

The Bible in the Reformation

Peter Marshall, University of Warwick

The Reformation that engulfed Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was, to a very considerable extent, one long argument about the bible. About its status and authority for Christians, about how to interpret, and who had the right to interpret it, even about which texts constituted the bible – Protestant reformers judged that books of the Old Testament surviving only in Greek rather than Hebrew versions were not part of the actual canon of scripture. The Council of Trent formally affirmed in 1546 that, for Catholics, they were.

One way of seeing things is simply to regard the Reformation as the triumph of the bible. Luther, Calvin and countless other Protestant teachers saw the bible as the sole source of reliable moral and doctrinal authority. *Sola Scriptura* – by scripture alone – was one of the great slogans of the reformers, alongside *sola fide* and *sola gratia*: by faith alone, and by grace alone. For Protestants of the Reformation era, the centrality of scripture was not just doctrinal and intellectual. It was also profoundly emancipating, emotional and personally transformative: reading scripture, or hearing it preached, was to open oneself to the life-giving Word of God; it was a place of touch and encounter with the crucified and risen Christ. The words of William Chillingworth, an Anglican clergyman of the early seventeenth century are often quoted: ‘The Bible, I say, the Bible only is the Religion of Protestants.’

The Reformation thus represented the discovery, the re-discovery, of the bible. Or perhaps it is better to say that reformers regarded themselves as liberators of the Word of God, freeing it from centuries of bondage and oppression. The Church of the middle ages, under the headship of the pope, had worked to suppress, twist and obscure the teachings of scripture, hiding them under man-made rituals and traditions, as well as innumerable legendary stories about saints and miracles. This was the devil’s business, and no wonder if Protestant preachers and writers of the sixteenth century often followed Luther’s lead in seeing the papacy as the manifestation of Antichrist, an institution tenaciously and ruthlessly opposed to the authentic teaching of Jesus.

Mercifully perhaps, that particular identification is nowadays largely confined to some marginal fringes of the Protestant world, in the United States, in Northern Ireland, and along the wilder shores of the Internet. But the idea that the Reformation represented a return to a purer form of scriptural faith remains central to the self-image of large numbers of sincere Protestant Christians, and this seems to be an idea quite widely shared across secular society too. People of faith, both in Britain and in the United States, who squarely see themselves as heirs of the Reformation tradition quite often make reference to something called ‘biblical Christianity’, as if there were other varieties of Christianity that are non-biblical, or perhaps not really Christianity at all. The suggestion seems to be that the scriptural legacy of the Reformation stands in need of defending, not just against Roman Catholicism, but against supposedly secularising and liberalising tendencies within the historically Protestant churches themselves.

This should, I think, prompt us to reflect that the Reformation understanding of the bible is not some dusty relic of history, but remains highly relevant for issues of Christian conscience and identity in the world today. The inerrant authority of scripture, and the so-called ‘teaching of the bible’, are themes regularly invoked in contemporary debates about sexuality, social and economic justice, gender equality, and a host of other ‘hot-button issues’. Christianity, of course, is nothing if not a historical religion, which is a reason why

historians like myself sometimes feel emboldened to talk about it. History – both the flow of the past itself, and the challenging business of making sense of that flow of events – is invariably about the warp and weft of sameness and alteration, and about how even the things we inherit and seek to preserve manage to change their meanings over time. In a Christian context, that location of self and society within a timeline of history is generally referred to as tradition – the act of transmission or handing over, as well as the content of that which is passed down. Tradition – both in the Reformation era and subsequently – has often been seen as a counter-point, a supplement, or even a rival to Scripture. But the meaning and significance of the bible, as it was forged in the struggles of the Reformation, is itself a vital part of Christian tradition. It seems to me that the idea we should simply deny or repudiate this tradition is no more appealing than a fundamentalist instinct for somehow preserving it in a pristine state.

