



Is the Bible a Book?

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It is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.¹

“I tell you what, Coleman, he made me determined I would read the Bible again. What a story that is!”

“Major, I thank God if you will read it; and not for the stories in it, save as all are part of one story—the story of God's redeeming mercy.”²



¹ from Article XX

² Mark Rutherford, *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane* (1887), n.d., p. 102





Is the Bible a Book?

SOME TRANSLATION, perhaps, does not require the translator to understand the work to be translated: some medical research or works of mechanics? Some translation is even possible to computers. It is often desirable, however, for the translator to understand what is being translated. The translator of a literary work must understand the work as a whole, because the whole affects the parts. The translation has to be “in the same spirit that the author writ”. The Bible is closer to a literary work than to an aircraft maintenance manual; the translator who knows the book as a whole is better qualified.

But is the Bible a whole book? If that means: in the same way as *Pride and Prejudice*, the answer is *no*.

The common reader, opening any book in a spirit of curiosity or because anybody ought to know it, will bring presuppositions, varying with time and place as well as individual character, about what is likely and unlikely, interesting and uninteresting, good and bad. Evelyn Waugh’s story gives Randolph Churchill’s response to the Old Testament as that of a common reader coming to the Bible cold, and not necessarily a bad reader.

Thinking the money well spent if it would keep Randolph quiet, Freddy and I have bet him £10 each that he will not read the Bible right through in a fortnight. He has set to work but not as quietly as we hoped. He sits bouncing about on his chair, chortling and saying, “I say, did you know this came in the Bible ‘bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave?’” Or simply, “God, isn’t God a shit.”¹

The reader of a novel or a manual of aircraft maintenance also begins with some formulable expectations. Starting *Pride and Prejudice* the reader knows that it is not history. But the Bible does not belong to any *genre*. On the contrary it is well known that the Bible is a collection of works in very different *genres*—myth, history, fable, proverb, hymns, love poetry, prophecy, letters, sermons, interior decorating—and almost as undeniable that misunderstanding of the

¹ The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh, ed. Michael Davie, 1976, p. 591





Bible has come from confusing *genres*, taking myth as cosmology or fable as history.¹ But if we manage to read all the parts in the right spirit will they make one book? There used to be on library shelves a book entitled *The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature*. Though much of the Bible surely is literature of the rank of Homer or Shakespeare, the implication of this title is that the Bible is ordinarily read as something else. But what? What is it to read the Bible as the Bible?

The titles Old Testament and New Testament may help: the books, that is, of the covenants between God and man. Let us bear in mind that an author's intentions are not always realised: "Never trust the teller, trust the tale." But it also seems reasonable to start with a stated intention. At the end of what is probably the latest of the Gospels, the writer tells us that "these [signs] are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."² This would surely be acceptable as a statement of the intention at least of the Gospels and Epistles. The reader envisaged is a seeker. Could any such find in the whole Bible, and not just impose upon it, Gospel truth?

The Westminster Confession was over-optimistic when it used the word *ordinary* to beg this question:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."³

But what *ordinary means* are there of knowing which "some places" we need?

If the Bible can be a whole book making belief in Christ possible it is by way of the New Testament understanding of the Old Testament. What is probably the oldest and certainly the most basic of the four Gospels begins by announcing as its theme "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God",⁴ but St Mark at once offers

¹ The Books of Jonah and Job for instance are (often comic) moral fables, and it is as much misreading to suppose that the leviathan was a zoological sea creature as that Job is a character in history. How do I know? The Bible is close enough to a book for these judgements to be available to the common reader.

² John xx.31 ³ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647, VII

⁴ Mark i.1; "most basic" though Mark often gives straight-from-the-life details omitted by Matthew.





this “gospel of Jesus Christ” as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and makes direct quotations from the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah in order to apply them to the preaching of John the Baptist. In Paul’s statement of the bare essentials of what he delivered to the Corinthians, how Christ died for our sins, and was buried, and rose again the third day, there has to be room, *twice*, for “according to the scriptures”.¹

Jesus himself initiated the tradition of preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Sonship and necessary suffering of the Christ as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. In the synagogue of his home town he survived a lynching attempt provoked by his saying, of a passage of Isaiah, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.”² Again, in St Mark’s account, the High Priest rends his clothes and judges that no more evidence of blasphemy is needed when Jesus applies to himself an eschatological prophecy of Daniel, “... And behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven...”³ Then the risen Lord’s teaching the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is a model throughout the New Testament: “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”⁴ Whether it is Philip who in answer to the puzzlement of the Ethiopian Eunuch about Isaiah “opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus,”⁵ or Stephen, Peter or Paul, they all offer one particular reading of the Old Testament.⁶ As Peter Toon put it, “The Bible of Jesus and his apostles was the Old Testament, and the apostles with others created the New Testament as a guaranteed commentary on the Old Testament, showing how the ‘Law and the Prophets’ were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷

What Christians call the Hebrew Old Testament is a different book from what to the Jews is the Bible, though both works, with some variation about what counts as apocrypha, and about the ordering of the contents, are the same words in the same order. I dislike Harold Bloom’s book *Jesus and Yahweh: the Names Divine*, but Bloom is certainly

¹ = “in accordance with the Old Testament”: 1 Corinthians xv.3, 4

² Luke iv.21 ³ Daniel vii.13; Mark xiv.62-4 ⁴ Luke xxiv.27 ⁵ Acts viii.35

⁶ Even after St Paul turned to the Gentiles, his common practice on arrival at a city was to begin in the synagogue. In Athens on Mars Hill, where he had not that option, he had to preach the Gospel quite differently, without mentioning the Scriptures, by asserting the one creating God and quoting Cleanthes (or somebody: Acts xvii.28). This was not the most immediately successful of his missions.

⁷ Peter Toon, *Foretaste of Heaven amidst Suffering*, Eugene, Oregon, 2010, p. 42





on to something when he says, “The New Covenant necessarily finds itself upon a misreading of the Hebrew Bible.”¹ The dispute between Christians and Jews is about whether *misreading* is just. Bloom is reviving the old idea that both Old and New Testaments have been subjected to a theologisation resulting in two different Gods. Christians believe, of course, that God reveals himself in both, but perfectly in the incarnation, death and resurrection of his Son. Where Bloom is right is in the observation that the Old Testament on its own cannot make the sense it has as part of the Christian Bible.

