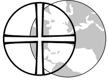

Word & World
Volume 32, Number 4
Fall 2012

The Bible as Word of God

MARK G. VITALIS HOFFMAN

I love the Bible. More accurately, I love the word of God. The two are inseparably bound together, but it is important to make the distinction. The Bible is composed of words, but it is also an expression of God's word. The Bible tells many stories, but it is also the word that is the metanarrative story of God and all existence. The Bible is a collection of ancient documents, but it is also the word that continues to document and inform our present reality. While those differences seem rather obvious, I do not think that we automatically understand them when we first have a Bible placed in our hands and start to read. Would someone who has no familiarity with Christianity automatically be able to read the Bible and make such discernment about this collection of strange old texts?

I believe that we grow into an understanding of the word of God. Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience—the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral"—work together to shape this understanding. The Bible remains the initial and most important element, but the other three continuously provide new perspectives that affect our reading of the Bible. In this essay, I will provide a semiautobiographical narrative of how reason, tradition, and experience have helped me come to understand the Bible as the word of God.

THE KJV: MY PAROCHIAL SCHOOL BIBLE

My first Bible had a black, faux-leather cover with the edges of the paper

> *The Bible and the word of God are inseparably bound but not identical. The Bible is the best and most reliable witness to the word of God, but the word of God exists independently of and prior to the Bible. If the word of God is like life-giving water, the Bible is not a jar of water but a boat riding on an ever-flowing stream.*

 Copyright © 2012 by Word & World, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. All rights reserved.

tinted red—King James Version. It lasted me from second to eighth grade at the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod grade school I attended. We had a religion class every day, so it did get a lot of use, but I recall that we spent at least as much time with a heavily annotated edition of Luther's *Small Catechism*. There was daily memory work from the *Catechism*, Bible verses that accompanied the various parts of it, and occasionally a hymn verse. All that memorizing was in preparation for the confirmation exam in the spring of our eighth-grade year in front of the whole congregation. Mercifully, the pastor would ask for responses commensurate with what he thought each of us might actually know.

I know that the habit of memorizing Bible passages shaped my initial understanding of the "word of God"

It is impossible to underestimate the influence all that memory work has had on me. I suspect that simply the discipline of memorizing helped me in my academic career. More important, I know that the habit of memorizing Bible passages shaped my initial understanding of the "word of God."

I learned, first, that the word of God is different. Using the King James Version contributed to that perception, though eventually even "KJV English" became a natural way of communicating. I am fluent in "thy," "thou," "art," and verbs ending in "eth." What really is distinctive is simply the assumption that these ancient and foreign passages and stories were worth studying and memorizing. We studied American history texts too, but they did not receive the same kind of respect that the Bible did. There was a sense in which a sacred text with words and passages was worth observing, preserving, and memorizing.

Second, that respect for the Bible also had the unfortunate effect of rendering it into a foreign object that was something *simply* to be observed, preserved, and memorized. The Bible for me was an object, a book. It may have been the greatest story ever told, but there was no sense that it was my story. It was a text that required assent but not engagement. My description here may reflect only my juvenile capability for comprehension, but my sense of distance from the text was confirmed by my reluctance even to write in the Bible. When the pastor asked us one day to underline a passage in our Bibles, it felt more like defacing a treasure than interacting with the text.

The RSV: My Student Bible

The second Bible I got was a red, hardbound *New Oxford Annotated Study Bible: Revised Standard Version* that was a required textbook for an Introduction to the Old Testament course during my sophomore year at the University of Illinois. How I got to that Bible class at a secular university is a long story, but I do remember thinking that what I learned there was certainly not what I had been taught

back in parochial grade school. At least, it was not *how* I had been taught the Bible. I was puzzled but intrigued by this approach that regarded the Bible as literature and as a collection of theological interpretations of history.

My struggle to understand became more acute the next semester when I took the Introduction to the New Testament course, and I started realizing what a historical-critical approach had to say about Jesus. The text gained texture for me. I began to hear in it different voices. No longer was the Bible simply a text whose words I memorized and from which I was to draw important lessons. No longer a book to respect from a distance, the Bible became a book that I started to appreciate as a dialogue partner.