Christianity, like other aspects of collective human enterprise, has a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for myth-making, and the memory of the Reformation has always been an extremely fertile source of myths. One of these is that the Church and culture of the middle ages displayed very little interest in the bible. Victorian biographies of Luther recounted the improbable tale that his life was changed after he came across a copy of the bible, mouldering and neglected, in a cupboard at the monastery in Wittenberg. In fact, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther, was professor of biblical studies at the University of Wittenberg. The theology faculties of medieval universities existed largely to produce commentary on scripture, and biblical imagery, symbolism and motifs saturated medieval culture as a whole. More particularly, despite the richness, and occasional extravagance, of the cult of the saints, the religious culture of the world in which Luther grew up was marked by intense devotional concern with the person and passion of Jesus. Images of the suffering saviour were ubiquitous in churches and public places, and the desire for greater intimacy with Christ as a human brother was feeding a growing interest in the Gospels as a source of direct information about his death and life.

Another myth is that before the Reformation there was no possibility for bibles to be in the vernacular, the spoken language of the people. Luther's New Testament of 1522 is often supposed to have been the first translation of scripture into the German tongue. Scholars have in fact calculated that at least 18 complete German editions of the Bible, 90 editions of the Gospels, and 14 books of Psalms were printed in Germany before Luther. Printed translations were also available to late medieval Catholics in Italy, France and the Low Countries. England was a special and unusual case. Here, the bishops had refused to grant any licences for translations of scripture. This was in nervous reaction to a local outburst of religious deviance – the so-called Lollard movement, inspired by the maverick Oxford theologian, John Wyclif. At the end of the fourteenth century, disciples of Wyclif translated the Latin bible into Middle English, and composed a General Prologue highly critical of Church teaching. This Lollard or Wycliffite bible circulated widely in manuscript – too widely in fact for it to have been confined to the small cells of underground dissidents. It seems virtually certain that many owners of Wycliffite bibles, usually shorn of the General Prologue, were orthodox Catholics, not heretics. They included pious nuns and monks, and virtually all the Lancastrian, Yorkist and Tudor kings.

In other words, the Protestant Reformation, both in continental Europe and in England, emerged in a culture that cherished the bible, not one that shunned or neglected it. If this were not the case, it would be indeed hard to explain how Protestant teaching, and the refrain of sola scriptura, managed to gain any traction with people.

The real issue, of course, was authority. Who had the right to interpret the true meaning of scripture, which, as everyone recognised, was sometimes dark or obscure? The conventional answer was that a consensus of learned opinion in the Church, guided down the

centuries by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would ensure that the bible was read and understood correctly. Those who vaingloriously put forward personal interpretations, contrary to the received understanding, were the very definition of heretics, choosing their own stubborn opinions over the collective wisdom of the ages. In the eyes of Rome, Martin Luther rapidly became just such a heretic. The decisive shift in his thinking was when he came to see the bible as the sole and unique source of legitimate authority. At first, and during the furore over the relatively minor issue of indulgences, Luther resembled earlier Catholic reformers in hoping to appeal against the pope to the ultimate authority of a General Council of the Church. But within a couple of years he had become convinced that General councils also had feet of clay – they could err and had erred. Only God’s Word in scripture was reliable, authoritative, infallible.

Before leaving the subject of myths, one of the most pervasive and enduring myths about the bible and the Reformation is that Luther and his fellow reformers believed that every Christian should be permitted to decide the meaning of scripture for themselves. This fits with a widespread modern conception that the real achievement of the Reformation was to elevate the individual over the institution, to strip away all the layers of mediation between the Christian and his or her God, and to open the door to liberty of conscience. We think of Luther standing alone before the emperor and the massed princes and prelates of Germany at the diet of Worms in 1521, and refusing to renounce his books. ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’. It is without doubt an image of individual heroism, but not perhaps one of heroic individualism. Luther may or may not have said ‘Here I stand’, but he did say on this occasion that he could not recant because ‘my conscience is captive to the Word of God’.

The idea of being held captive by the bible is a truly striking one, and powerfully gets across Luther’s sense of human helplessness and dependence in the face of the transcendent majesty and fathomless grace of the Almighty. There is a sense in which Luther did not really see himself as an interpreter of scripture at all – at least, not in the way that medieval theologians had looked in the bible to find complex allegorical meanings and correspondences. Indeed, he wrote that ‘*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*’ – holy scripture is its own interpreter, a powerful and audacious claim that became very deeply rooted in the Protestant tradition. By this he meant, in effect, that scripture had a clear sense, which ought to be evident to any right-thinking and well-meaning Christian reader. For Luther’s English disciple, William Tyndale, the meaning of scripture was ‘plain and manifest’. Furthermore, the principle of *sui ipsius interpres* implied that more obscure passages of scripture could be elucidated by comparing them with the more straightforward ones, since the bible, by definition, could only teach one truth.