Prophecy is incomplete without fulfilment, and prophecy cannot itself decide whether it has been fulfilled or even whether it is prophecy. At the synagogue in Nazareth and in the hall of the High Priest both the claim of Jesus and the rejection of the claim as blasphemous depend on a judgement as to whether prophecy has been fulfilled. In one way of looking at the matter it could be truthfully said that Christianity diverged from Judaism over the interpretation of prophecy. As St Paul wrote, “But [the children of Israel’s] minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ.”²

Our assumption that prophecy looks to one future fulfilment is not, however, quite that of the Old Testament, though of course some Old Testament prophecies do look to one fulfilment, sometimes very soon. Elisha prophesies that (in English) “Tomorrow about this time *shall* a measure of fine flour *be sold* for a shekel.”³ At that moving moment when Micaiah prophesies, against his will, that if the armies of Israel and Judah fight Syria they will be scattered on the mountains like sheep without a shepherd, the fulfilment is again in the immediate future.⁴ Much Old Testament prophecy is not so specific. One rabbinic explanation of why some authentic-sounding prophecies did not get into the canon is that

Many prophets arose in Israel . . . but only a prophecy which had validity for generations (*viz.* did not only pertain to specific historical circumstances) was written (*viz.* was included in the biblical corpus);

¹ New York, 2005, p. 14. Bloom’s outspoken hatred of the Fourth Gospel is not true judgement, and he is just wrong when he says repetitiously that there are no reliable reports of either Jesus or his teaching. To support this Bloom has to accuse the author of the Fourth Gospel of direct lying, and Paul of relying on unreliable tradition. The written text of the Synoptic Gospels records carefully preserved self-consistent oral traditions: see R.J.P. Lyon, *The Sign of Jonah*, revised edn, Guelph, Ontario, 2012.

² 2 Corinthians iii.14

³ 2 Kings vii.1

⁴ 1 Kings xxii.17; 2 Chronicles xviii.16





a prophecy which did not have validity for generations was not written (included).¹

In the New Testament itself, fulfilment of prophecy is not always understood as the occurrence of a predicted event. As Mr Anthony Weston says,

The Bible does not use the word fulfilment (*pleroma*) entirely in accordance with contemporary usage. When, for example, Matthew's Gospel quotes Hosea xi, "Out of Egypt I have called my son," it says that these words were "fulfilled" in the experience of Christ. This expression means that Matthew sees a cogent and instructive parallel. Readers (especially his Jewish readers) would be fully conscious that [originally this passage referred to] the people of Israel. Matthew is not arguing and is not understood to be arguing that the "fulfilment" of this prophecy was an example of divine foreknowledge to substantiate the Messianic status of Jesus Christ.²

This idea of fulfilment, however, can be a problem for modern exegetes, including the late Eugene A. Nida, who uses the same example:

In the New Testament itself there is no hesitation to interpret words out of context. This was in line with approved exegetical principles used by Jewish rabbis of that time. For example, in Matthew 2:15 the expression "out of Egypt have I called my Son" is applied to Jesus, although in Hosea 11:1 (the source of the quotation) the reference is certainly to Israel, not to the Messiah.³

¹ Cited Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Crystallisation of the 'Canon of Hebrew Scriptures' in the Light of Biblical Scrolls from Qumran", *The Bible as Book: The Hebrew Bible and the Judaean Desert Discoveries*, ed. Edward D. Herbert & Emanuel Tov, 2002, p. 10. (Micaiah's prophecy was "included" as history and perhaps as a great and terrible speaking-forth?) Although this idea of prophecy may seem strange to the contemporary Christian it is not new to Christianity. Charles Kingsley, for instance, explains one of the most famous prophecies of Isaiah:

You will find, too, what will surprise you at first, that Isaiah was speaking of himself. He says, "That the spirit of the Lord was upon *him*"—Isaiah—"because the Lord had appointed *him* to preach good tidings to the meek, to bind up the broken-hearted, and deliverance to the captives, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." Isaiah must have spoken truly about himself. He could not have meant to tell a falsehood, to say a thing was true of himself which was only true of Jesus, who did not come till 800 years afterwards. . . . And yet 800 years afterwards the Lord took those very same words to Himself, and said, that *He* fulfilled them. . . . Can prophecy be fulfilled twice over?

No doubt it can, my friends, and two hundred times over. (Charles Kingsley, *Sermons on National Subjects*, p. 19; *The Works of Charles Kingsley*, 1880, vol. 22, pp. 18–19)

² Anthony Weston, *Apologia pro Fide Mea* (unpublished)

³ *From One Language to Another*, p. 23





Prophecy, however, is not quite reference. “Howbeit all these things went before in figure, and they were written for us, upon whom the end of the world is come,” as the Homily against Peril of Idolatry renders St Paul’s teaching about how to take the Old Testament.¹ If the Bible is to be read as a whole, the New Testament’s style of interpreting prophecy must at least be sympathetically understood.

Prophecy shades off into typology, where prediction does not arise. Jesus himself used typology. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”² It would be unintelligible to take the brazen serpent as deliberately referring forward to the Crucifixion of our Lord. But it is intelligible to see in it a type or foreshadowing.

“Validity for generations” in Psalm xxii is shown when Jesus prayed that Psalm on the cross,³ the praying in one situation of a hymn written for another, or for many. And Jews and Christians go on praying it.

It is undeniable, however, that, at the same time, to see fulfilment on one occasion is necessary to the New Testament. The Gospels *fix* the fulfilment of Psalm xxii at this moment. The mockers at the foot of the cross use the words of verse eight;⁴ in three Gospels the soldiers parting the garments fulfil verse 18.⁵ The Psalmist could not have had Roman soldiers in mind, but Coleridge is right: “It is, indeed, a wonderful prophecy, whatever might or might not have been David’s notion when he composed it.”⁶ This is a model of what the New Testament can make of the Old, Psalms as well as the formally prophetic books.⁷

Matthew explicitly says, several times, that such-and-such was done *in order to* fulfil a prophecy. When he applies to John the Baptist the prophecy of Malachi, “For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee,”⁸ though it is not conceivable that the messenger Malachi could have known in advance about the future messenger John the Baptist and his relation to the Lord, this claim to fulfilment is neither incoherent nor incomprehensible.

1 1 Corinthians x. 11; The Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches, B, 2006, p. 184

2 John iii. 14, with reference to Numbers xxi. 8–9

3 Matthew xxvii. 46 (in Hebrew); Mark xv. 34 (in Aramaic) 4 Matthew xxvii. 43

5 John xix. 24; Matthew xxvii. 35; Mark xv. 24. See below, pp. 18 ff, for the apparent misquotations resulting from the translation of the NT from Greek, the OT from Hebrew.