Learning from Schweitzer

It was also during this time of college and seminary that I encountered three writings that challenged and shaped my understanding of the Bible in significant ways. The first was Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, originally published in 1906.[1] Schweitzer may be better known as a remarkable physician and humanitarian, but he was also a world-class musician, philosopher, theologian, and biblical scholar. His *Quest* is a brilliant and scathing analysis of the many lives of Jesus that had been written by rationalists and critics who sought to explain Jesus, and various attempts by others to spiritualize, romanticize, idealize, or otherwise make Jesus relevant. Schweitzer's own brutal assessment of Jesus? Jesus was an apocalyptic fanatic, a truly great man, but one with little relevance for today.

While one need not agree with Schweitzer's conclusion, his real contribution was the observation that people tend to create Jesus in their own image as one who shares their own values and perspectives. Both in this specific application and as a general principle, thinking that the Bible confirms what we already believe is a problem that remains with us today. The Bible becomes something like a TV guide: people use it to see what they want to see. For the Bible to be the word of God, it must be able to critique any human word that seeks to claim it as one's personal possession. While we hope that in time God's word will transform our way of thinking and being, we must be alert to the danger of conforming it to our preconceived notions.

Learning from Dostoevsky

A second work that grabbed my attention was Fyodor Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century novel *The Brothers Karamazov* and specifically the chapter on the "Grand Inquisitor."[2] This chapter is the heart of the epic novel, and it can be read pretty much on its own with a bit of introduction. The story is told by a character who is not the protagonist in the book, and the story is significantly affected by Dostoevsky's experience with the church, so the reader has the additional challenge

[1]Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, ed. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

[2]Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor," in *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: William Heinemann, 1949) 253–272.

of determining how seriously to take it. In brief, the story is based on Matt 4:1–11, the temptation of Jesus. It tells of Jesus' return to Seville, Spain, at the height of the fifteenth-century Spanish Inquisition. Miracles occur, the people praise him, but Jesus does not say a thing. He is arrested and condemned to be burned, and the rest of the chapter records the Grand Inquisitor's conversation with Jesus in prison. The Inquisitor asserts that Jesus' refusal to submit to the three temptations created huge problems. If only Jesus had acquiesced, he could have created a worldwide communion of followers subject to him, and they would be spared so much of the suffering human's experience. Now in the Inquisitor's day, however, Jesus is no longer needed nor even welcome, for the impossible claims on faith and life that Jesus declared have been made manageable by the church and by the very few who can bear such a burden. It is out of love for humanity, the Inquisitor claims, that they have done this. The hordes of people would much rather be fed, enslaved, enthralled, and told what to do than have to deal with Jesus' unbearable freedom. Jesus' response is to kiss the Inquisitor and wordlessly slip away.

***the Bible does not show us how to be happy;
it demonstrates how we are to live authentically***

I always think of this story as I am writing a sermon, when I get to that point where I am ready to make the turn from problem to proclamation. It is precisely here that I am tempted simply to tell people what to do. I know that many people in the pew want to hear just that kind of advice. I know that for many people this is what is regarded as good biblical application. The Bible as the word of God, however, is not a collection of helpful guides for happy living. Rather, it is the story of the true way that we are to experience God, ourselves, and the world around us. It does not show us how to be happy; it demonstrates how we are to live authentically.