Luther was an idealist, but not an innocent. He understood that ordinary Christians might require help to ascertain the true meaning of scriptural texts. His New Testament of 1522, and complete German Bible of 1534 came thoroughly supplied with prologues and marginal notes to guide the reader, as did William Tyndale’s Cologne New Testament of 1525. Few Protestant bibles of the era in fact represented some completely unadorned Word of God, lacking the technical aids and appendices for which literary scholars have coined the rather ugly description, ‘paratext’. The version of the bible most popular with English Protestants later in the sixteenth century, the Geneva Bible of 1560, became particularly renowned for its learned and detailed notes, as well as for being the first English bible to divide the text into verses as well as chapters.

All of these bibles betrayed a slight sense of unease about the plain and manifest meaning of scripture by thus enveloping themselves in layers of labelled interpretation. But there was another sense in which these biblical texts were in themselves interpretations of the Word of God, in that all of them were translations. It was a foundational principle of the Reformation, absolutely everywhere it took root, that people should have access to the Bible

in their own language. This has been an enduring legacy of the reformers, and a principle that has long been accepted as axiomatic right across the Christian spectrum. It's been calculated that, as of October 2017, 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation, the bible has a whole has been translated into no fewer than 670 different languages, the New Testament into over 1500.

Muslims, as I understand the matter, generally believe translations of the Qur'an to be human artefacts, surrendering the uniquely sacred and infallible character of the Arabic original. But Christians have usually considered translations of scripture to be holy scripture still. There are various versions of an apocryphal tale in which an American preacher, collecting funds for a new translation of the bible, was told by an indignant farmer that the King James Version was 'good enough for St Paul and it's good enough for me'.

Yet translation, by definition, means relocating or changing something into something else. Linguistic translation always involves an interpretation of the original in the attempt to replicate or approximate it in another form. The contentious politics of bible translation predated the Reformation itself. The most widely used medieval bible, the Latin Vulgate, was itself a translation; in its fourth-century origins, a version rendered into the common or vulgar tongue of the people of the late Roman Empire. A thousand years later, some scholars had become concerned with corruptions and mistranscriptions in the text, and they urged the necessity of going back to the earliest Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. The great Dutch scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam, caused a sensation in 1516 by publishing a brand new annotated Latin translation of the New Testament, alongside a best attempt at a scholarly reproduction of the original Greek text. To the dismay of conservatives, Erasmus showed a cheerful disregard for tradition in his rendering of Greek terms. For example, in a reading we have just heard, John the Baptist's terse instruction *Metanoiete* was rendered by the Vulgate as *poenitentiam agite*, or do penance. Erasmus thought that a better Latin translation was *resipiscite*; repent.

For Erasmus, this was scholarly precision rather than revolution, but such choices had real theological and practical consequences. In his English New Testament, Tyndale followed Erasmus's lead and argued that the Church had egregiously misled the faithful in teaching the necessity of works of penance, and confession to a priest; simple repentance sufficed. Tyndale's decisions to translate *Ekklesia* as congregation rather than Church; *agape* as love rather than charity; and *presbyteros* as elder rather than priest, also had profound implications for long-accepted religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps the most famous, or notorious, translation choice of the Reformation era was Luther's decision with respect to Romans 3:28: 'Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the law.' His German version added the word 'allein' to make 'justified by faith alone', a clarion declaration of the central theological tenet on which Luther's Reformation was built. This was not fraud or deception: Luther was convinced that his vernacular rendition captured best the real meaning of St Paul's phrase. His Catholic critics, of course, disagreed.

Translations, inevitably, are products of their age. In a brilliant recent book on sixteenth-century English versions of the Old Testament, the historian and Hebrew scholar Naomi Tadmor has shown how these translations subtly and unconsciously imposed Tudor notions of community, monogamous marriage and political authority on the alien world of the ancient Near East. In the Authorised Version, for example, no fewer than 14 different Hebrew terms were all flatly translated with the single word, 'prince'.