6 Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1835) 1884, p. 91

7 The Homilies can cite “the prophet David”.

8 Matthew xi. 10, citing Malachi iii. 1 also cited by Mark i. 2 (above, p. 5)





And much Old Testament prophecy, let us not forget, is more straightforwardly compelling to the New Testament seeker. Isaiah liii is much more about the sacrificial suffering of Christ than about anything identifiable in the time of the third Isaiah. The Lord showed the prophet how it *must be* for the redemption of mankind, though the enactment was not until several hundred years later. Jesus and the disciples and evangelists made a truth out of the fulfilment of prophecy.

Handel's *Messiah* makes very little use of the Gospels! The herald angels of St Luke's account, the Spirit descending on Jesus, "His yoke is easy" . . . but the central events of Christ's being born of a virgin, dying for our sins, and rising from the dead, are all taken from the Old Testament. This is not noticeable in performance, but it does show how natural it was for Charles Jennens to understand the Old Testament by the light of the New.¹

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Now this New Testament understanding of Old Testament prophecy is much helped simply by the fact that the whole of the New Testament, including its citations of Old Testament prophecy, is in Greek.² This exceedingly well-known fact has implications that are not always so well-known.

Any translation of a Hebrew prophecy into one of the Indo-European languages will have a tendency to limit the fulfilment to one occasion, just because of the different grammars of the two languages. In the translation of Elisha's prophecy, above, the English future tense

¹ The Christian understanding of Jesus as Christos ("anointed", the Greek translation of Messiah) is not quite the interpretation of prophecy, but similarly itself involves a new understanding and application. (The development of the idea of the Messiah and its metamorphosis in the Gospels, is of course the subject of a library of learned books.) The Hebrew word-root is very common in the Old Testament; originally *save*, then with the implication *anoint*, the latter being the ordinary translation in many places of the Old Testament. Jews point out reasonably that as far as we know Jesus, unlike the kings of Israel and Judah, was never anointed. In the New Testament anointing seems to be figurative: at Acts iv.27 Jesus has been anointed by God, not, like David, by a prophet; similarly with St Peter's sermon to Cornelius, ". . . God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power . . ." (Acts x.38; cf. 2 Corinthians i.21, 1 John ii.20, 27) The only physical anointing is by the woman who is a sinner, Mark xiv.3 etc. Peter nevertheless is able to recognise Jesus as *Christos*, the anointed.

² Apart from the odd Aramaic word or phrase, sometimes used in situations that demand the language of the home, like *talitha cumi* (Mark v.41: the Evangelist translates the phrase, not expecting his readers to understand it) to raise the dead girl in her own language.





accurately renders the sense of the Hebrew, as well as being, in English, more or less inevitable. But as the 1611 version honestly informs us by its use of italics,¹ *shall* and *be sold* are the translator's additions. For one oddity of Hebrew, from our point of view, is that it often does not use a verb at all. (A temptation to be resisted is to say "omits a verb", implying that the verb was somehow originally there before being omitted.) For ordinary predication Hebrew tends not to use its *to be* verb. The explanation of the measurement of the manna in the wilderness, "Now an omer *is* the tenth *part* of an ephah," goes word-for-word literal "And the omer tenth the ephah he."² (If the *to be* verb *is* used it makes an unusual emphasis, as when God reveals his name to Moses as "I AM THAT I AM."³) What Elisha actually says is more like "About time tomorrow a measure of flour fine at a shekel," where the limitation to one future moment is not made by a verb.

Verbs, however, do of course come in to prophecy. The most important difference between Hebrew and Greek affecting prophecy is that, believe it or not if you are unfamiliar with the language, the verb in Hebrew has no tenses!

This may seem an extravagant statement that flies in the face of grammar, for Hebrew does have two forms of the verb for which *tenses* is the name grammarians often used to use, though the terminology seems to be changing. The respectable Hebraist Thomas O. Lambdin tells us that "There are two full verbal inflections for person, number, and gender, for each Hebrew verb. The first, called the perfect... the second, called the imperfect..."⁴ The "imperfect" is called by older grammarians "future".⁵ From an Indo-European point of view, whatever the best grammatical category for these forms, it is already odd that one may be called either imperfect or future at the discretion of the grammarian, and that neither nomenclature mentions the present. Lambdin reports of the "imperfect" that as well as having a future sense it is also used for "habitual or customary action... he writes (as a matter of custom), he used to write (as a matter of custom), or he will write (*idem*). In this usage tense is not explicit and must

¹ In the original edition small roman as against black letter

² Exodus xvi.36. Here the LXX follow the Hebrew and do without a verb.

³ Exodus iii.14; translated by a present participle by the LXX, "I am the Being."

⁴ Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, 1973, p. 37

⁵ E.g. Gesenius's Hebrew Grammar enlarged and improved by E. Rödiger, transl. Benjamin Davies, re-ed. B. Davidson, n.d. [c. 1850], p. 74





be gained from the context . . .”¹ The “perfect” also, is not confined to past action: “Rarely in prose, but rather frequently in poetry and proverbial expressions, the perfect is used to denote habitual activity with no specific tense value.”² In any case, Lambdin warns us that “the translation value of Hebrew tenses is very largely dependent on the kind of sentence or clause in which the verb is used.”³ These forms just do not do what we Indo-Europeans expect of tense.

A grammarian of modern Hebrew, though he retains the word *tense*, explains the difference between the two verbal forms as one of *aspect*. “The Hebrew verb has only two tense forms, the *perfect*, expressing a completed action, and the *imperfect*, expressing an incompleted action.”⁴

But in the Old Testament, as we have just seen, the use of the two tenses/themes as perfective and imperfective aspects is not straightforward. The matter is further complicated by the “*waw* consecutive” or “*conversative*”. If a “sentence”⁵ narrating completed action begins, as expected, in the “perfect”, and is then continued paratactically by new clauses starting with *waw*, the verbs in them will all be “imperfect”. This means that in the Old Testament the imperfect (“expressing an incompleted action”) is in fact far more common in narratives of completed action than the perfect. Even a new Book can begin with a *waw* consecutive, as Leviticus, Joshua, 2 Chronicles. So just about the commonest phrase in Biblical Hebrew, *Wa yomer* [*proper name*] *el* [*proper name*], “And said/says/will say So-and-so to So-and-so,” imperfect, does not of itself tell us whether the saying is in the past, present or future or even whether it is complete or continuing. All this has to be inferred from context. This *waw*-consecutive has of course given rise to centuries of discussion by grammarians, but however it is treated shows the impossibility of finding any simple grammatical sense even of aspect/theme in the two verb forms, and much more, of finding any consistent use of them to convey tense.