Learning from Auerbach

The third work that challenged the way I read and understand the Bible is Erich Auerbach's essay "Odysseus' Scar" in *Mimesis*.[3] Auerbach compares Gen 22, the "Binding of Isaac," with the section in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus' identity is revealed to his childhood nurse who recognizes the scar on his leg. In that story, Auerbach notes that everything is explicit. All backgrounds are fully described, every motive is explained, and every emotion is expressed and analyzed. All of this occurs because the text is designed to entertain. The poet is telling a great story and wants the audience to fully appreciate all the dynamics of the story. Genesis 22, in contrast, is gaping with holes. So much is left unsaid, and the text keeps raising new and difficult questions that are left unanswered. Why does Abraham not protest

[3]Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis*: *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 3–23.

when God asks him to sacrifice Jacob? He did so when hearing of God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. Why does he, seemingly eagerly, leave early in the morning? What about Sarah? Did Abraham tell her what he was planning to do? Did she protest? What about Abraham's deception to Isaac when asked about the animal to be sacrificed? Or was he telling the truth? Did Isaac resist when Abraham began to bind him?

believers must make sense of this God and the actions of Abraham and Isaac, and, as they do so, the Bible both becomes and is experienced as God's word for them

With the biblical text, the hearers are not being asked to sit back and enjoy the show. The story demands engagement and response. Those who refuse to do so, who choose to be casual hearers, get stuck on the horror of the sort of God who would ask for such a sacrifice and the sort of person like Abraham who would agree to it. Such hearers find themselves rejecting the premise of the account and, as Auerbach puts it, they become "rebels" to the text.[4] On the other hand, those readers who are engaged with and committed to the text must fill in the gaps in ways that solidify their identities as believers. Here we see most clearly how reason, tradition, and experience come into play. Believers must make sense of this God and the actions of Abraham and Isaac, and, as they do so, the Bible both becomes and is experienced as God's word for them.

I do not think that Gen 22 would be the first biblical passage I would share with someone unfamiliar with the Bible or the Christian faith, but it is not dissimilar to the New Testament story of the crucifixion of the Son of God. I am raising here a question about the reading experience: Is there something intrinsic to the biblical text that allows it to create believers? Or must we be believers before we can properly read the text? The Lutheran response here is probably yes to both. When we read the Bible, we assert that it exists as the word of God apart from us, but we also want to affirm that it is our experience of the word of God that makes the Bible truly meaningful.

With these provocative writings in mind and with all the biblical courses I took in college, seminary, and graduate school, that red *New Oxford Annotated Study Bible: Revised Standard Version* became a well-worn book. It still sits on my shelves, held together by tape. Looking at the wear on the page edges, my canon within the canon is evident: the Pentateuch (especially Genesis), Psalms, Isaiah, the Gospels, and the Pauline writings. That is probably typical for a Lutheran Bible reader, but this highlights the question of how we can talk about having favorite books of the Bible and still maintain that the whole Bible is the word of God. Here is where Auerbach can help. Not only do discrete stories in the Bible display gaps

[4]Ibid., 15.

that require filling, the whole Bible can be viewed similarly as a text that requires some explanations to make it cohere. If we were to reject certain books and create a new Bible, that would mean we have rebelled against the text. If we maintain the whole but identify texts that serve as anchor points, we have engaged in the process of identifying with the larger story as faithful dialogue partners. The Bible may be a narrative with holes, but as the word of God, it is both a "hole-y" and a whole narrative.

NRSV: My Pulpit Bible

While my RSV Bible served long and well, I did supplement it with a still-growing collection of other versions. The more significant change occurred with the release of the NRSV in 1989 and the switch to use it as our preferred version in the church I was serving. Eventually I settled on a low-cost, blue, hard-bound Bible like the ones we supplied in the pews. I decided on this Bible for a number of reasons. First, our members were not accustomed to bringing their own Bibles to church. If they were going to read a Bible during the service, it would be that one in the pew, and I wanted to use the same Bible. This also had the happy side benefit of allowing me to refer not only to book, chapter, and verse, but also to page number, which the people were then able to find much more confidently and quickly.

Second, I wanted to make the visual connection between what was read and what was preached. While the pulpit has traditionally been used to indicate authoritative proclamation, it is finally only a piece of furniture. Preachers stand in the pulpit, but it is more important that they stand on the word of God. Preachers do not necessarily need a physical pulpit in order to proclaim God's word, but they do need the Bible.