The legacy for us here seems a decidedly mixed one. The ability of Christians, in all denominations, to nurture their faith in God and their relationship with Jesus through the reading of scriptures in the language of everyday life is a blessing we owe largely to the insistence of the reformers, and to the eventual realisation of their Catholic opponents that joining them might be the best way of beating them. Yet modern biblical fundamentalism, in

all its legalistic certitude, is equally rooted in the slogans and stances of the Reformation. Some people might consider than even to raise questions about the indeterminacy of scriptural translation is to risk sowing doubt and confusion among Christians. Another way of viewing the matter is to see it as an invitation to mature discussion and reflection on the sources of revelation, a means of entering more deeply into the stirring challenge of faith.

There is no getting away from the fact that in announcing the bible to be its own infallible interpreter, the Reformation unleashed an era of unprecedented dispute over how it was actually to be interpreted. Catholics, unsurprisingly, were reluctant to accept that for centuries they had understood scripture all wrong. It seemed self-evident to reformers like Tyndale, for example, that the doctrine of purgatory was an innovation and an invention, without any grounding in the Word of God. But Thomas More could find a dozen and more biblical passages to prove the truth of the teaching.

Disagreements over the interpretation of scripture were also, right from the outset, a feature of the Reformation movement itself. To take just one example, all Christians could agree that God had given 10 commandments to Moses. Yet the texts in Exodus and Deuteronomy actually contain up to fourteen discernible instructions, and they require sorting and grouping to add up to the required number. Luther followed the lead of St Augustine in judging that the prohibition on making ‘graven images’, and worshipping them, was part of the first commandment, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’. But others, including Zwingli, Calvin, and Cranmer in England reverted to an older Hebrew tradition in maintaining that the image ban was a separate second commandment. As a result, German and Scandinavian Lutheran churches kept many of their old Catholic statues and paintings, and in time added more. But Switzerland, Scotland, the Netherlands and indeed England witnessed waves of zealous iconoclasm and white-washing of church walls.

Yet more significant, was the seemingly unshakable argument about the statement of Jesus himself, made at the Last Supper, ‘This is my Body’. It has been said that the Reformation was a prolonged dispute about the meaning of each one of those four little words. Luther was insistent that Christ’s statement to be taken literally. There was a real, physical presence in the bread of the Eucharist. Zwingli, Calvin, and others in the so-called Reformed tradition, pointed to the accompanying words, ‘do this in memory of me’, and regarded the presence as a spiritual or metaphorical one.

Lutherans and Calvinists could agree, if often testily, to disagree. But in all parts of sixteenth-century Europe there were sincere and questing Christians who read the bible, and could not persuade themselves that it said what the university-educated preachers said it did. They saw no convincing evidence there for infant baptism, for the notion that Christ took flesh from the Virgin Mary, or for the idea that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were co-equal persons of the Godhead. The word ‘Trinity’, of course, appears nowhere in scripture. These free-thinkers, frequently labelled Anabaptists, were ruthlessly persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant authorities. There was no possibility that their interpretations of scripture might be valid, worthy of respect, or even of toleration.

The story of the bible in the Reformation is in many ways the story of the Reformation as a whole. The reformers prized unity and consensus, a Church of Christ recalled to clarity of vision and resolve in proclamation. But they produced in practice a world of discord and division – a seemingly exponential multiplication of sects and splinter-groups, each claiming to have understood God’s Word correctly, and issuing anathemas against the competition. Nonetheless, over time, the character of these divisions changed in most parts of Europe, and across an expanding Christian world. Violent intolerance evolved into a grudging acceptance of law-abiding minorities; and, over a longer time-frame still, into positive affirmation of what other Christians might have to offer and share. Taken together, the bible of the Reformation, and the Reformation of the bible, represent a complicated

inheritance for modern Christians, in different degrees both liberating and constraining. The legacy has without question often been a source of conflict and confusion. Yet, when acknowledged openly, generously and honestly, it is also an inheritance that holds out possibilities for renewing and refreshing a common search for faith and understanding.