Moreover, if the first sense of the “imperfect” is future, and if prophecy *inter alia* foretells the future, one would expect the imperfect to be the ordinary tense of prophecy, speaking of something yet

¹ Lambdin, p. 100 ² *Ibid.*, p. 39 ³ *Ibid.*, p. 38

⁴ Ben-Yehuda’s Pocket English-Hebrew Hebrew-English Dictionary, New York (1961) 1964, p. xii

⁵ In *Cranmer’s Sentences* I have shown why it is misleading to think of the syntactic units of Biblical Hebrew as sentences in the modern sense.





to be accomplished. This is by no means always true. There is the “prophetic perfect” to be understood as prophesying an event that will be perfected in the future. “But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.”¹ A. Guillaume comments “‘have redeemed’: a ‘prophetic perfect’; the act being completed in the mind of God, is spoken of as already accomplished.”²

In a well-known verse to which we shall recur, Isaiah records the utterance of Ahaz: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” But in JB “the maiden is with child and will soon bear a son.”³ In the absence of reliable Hebrew tense indications both are possible. In English translation, some of the tenses rendering both “perfect” and “imperfect” in Hebrew can seem just whimsical. AV puts all the verbs in the fifth verse of the twenty-third Psalm into the present, though both before and after that verse we have futures as well: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over,” but the Coverdale version (from the Latin) in the Prayer Book has future and perfect but no present: “Thou shalt prepare a table before me against them that trouble me : thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full.” In the one verse, Isaiah liii.7, AV translates the same form of the same word first *opened* then *openeth* within the same sentence.⁴ Why the changes of English tense? “And Abraham said, I will swear.”⁵ Why future? he just performatively swears—though the Hebrew would have been the same if the swearing had indeed been in the future, or the past. “I have sworn” is possible.⁶

Hebrew has words for before, after, and so on, and context will often make the time of an action clear. There are still difficulties for the translator into a tensed language. There could be an interesting discussion of places such as this of Ecclesiastes, “The thing that hath

¹ Isaiah xliii.1 The LXX do this by aorists for the first two verbs but then (like English) insert an *art* in the present.

² A New Commentary on Holy Scripture, ed. Bp Charles Gore and others, 1928, *ad loc.* (But if one prophecy why not all? Are there acts that could *not* be thought of as completed in the mind of God?)

³ Isaiah vii.14: N.B. all future in the Septuagint. The attribution of this prophecy to Ahaz is uncommon but, I think, the most natural understanding of the Hebrew, one of the oddities of which language is an occasional imprecision about the antecedent of a pronoun (a habit usually reproduced in the KJV). Here, the speaker is usually taken to be Isaiah, but the account would make sense if the King (like Saul before him) in his exasperation is himself given a momentary gift of prophecy or, in modern parlance, “grabs the mike”.

⁴ LXX: both verbs present ⁵ Genesis xxi.24 ⁶ LXX present





been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.”¹ Or of this bit of Nehemiah’s account of the repossession of Jerusalem: “For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.”² To what time is the *now* referring? The narrative is of a sequence of events in the past, and if a modern historian had it to do the last sentence would go something like “Then I prayed to God, ‘Now strengthen my hands.’” A close translation of the Hebrew cannot do this. ESV keeps the tenses of 1611 but GNB, rightly from its point of view, renders, “They were trying to frighten us into stopping work. I prayed, ‘But now, God, make me strong!’” CEV too uses the past tense to report that Nehemiah prayed. But the GNB has to make its English sense by the editorial addition of a verb not in the original: “I prayed”. The Hebrew goes literally more like “For they all [no finite verb] men-making-us-afraid saying are weakened their hands from the work and not it is done and now make strong my hands.” Let me not forget, however, that these remarks are prefatory to a short book about Bible translation, not the beginnings of an attempted contribution to hermeneutical scholarship.

So I restrict us to just one rather longer example. Psalm lxxxv, that lovely poem used by William Langland as the climactic celebration after the harrowing of Hell,³ is tricky to the English reader of translations because of tenses. The Psalm praises God for the forgiveness and restoration of Israel:

- 1 Lord, thou hast been favourable unto thy land: thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob.
- 2 Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin. Selah.

But then: (5) “Wilt thou be angry with us for ever?” Have we not just been forgiven? There may seem little alternative to the English beginning in the perfect tense. The trouble arises because in English the perfect is both a tense and an aspect, telling us that an action is both complete and in the past. As we have seen, the Hebrew “tenses” do neither of these things consistently. Likewise, for us the incompleteness of an action has to be expressed in a tense, so with “Wilt thou be angry with us for ever?” the Psalm seems to be

1 Ecclesiastes i.9 2 Nehemiah vi.9 3 *Piers Plowman* B xviii





contradicting what it has just said, rather than reminding us of the other possibility even when we are rejoicing in our salvation.

I wonder whether a better sense of the original can be given by using the present tense throughout, though since there is no present tense in Hebrew this would be no closer “formally” than the medley of tenses in most translations.¹ (I have read somewhere that two of the translators of the Authorised Version wanted to translate the Psalms into the present. When I was in charge of the parish Nine-Lessons-and-Carols a few years ago I tried the experiment of removing all future tenses from the Old Testament prophecies and it worked surprisingly well!—“Behold, a virgin conceives and bears a son,” etc.) The Psalm verses would then go:

- 1 Lord, thou art favourable unto thy land: thou bringest back the captivity of Jacob.
- 2 Thou forgivest the iniquity of thy people, thou coverest all their sin. Selah
- 3 Thou takest away all thy wrath: thou turnest thyself from the fierceness of thine anger.
- 4 Turn us, O God of our salvation, and cause thine anger toward us to cease.
- 5 Art thou angry with us for ever? Dost thou draw out thine anger to all generations?
- 6 Dost thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee?

The possibility that the deliverance, though real, may not be a permanent historical state, that God may renew his anger, is better conveyed by our present tense, leading up more logically to another present imperative very familiar in the Church of England: “Shew us thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.”