There is another related issue here. Some people must wonder what is actually happening in the worship service. Some texts are read from the Bible, which takes up a few minutes of time. These are declared to be the "Word of the Lord," but then the preacher spends perhaps five times as long speaking. What, then, is the relationship between the Bible, the word of God, and the sermon? Does the word of God always need such extended explanation or application?

The Bible, I think, is a commentary on the word of God. The word of God exists independently of and prior to the Bible. When God says, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3), God is not quoting from the Bible. If the word of God is how we humans experience God in this world, then the Bible is the way such interaction is expressed in words. Through a long history of use and reflection, the Bible has been recognized as the best and most reliable witness to the word of God. We see this at work within the Bible itself. The prophetic writings and the Psalms, for example, reflect on the Torah and history of Israel. The New Testament is written with an eye to the whole Old Testament.

So how does a sermon relate to the Bible and to the word of God? The one

who preaches a sermon today simply stands in a long line of witnesses who have experienced God's word in their present moment and who relate it to the ongoing word of God as expressed in the Bible. A good biblical sermon, therefore, is not about *applying* the Bible to the present but *extending* the word of God into the present. The Bible is not a historical relic that has lessons to be applied to the present; rather, it is the witness to "the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1:23) that continues to speak to us today. Luther used the metaphor of the Bible as a cradle, in which the important thing is that we discover in it the living Christ.[5] To attempt my own metaphor, if the word of God is like life-giving water, then the Bible is not a jar of water but a boat riding on an ever-flowing stream. The preacher's responsibility is not to dole out sips of water but to help the hearers navigate the waters.

Computers and Apps: My Classroom Bible

Finally, as for the Bible I use most today, it is not a "Bible" at all. In the classroom and in my personal study, I use Bible software on a computer. When I am sitting in the pew in church, I use a Bible app on my smartphone. Not only do I have dozens of English versions, I also have original language texts with a variety of lexical and other study tools at my fingertips. When I want to highlight a text or add my own comments or reflections, I do so in the Bible program, and I have set things up so that they will automatically synchronize across my various devices. The only way I could now have the Bible more available to me is to have some kind of Bible chip embedded within me. I have not preached in a church from the Bible on my smartphone, but I have projected biblical texts for a congregation to follow along.

the only way I could now have the Bible more available to me is to have some kind of Bible chip embedded within me

Is all this technology splitting the connection between the Bible and the word of God? As I indicated above, especially in preaching, I have tried to reinforce their interconnectedness. By this point in my story, it should be clear that I believe that the virtual Bible I use on my computing device is still the real word of God. What actually is changing is the conception of the Bible as a book. The issue is not unique to the Bible, since the concept of a book is changing today throughout our culture with the advent of the various reading devices available. Nor is the issue unique to our time as similar shifts in understanding were made as the biblical texts transitioned from scroll to codex and from handwritten to printed.

[5]"Here [in the Scriptures] you will find the swaddling cloths and manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, which lies in them." Martin Luther, *Prefaces to the Old Testament* (1545), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1950) 236. A similar saying appears in *LW* 35:122.

It may, in fact, be a good thing to stop thinking of the Bible as a book. There still is the tactile pleasure of holding and reading a book, and I am also enough of a student still to enjoy the dusty, leathery smell of an old library. With a book there is a sense of permanence and solidity as it sits on a shelf. The technology of ink imposed on some kind of medium has lasted successfully for thousands of years. In contrast, the modern technologies often seem temporal, transitory, and even disposable. If Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum, "The medium is the message,"[6] is correct, what kind of Bible do we really want?

The theme of my journey of experiencing the word of God in the Bible is, as it says in Heb 4:12, that "indeed, the word of God is living and active." It is not ink on paper or letters bound to the page. It continues to breathe. With the technology now available, the word of God not only continues to be active, it is also interactive as I relate to the text and to others who are reading it as well. The word of God is not just the Bible; it is the message of God's interactions with all of humanity. The Bible is not just a book preserving the past—it is a bridge linking past, present, and future. That is why I love it. ⊕

MARK G. VITALIS HOFFMAN *is professor of biblical studies, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.*

[6]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 7.