



What Does the Bible Say about the Automobile?

Since there's nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9), we should probably not be surprised to learn that modern teens were not the first to discover the value of the automobile (or its precursors) as a trysting place. Young folks in the Bible fantasized about such things long ago (Song 6:12)—chariots, then; cars now; but otherwise little changes. Or does it? Certainly, technological change is real, which means that we have to address concerns today that are quite beyond the horizon of anything the writers of the Bible knew to exist. The Bible might suggest what kind of chariot God would ride in (Ps 104:3), but it offers no direct word about what kind of car Jesus would drive. It knows nothing of autos or air pollution, sidearms or stem-cell research, freeways or Facebook.

This does not mean, of course, that there are no biblical arguments to be made about such modern realities. It just means that we need to make the arguments. Simple concordance exercises won't suffice. Nor will lists of "what the Bible says about x, y, or z." Historian Joseph J. Ellis made a similar point recently about George Washington and the Iraq war. Asked what Washington would say about our Iraq policy, Ellis wrote, "Washington would not be able to find Iraq on a map. Nor would he know about weapons of mass destruction, Islamic fundamentalism, Humvees, cellphones, CNN or Saddam Hussein." The proper question, said Ellis, is not "What would George Washington do about Iraq?" Rather, it is "How are your own views of Iraq affected by your study of Washington's experience leading a rebellion against a British military occupation?"*

So, how are our views of the automobile affected by our study of Scripture? That has to be the right shape of the question. Still, there are no easy answers. We have this ongoing love/hate relationship with cars. Like our first kiss, almost all of us remember our first car. Mine was a 1950 Buick Roadmaster—a big, black, four-holer road hog with a straight-eight engine beneath a hood nearly six feet long. It had been owned, literally, by the proverbial little old lady who drove it only to church, and she finally agreed to let it go to a nice young intern who would use it in the work of the Lord. The good news for my mother was the size and weight of the thing (it will be safe!); the bad news, of course, was the gas mileage.

My next car was the opposite extreme: a tiny, aging, and heavily driven VW Bug that I bought while in graduate school in Germany. In this case, the bad news

*Joseph J. Ellis, "What Would George Do?" *The Washington Post*, 23 December 2007, B01.

was the lack of safety (happily never tested); the good news was the gas mileage and the fact that I put a new (rebuilt) motor in it for \$175, labor included.

And now? Three cars (one for each member of the family, you know)—not heavily used and chosen for their efficiency, but, still, an embarrassment of riches.

What does the Bible say about my cars—and yours? Nothing, of course, not directly. But probably a lot when we think about our responsibility for the neighbor (including the planet) and our stewardship of financial and natural resources. The car, important and freeing as it is, has a very large footprint.

This year (2008) marks the 100th anniversary of Henry Ford's introduction of the Model T and also of the founding of General Motors—two events that have shaped our time like few others. Indeed, in deciding to dedicate an issue of *Word & World* to the automobile, we saw it as a primary icon of twentieth-century American culture. Freedom, privacy, sex, speed, utility, marketing, mobility—both social and geographical. Aren't these what America is all about? And aren't they all captured in the mythology and reality of the car?

And, again, what does the Bible say about all of this? Nothing, and everything. No "car" in the concordance, but there is nothing related to our use (and sometimes our idolatry) of cars to which there is not a biblical dimension. The Bible does not function as an answer book here or a user's manual. It functions as a conversation partner—altogether fitting for a "word" of God. It's a significant conversation partner, to be sure—with more authority, say, than the guy next door—but still, a conversation partner, one with whom the nature of the questions we bring and the depth of our investigation will play a role in the value and validity of the outcome.

Sola scriptura won't work to provide us what we need to know in our use of cars. It may be *sola scriptura* when we think about matters of faith and salvation, forgiveness and justification, or the person and character of God, though even there we will need a living interaction with Scripture as a whole rather than just a guide to finding the "right" passage. And in order to figure out what car to drive, how to use the world's oil, whether to ride the bus, and how our cities should be designed, we will need even more outside help.

When Philip asked the Ethiopian official whether he understood the book of Isaiah that he was reading in his chariot, the official rightly responded, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31). We, too, will need guidance to interpret both Isaiah and the chariots of our own day, guidance that will come from Scripture itself, to be sure, but—as is the case in all contemporary ethical questions—that will also derive from bringing a rich scriptural imagination into conversation with our most careful theological and ethical analyses and the best of the human wisdom that God provides in every sector.

F.J.G.