The closing verses of the Psalm still go better in a sort of eternal present than in the future of AV:

- 8 I hear what God the Lord speaketh, for he speaketh peace unto his people, and to his saints: but let them not turn again to folly.
- 9 Surely his salvation *is* nigh them that fear him, that glory may dwell in our land.
- 10 Mercy and truth meet² together: righteousness and peace kiss.

¹ According to Ben-Yehuda the present in Hebrew is “expressed by the Hebrew participle”. (p. xii)

² 1611 “are met”, nicely ambiguous because it could either be the old perfect tense of an intransitive verb conjugated with *to be* or a report of the present state of affairs.





11 Truth springeth out of the earth: and righteousness looketh down from heaven.

12 Yea the Lord giveth good, and our land yieldeth her increase.

13 Righteousness goeth before him, and setteth us in the way of his steps.

GNB has the perfect tense for the first three verses then the future for verse 5, but turns the rhetorical negative question of verse 6 into another (present) imperative and then uses the present for verse 8 (“I am listening to what the Lord God is saying; / he promises peace to us . . .”) which is perhaps a step in the right direction, but increases the rather bewildering variety of tenses. For verse 10 it uses the future (“Love and faithfulness will meet”) and remains in the future to the end of the Psalm, as does AV, but using the more prophetic *shall* as auxiliary.¹ ESV begins in the preterite for three verses before going into the future for verse 5. This may avoid the difficulties we are discussing but at the expense of placing God’s favour in the past. In British English anyway the implication of “You were favourable to your land” and “You restored the fortunes of Jacob” is that You are no longer favourable and no longer restore the fortunes of Jacob, which is not suggested by the Hebrew. This version too goes into the present for verses 10 and 11 before returning to the future for the end.

English itself used to have no future tense, the future being expressed by the present. Perhaps enough of a spark of that survives (as in “I’m off to Philadelphia in the morning”) to suggest both a continuative and a future sense in some prophecy.

Whatever quite is going on in the Hebrew in these places it is not an ordinary (for us) use of tense.²

¹ Translators into English luckily have two forms of the future as made by, respectively, the auxiliaries *will* and *shall*. Neither need be straightforwardly a tense. The former can also express determination: I *will* do so and so. The latter gives the English translator a real advantage over some other languages by expressing, in one of its senses, something like a guarantee or promise: “it shall be done,” very fitting for some prophecies and well used at many places in 1611.

They are both, however, forms that place the action in the future.

² Other grammatical differences between Hebrew and English leading to oddity in translation include the frequent Hebrew causative (hiphil / hophal). English has few if any causative verbs so you can be sure that in formations like “cause thine anger . . . to cease” the “cause to” represents one Hebrew word. And what to do with the *piel*, the intensive? When Samuel hews Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal, the word AV and RV translate *hewed* is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and is variously interpreted, but one thing the scholars are sure of is that it is a *piel* form, so whatever Samuel did he did it intensely. (1 Samuel xv.33b; cf. below p. 25. LXX *esphaxe*, from *sphazo*, one of the senses of which is *to slaughter in sacrifice*.)





These differences make difficulties for the translator of Hebrew. But tense is a great aid to the history of redemption as the fulfilment of prophecy. “If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable,” but the translator into Greek or Latin has no alternative to using tenses. Prophecies most naturally go into a future, and the ordinary future sense is to look forward to that fulfilment on one occasion which, as we have seen, the temporal ambiguity of Hebrew need not. So the natural tendency of Greek is to treat prophecy much more as once-for-all fulfilled than Hebrew does, as is necessary to the New Testament reading of the Old. The New Testament is not only itself a Greek book: as I noted, it quotes the Old Testament in Greek.

When Our Lord expounded part of the prophecy of Isaiah, we don’t know whether he read Hebrew and commented in Aramaic; nor do we know for sure that no written Aramaic original preceded the Gospels.¹ What we do know is that the only record we have quotes the [Hebrew] Scriptures in Greek, in which the ordinary tense for prophecy is future.

The Greek ordinarily though not always quoted is that of the Septuagint.



What book is the Bible? I think the simplest library-catalogue answer has to be: “the book recognised as the Bible by the Church”. What we call the Bible was not one book until the canon was formed, a process taking some centuries and concluding in the West with the Synods of Hippo and Carthage (393 and 397). In the Bible, the Old Testament is what the New Testament takes the Scriptures to be.

The reasons why this cannot be a simple answer even as to what collection of texts we mean go infinitely far beyond the present discussion. Eastern and Western Christians differ as to the canonicity of the “apocryphal” books and Rome and Protestantism traditionally disagree about their authority: they are not usually printed in Protestant bibles, but always in Roman Catholic bibles. So there is no complete agreement even amongst Christians as to what constitutes the Bible. And which text? If the universal custom of modern translators is followed and the Old Testament is translated from Hebrew, the question is raised how closely the received Masoretic text resembles any of those used either many centuries earlier in the time of Christ, or those of

¹ It seems very unlikely. See Ray Selby on “the Aramaic hypothesis”, *Jesus, Aramaic and Greek*, B.





the time when the Christian canon came as close to finality as it is, and problems remain even after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For the text of the fourth-century Bible the Masoretic text cannot simply be assumed to be more authoritative than the Greek of the LXX.

The New Testament Greek text was never settled on authority, and there is unlikely ever to be a final best text from the *thousands* of manuscripts and the several Byzantine, Alexandrian, Western text types, each with scholarly supporters.

If, though, the Bible is the book recognised by the fourth-century Synods, textual problems are much reduced in number and complexity. I think it is fair to say that the holy grail of Biblical textual scholars since the Renaissance has been a collection of texts as they left the authors' hands (the human recorders, for those who believe in verbal inspiration). Of course this too is problematic in the case of books that some think were of multiple authorship, or recorded from oral transmission. It is, of course, a knot of subjects of deep interest, only a little more interesting than the related questions what lay behind the texts we have, hypothetical ur-texts, myths behind the myths of Genesis (Creation, Flood . . .). The layers of reworking of the Psalms are in themselves a subject for several lifetimes. If the proposed principle is acknowledged, none of these inquiries concerns the text of the Bible. The New Testament is neither what the New Testament authors wrote nor what lay behind what they wrote, but what is most likely to have been accepted by the Councils.

