

What to us seems the most serious constraint of the Bible on seventeenth-century radical reformers is its attitude toward women. It reinforced the pressures working against equality of the sexes — the household economy, the long tradition of excluding women from public and professional life and from equal education. It is an unfortunate fact that the sacred texts of the three great religions — Judaism, Islam, and Christianity — date from the heyday of patriarchy. There are surviving traces in the Old Testament of prepatriarchal female warrior leaders who recall Boadicea in pre-Roman Britain. There are prophetesses. But the patriarchs dominate.

“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, nor his ox, nor his ass, . . . nor anything that is his” ran the tenth commandment:

a wife is a piece of property, of livestock. Wives could be repudiated. The Bible says nothing against women coveting their neighbours' husbands: husbands were not property to be owned or stolen. Similarly the command in Exodus "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" proved fatal to many a poor old woman and was a real obstacle to the slow emergence of a rational attitude to accusations of witchcraft.

St. Paul told wives to submit themselves to their husbands and to keep silent in church. If they had problems, they must ask their husbands in the privacy of their homes. One argument for the inferiority of women was that the Bible said God created Adam before he created Eve. But this was being challenged. A Tory defender of women's rights, Mary Astell, in 1706 asked whether men who used this text ever noticed that God created the animals before he created Adam. What should we conclude from that?¹⁷

Christ's "Ye have the poor always with you" (Matthew XXVI.11) seemed to countenance the institutionalization of poverty in the Elizabethan poor law and to accept its inevitability: "the poor" rather than "poor people." Racialism too — Columbus, we are told, got from the Bible his attitude toward the Indians whom he met in America: servitude was the necessary fate of all the descendants of Ham. The consequences could hardly have been worse, or more lasting. The analogy between Old Testament and Irish or Indian "heathenism" seemed to authorize forcible suppression in both cases. The Bible had a strong delaying effect on the emergence of an antislavery movement.

The same is perhaps true of theories of toleration. There is much intolerance in the Old Testament: Roger Williams observed that "persecutors seldom plead Christ, but Moses."¹⁸ Walwyn

¹⁷ Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, in *The First English Feminist*, ed. Bridget Hill (Aldershot: Gower/Temple Smith, 1986), p. 76.

¹⁸ Quoted by D. M. Wolfe, *Milton in the Puritan Revolution* (New York: Nelson, 1941), p. 33.

was most unusual in declaring, “The Word of God is express for toleration.”¹⁹ Those who advocated toleration in England wanted it not on abstract general principles but as a means of establishing unity against an enemy. For radical Protestants that enemy was international Catholicism, against which all who rejected the pope could be united, even if they did not accept the national church; but for many members of that church peaceful papists seemed less dangerous than radical sectaries. Toleration was from this point of view an aspect of foreign policy. So long as the Thirty Years War continued, and a Papist invasion of England (or Ireland) seemed a real possibility, radical Protestants strongly opposed toleration for Papists. Throughout the period one group remained beyond the pale of toleration: those who denied the existence of God. This was thought to preclude a recognition of rewards and punishments in the afterlife, regarded as a necessary prop of the unequal social order. This consideration should be borne in mind when we comment —as we must —on the absence of evidence for open atheism in the seventeenth century.

De facto the hegemony of the Bible ended with the English Revolution in which it had played so large a part. In 1657 an M.P. was jeered at for citing “a Scripture to confirm what he said.”²⁰ The fact that Thomas Hobbes quoted the Bible so extensively (657 times in *Leviathan*, and as often again in his other political works)²¹ confirmed many in the growing belief that you could prove anything by judicious selection of Biblical texts. Whether or not it was Hobbes’s intention, political theory was henceforth argued primarily in non-Biblical terms. The point can be made from a different angle in relation to James Harrington. In his *Oceana* (1656) the argument is primarily secular, with

¹⁹ Walwyn, *Toleration Justified and Persecution Condemned* (1646), in *Writings of William Walwyn*, p. 170.

²⁰ *Diary of Sir Archibald Johnston of Wariston*, vol. 3, 1655–1660, ed. J. D. Ogilvie (Scottish History Society, 1940), p. 71.

²¹ This is the estimate of Wolfgang Palaver, in *International Hobbes Association Newsletter*, new series, 10 (November 1989), 24–31.

occasional Biblical allusions. But in later writings defending *Oceana* he made a case for saying that his utopia was entirely Biblical. This was certainly an afterthought, intended to reconcile the then dominant godly to his schemes. But the popularity of Harringtonianism in the century after 1660 owed nothing to this *ex post facto* Biblicism.

The Bible was used in the 1640s, especially by lower-class sectaries, to subvert traditional orthodoxies accepted by those whose opinions mattered. In the 1640s and 1650s radicals defended very different moralities —Leveller egalitarian democracy, Digger communism, Ranter free love. The impossibility of reaching agreement led to Biblical criticism and ultimately scepticism about the authority of the Bible. How right Henry VIII had been to try to restrict Bible reading, and especially discussion of the Bible, to the upper classes!

Restoration of monarchy and the Church of England in 1660 established and enforced a new consensus among those whose opinions mattered. But the latter had learnt a lot. They now recognized the dangers of attributing absolute authority to a Bible whose interpretation was contentious. Lady Brute in Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife*, when confronted with the Biblical command to return good for evil, retorted simply by saying "that may be a mistake in the translation."

Vanbrugh's play and Mary Astell's and M.M.'s treatises all appeared in print, interestingly, after the ending of censorship in 1695. By the end of the century the Bible had ceased to be the centre of intellectual discussion. It continued to be of the greatest importance for belief and conduct during the next two centuries, especially among dissenters. But it never again reached the peak of unimpeachable authority which it attained between the first appearance of the printed Bible in English and the defeat of the Biblical revolution in the mid-seventeenth century.

Historians who try to argue that the English Revolution had no long-term causes or consequences have not reflected sufficiently

on this fact. Religion did not cause the Revolution, nor was the Bible a casualty of it. But the absolute sovereignty of the Bible was a victim of the wide-ranging political, social, and intellectual revolution which overthrew the traditional monarchy with its Star Chamber and High Commission, handing control of the state over to Parliament and taxpayers who set England on the path of colonial and commercial imperialism, which by the end of the century had made her top nation —though by then English aggression was no longer justified in the name of overcoming Antichrist. The Revolution also established greater freedom of religious worship, of the press, and of discussion and so promoted secularism. The Bible could now be treated facetiously *in print*, not only by a dramatist but also by a pious Anglican like Mary Astell. The infallible Bible contributed very largely to making the Revolution — and in the process lost its infallibility.