This, too, throws up plenty of questions because no approved text was ever issued, but it does at least simplify matters.¹ One thing that does follow from the nearest-to-an-answer above is that where the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, the text quoted is the Bible. The Septuagint is a better text than the Masoretic Hebrew *of the Old Testament Scriptures as used in the whole Christian Bible*. This is not to claim that Our Lord himself read the LXX, which is more than we know, and it is unnecessary to the present discussion to argue that

¹ Some are inclined to fall back on the so-called Textus Receptus, but the name is doubly misleading—a singular, though it covers a number of texts; and none of them were just “received”. The usual referent of the phrase is the nearest one can come to a consensus of the texts put together during the Renaissance from whatever old manuscripts were to hand, principally in the Vatican Library. The several editions of Erasmus occupy a central place, but for instance for his first edition, when the mss to which he had access in Basle were defective, he is reported to have supplied bits of Greek by translating *ad hoc* from the Latin Vulgate. (Robert Martin, *Accuracy of Translation*, Edinburgh, 1989, p. 80. Martin’s Appendix “The Textus Receptus and the Text of the New Testament” is a good succinct account.)





the Septuagint is itself the authoritative Old Testament, though it has always had that status in some Eastern churches. What is indisputable is that the Old Testament is often quoted in the New from the Septuagint. Naturally, there are textual problems in the LXX too, but it follows from the present argument that the text of the Bible is that quoted in the New Testament.

A relevant fact is that the oldest surviving codices of the whole Bible have the Old Testament in Greek not Hebrew.¹

If the Septuagint is allowed to be commonly “the Scriptures” quoted in the New Testament, they will not look as if they are being misquoted, as they often do when the Old Testament follows the Hebrew and the New Testament the Greek. In the answer to the first temptation, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God”² the Greek New Testament quotes the LXX exactly, so a translation of the Deuteronomy verse from the Greek would have given the text found in Matthew. As it is, the AV gives a version recognisably of the same half verse, but which makes Jesus sound as if he is quoting rather vaguely: “...man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.”³

When the Hebrew is followed rather than the Greek, a prophecy translated in the New Testament may differ significantly from its source in the Old Testament. The “virgin” of [AV] Isaiah vii.14 has caused great rifts between different schools of Protestant Bible translators. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” The virgin of this, one of the prophetic texts used from the beginnings of Christianity and as late as Handel’s Messiah, GNB translates as “a young woman who is pregnant” and gives the note: “The Hebrew word here translated ‘young woman’ is not the specific term for ‘virgin’, but refers to any young woman of marriageable age. The use of ‘virgin’ in Mat 1.23 reflects a Greek translation of the Old Testament, made some 500 years after Isaiah.” The word in question, *almah*, is indeed, according to Brown-Driver-Briggs, “young woman (ripe sexually, maid or newly married)”. The

¹ If Bible translators accordingly gave an Old Testament as near as they could get to the New Testament version of it, this would bring the advantage, genuine if fairly minor, of allowing the reader of the New Testament to recognise Old Testament names. In AV the prophet Esaias cited in the New Testament is known as Isaiah in the Old and Elias Elijah. But do the modern translators who give the same character the same name realise that this is a step away from translating from the original tongues, though towards translating one book?

² Matthew iv.4 citing Deuteronomy viii.3

³ Notice the AV translators’ dynamic use of the present tense.





ordinary Hebrew word for virgin is *bethulah*.¹ The word used in the Greek translation referred to by GNB, the LXX, is *parthenos*. In classical Greek *parthenos* is occasionally used for Latin *puella*, “girl” or “unmarried woman”, but ordinarily “virgin”. Jerome certainly thought that the word *virgo* was the right one in Latin, and this is certainly how the word is understood in the gospel according to St Matthew, rendered correctly if prosaically by GNB: “Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, ‘A virgin will become pregnant and have a son...’”²

But according to the same GNB the prophet has said no such thing! The contradiction arises because “virgin” is what the word does mean in the New Testament, as well as in the Septuagint Greek, though not what unbiased scholars take *almah* to mean in Old Testament Hebrew.³ The Septuagint *parthenos* is commonly thought to be a mistranslation, but whether or not,⁴ it is certainly the New Testament reading and therefore the reading of the Bible.

The traditional English versions of Isaiah here follow the LXX, not the Hebrew. I don’t know why AV uses the indefinite article, a part of speech not found in Hebrew or Greek, because the Hebrew uses the definite article, *the* virgin (or the young woman) as do the LXX and some modern versions including ESV. Howbeit, King James’s translators could on occasion decide against a Hebrew reading. But the commitment to translation from the original tongues made the possibility unstable, and unsustainable for more than a few centuries.

The great Renaissance⁵ movement of scholarship beginning in the fifteenth century, and including the editions of the Greek New

¹ See many instances of the word-root in the law concerning virgins, Deuteronomy xxii.14–29, with the adjective qualifying the feminine of *naar*, a lad (English *girl* or *lass* better than AV *damsel*). There is of course nothing to stop a girl being both *almah* and *bethulah*, as Rebekah in Genesis xxiv.

² Matthew i.23

³ The New Testament understanding is in any case not anything that would be natural to Isaiah standing alone. Israel or Judah as a young woman is so frequent an image as almost to be normal. But the evangelists were able to see another meaning.

⁴ A later Greek translation uses *neanis* because, it is suggested, the Jews wanted to make Christian misinterpretation impossible. But it is quite possible that the LXX, though they certainly did sometimes make mistakes, had a better sense of the Hebrew original than we can have or were following an authentic Hebrew text now lost. Another possibility is that the New Testament writers knew that *parthenos* is a mistaken rendering, but took the Septuagint translation to have been inspired.

⁵ “Rebirth” is right here: Origen’s amazing parallel-text editions of the Old Testament preceded the final establishment of the Christian canon and affected the LXX text. Origen, obviously a very distinguished mind, was not altogether orthodox.





Testament by Erasmus, was not without its dangers—dangers, that is, to the integrity of the Bible as one book. If the Bible to be translated is that of the fourth century, it will be unaffected even by important textual improvements. For instance the received text of the Bible includes the so-called “pericope”, the story of the woman taken in adultery, that used to be at the beginning of John viii but is now usually relegated to an appendix. “If text-critical inquiry can affirm the inclusion of this passage into [*sic*] the New Testament text, then so be it, thus vindicating its antiquity, authenticity and edificatory value. If not, the passage should remain excluded. . . .”¹ It is not for the textual critic to determine authority or edificatory value. In the quoted essay Clarke quotes Burge: “If our notion of canonical authority rests in the books of the Bible themselves . . . then our passage cannot be a part of the canon.”² But how can the books decide for themselves whether and in what form they are canonical? If this “piece of ‘floating’ tradition which was inserted into the New Testament text at an early date”,³ which sounds authentic and has been used countless times in Christian teaching, was in the text accepted as the Bible, it is part of the Bible. By all means let the scholars and translators offer notes about its lateness, indicated by marginalia in some manuscripts and omission in others (and let them publish essays as interesting as Clarke’s), but they should be taken as comments on the Bible, not alterations to the text.

The affirmation of the Trinity in 1 John v.7 has less manuscript authority than the Woman taken in Adultery, but by the same criteria is also part of the Bible. “We must take their texts [of the Hebrew prophets of the eighth to sixth centuries before Christ] in the form in which the most scientific criticism has restored it to us,” said C.H. Dodd. No, we must take them in the form they have in the Bible. “The prophetic books,” he goes on, “as they stand in the Canon are the result of an extensive period of editing”⁴ So be it. That editing was part of the formation of the Canon, and the Canon is the Bible.

¹ Kent D. Clarke, “Original Text or Canonical Text? Questioning the Shape of the New Testament Text We Translate”, in Stanley E. Porter & Richard S. Hess (eds), *Translating the Bible: Problems and Prospects*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* Supplement Series 173, Sheffield, 1999, p. 319. He does qualify “(or at least identified as a secondary, even if early, tradition) although it may well be a genuine Jesus *agraphon*” (*Ibid.*, p. 320) ² *Ibid.*

³ Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, revised A. W. Adams, 1958, p. 53

⁴ *The Authority of the Bible* (1929, revised edn 1960); 1986, p. 43





What, though, if a scholar demonstrates that a Biblical text is badly corrupt and can be made more authentic in a way that alters the whole book? The text of Shakespeare is notoriously imperfect. If any of the foul papers of *Macbeth* turned up, or (perhaps more likely) a quarto, some textual problems would be solved, and a better understanding of the play made possible. Printed editions would have a different text and performance would be affected. If the Bible is the Christian canon as finalised at the end of the Roman Empire, the establishment of better Hebrew texts is not parallel. If, for instance, as is not impossible, the oldest Psalms were shown to have been originally composed in something much more like metrically regular verse than the text we have, would we all have somehow been praying them mistakenly for thousands of years? No, because what we do with the Psalms depends on the sense of a later text within a whole book. The later, arguably corrupt text of that book is part of the Bible, used by Jesus as reported in the Bible and blessed by God in Jewish and Christian use.

Or imagine the digging up of the fragments of tablets Moses broke at the foot of Mount Sinai. The story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham may well record the divine inspiration that God does not require the burnt offering of the firstborn son of the children of men. What if the original commandments predate this revelation and one once read “Thou shalt offer thy firstborn son as a sacrifice to the Lord thy God”? This would not alter the Bible. In the Christian Bible it doesn’t matter whether or not the whole Torah is post-exilic, or that there never was a Darius King of the Medes. The Pentateuch and the Book of Daniel have their sense as what was Holy Scripture in the time of Christ within the whole Bible, and what the New Testament writers made of the inspired Scriptures.

I think it was Reuchlin who invented a word that has given good service to scholars ever since, and comes into English as *obscurantism*. Once pin this word on your opponent and your work is done as surely as if in political discourse you manage to brand him *racist*. Originally, it was *obscurantist* to wonder whether a return to the best original texts would improve knowledge of the Bible, or to doubt whether the Old Testament is best translated from the Hebrew. But on the contrary, if the book to be translated quotes a translation, accuracy demands that that translation be translated, not its original. Chaucer’s Chantecler quotes to his wife Pertelote “Mulier est hominis confusio” and explains the meaning of the Latin as “Woman is mannes joye and





alle his blisse.”¹ The mistranslation is no doubt deliberate, but in any case a translator of Chaucer must translate Chantecler’s translation, not the Latin. So with quotations in the New Testament: they have to be translated as found there. I am only pointing out that this has implications for what is the Bible version of the Old Testament. *Accurantism*² is the present threat: the concentration on parts and their origins which misses the whole.

The scholarship of the last few hundred years conflicts with the reading of the Bible as one book, almost on principle. In a passage cited above, Eugene A. Nida reports that “One of the serious problems involved in Bible translating concerns the interpretive orientation within the Scriptures themselves as well as that perceived in present-day attitudes toward valid exegetical principles.”³ The “valid exegetical principles” aim, at simplest, at clarifying what a text meant to its original audience, not what it may mean in the whole Bible. So the “interpretive orientation within the Scriptures themselves” must conflict with “valid exegetical principles” such as those that tell us that Malachi could not have meant John the Baptist and so on.

Prophecy is, naturally, the principal victim. Characteristically scholars will tell us that an Old Testament prophecy cannot possibly have meant what the New Testament takes it to mean. “Reading a virgin birth back into Isaiah 7:14 would mean either that the text was completely irrelevant for Ahaz (even though the context indicates clearly its immediate significance) or it would be necessary to postulate two virgin births for the Scriptures,” says Nida.³ This just ignores the nature of prophecy, glanced at above, as it is understood by the New Testament writers. “We are indebted to [Joel] for immortal language about the outpouring of the Spirit, even though we may not be able to go so far as to say that he is the prophet of Pentecost . . .”⁴ This is a direct contradiction of the oldest Christian sermon, when St Peter began by saying (in the English version) “This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel . . .”⁵ It is not for a commentator to say, as

¹ *Canterbury Tales* B 4354, 4356

² This useful word was coined by Professor David Wulstan. As often happens with neologisms his sense is here extended a little.

³ *From One Language to Another*, p. 23; cf. above, p. 7

⁴ S. L. Brown in the Gore OT commentary, p. 564

⁵ “And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams . . .” (Acts ii. 17 citing Joel ii. 28)





it seems to me arrogantly, of Isaiah lxiii.1–6, “There is no room for a Christian interpretation of this poem such as is suggested by its place as the Epistle for the Monday before Easter.”¹ The Bible has a much better chance of “getting its message across” as a whole book if the modern commentaries are ignored.

The Authority of the Bible was influential during the years when Dodd was the presiding genius of the New English Bible translation. “In all cases,” he says, “I ask, naturally, what the author meant to say.”² This is always a trap: what matters is what the author *did* say. The special mistake is that what Malachi or Joel meant to say may well be other than what they do say *in the context of the whole Bible*.

Though biblical scholars do not often follow the late Jacques Derrida through all the arabesques of *différance*, the trace, and so on, the alternative to translating the book taken from the fourth century onwards to be the Bible is a kind of deconstruction. What a reader should be trying to understand is still the Bible, not whatever may have gone into its making.

The course here advocated, of reading the Bible defined by the Synod of Carthage, ends neither textual problems³ nor difficulties a modern reader has with New Testament interpretation of prophecy. I cannot but think the prophetic interpretation of Psalm cx made by our Lord himself and at three later places in the New Testament less natural than just to take the subject to be King David.⁴ But there

1 A. Guillaume, *Gore OT commentary*, p. 480

2 *The Authority of the Bible*, ed. cit., p. 18

3 The most numerous textual problems in the New Testament arise from punctuation. The oldest codices have no punctuation and there are *hundreds* of places where the sense will be affected by decisions about sentence ends, whether a sentence is a question or a statement, and so on. Here decisions about the best text must follow for us as for the Christians of the Roman Empire from editorial judgement based on knowledge of the whole book.

4 To the Pharisees: if Christ is the son of David “How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool?’ If David then call him Lord, how is he his son?” (Matthew xxii.43–5 citing Psalm cx.1) It is hard not to take the Psalm as being just about David, either said by somebody else or by David speaking of himself, like Julius Caesar or de Gaulle, in the third person. The LORD is father to the King as well, of course, in “Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee” (Psalm ii.7, Coverdale)—but that invites the same discussion. There is also “I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father” (1 Chronicles xxviii.6, of Solomon) and at Psalm lxxxix.26, of “David my servant”, “He shall cry unto me, Thou art my father . . .” The fatherhood is then extended to the whole Kingdom of Israel.

The two Hebrew words rendered *Lord* were not distinguished typographically in Greek manuscript translation as we do in printed English, with the Tetragrammaton, the unspeakable Name, rendered in small capitals, LORD, and the word it is traditionally read as in Hebrew, Adonai, an earthly Lord, in lower case: in Greek they are both just *kurios*. This sometimes affects the Greek sense, though perhaps not here.





are harder things than the occasional difficulty in recognising the fulfilment of a prophecy.

If the Bible is the revealed word of God, a belief common to all Christians, it seems to me beyond dispute that it is not a *tidy* revelation.¹ Even if there were a perfect text, not even to the wholehearted Christian believer would the Bible be unproblematic.

“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation,” declares Article VI. But does Holy Scripture also contain things not necessary to salvation (such as, perhaps, the specifications for the Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple or the details of the ritual sacrifices required of Israel which, as the writer to the Hebrews argues, are now redundant) or even, not conducive to salvation? The Sons of Israel are certainly the Chosen People, to whom the Lord reveals his will; and his will, as recorded, sometimes demands what is now called genocide. One of the last commands of Moses (whose political career began with a murder²), about the captive Midianite women and children, is “Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him.”³ And this is in the Pentateuch, not one of the dubiously canonical books.⁴ Must a Christian really accept as the true voice of the Lord of Hosts this



¹ I am not able to accept the idea of verbal inerrancy. The Trinitarian Bible Society, for instance, believes that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are “inspired by God and inerrant even down to the individual words”. (G. W. & D. E. Anderson, *What Today’s Christian Needs to Know about the NIV* (1992) 1998, pp. 2–3) Even if the books of the Bible were composed in words as we understand *word*, which is doubtful (cf. discussions in my *Cranmer’s Sentences*), verbal inerrancy must mean that inspiration left the text of the Book of Ezra in an obviously bad state on purpose. It also raises the question of the now lost books referred to as authorities by the canonical books. For not the acts only of Abijah but his “ways, and his sayings” we are referred to the “story” [RV “commentary”] of the prophet Iddo: the phrasing arouses the reader’s interest by making the book seem more like a biography than most of the kings got. (2 Chronicles xiii.22) The most splendid of all the kings had more than one recorder. “Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, first and last, are they not written in the book of Nathan the prophet, and in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and in the visions of Iddo the seer against Jeroboam the son of Nebat?” (2 Chronicles ix.29) I would love to be able to see Nathan’s account of the Bathsheba episode. (He must have been a young man when he so righteously rebuked David over Uriah the Hittite, to have survived to record the acts of Solomon.) It would be good also to have Gad. But if they turned up would they have to be added to the verbally inerrant canon? The Councils that recognised the Canon of Scripture would have to be inerrant as well. The Bible itself does not contain a list of canonical works. Further: verbal inerrancy would make accurate translation impossible, since translation cannot be of words alone and therefore if it is the words that cannot err translation must err. Serious scholars like Robert Martin overlook this objection.

² Exodus ii.12 ³ Numbers xxxi.17

⁴ Deuteronomy, the “Second Law”, has the reputation of being less slaughterous than the earlier four books, but for instance “Consume”, in the command to consume the natives (vii.16 and 22) is literally “eat”.





later command?—“Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not: but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”¹ Saul’s failure on that occasion is in not carrying out the command to the letter, but sparing the animals and taking Agag King of Amalek alive. Samuel’s correction, the hacking Agag in pieces before the Lord,² is certainly against the Geneva Convention, which may seem to a Christian more like the voice of God and closer to the New Testament.

If the Bible is the standard of judgement it cannot itself be judged, but how can we not judge even by what we get from the Bible itself? How is it possible not to expound one place that it be repugnant to another?

It cannot be maintained (it seems to me—who have, I remind you, no authority except reason and faith) that the Bible is self-consistent in any simple way. The New Testament itself sometimes goes as far as superseding or even contradicting the Old (“Ye have heard it said by them of old time . . . but I say . . .” or the revelation to St Peter that it is not unlawful to eat the flesh of unclean beasts³). The necessity of the Old Testament to the New is then that of a starting point, to be understood newly or even contradicted. This perhaps means that the seeker would do better to start with the New Testament, but it does not put an end to difficulty. The question how genocide can be a starting-point for revelation, even as something to be superseded, remains to me a stumbling-block (one literal meaning of Greek skandalon) which I have to scramble over as best I can. The Bible may be a whole book without being unproblematic, and if so the wholeness is as hoped for by Mark Rutherford’s character in the epigraph. There is no other way for it to be whole.

The test of any translation of the Bible, as of the original, is whether it can possibly be taken by a reader of goodwill as the Word of God.

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1 1 Samuel xv.3

2 1 Samuel xv.33b; cf. above, p. 15

3 Acts x.10–16

