



The Bible, the British and the First World War



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Given its centrality in British life and culture, the Bible (and especially the King James Bible) framed the British experience of the First World War. In a Bible-conscious and scripturally literate society such as wartime Britain, Scripture served either to justify or condemn the conflict, it helped to explain its deeper meaning, it provided inspiration for soldiers and civilians, solace for the many bereaved, and profoundly affected the idiom of remembrance. Nevertheless, the experience of the First World War also exposed some of the Bible's inherent tensions and even perplexities, becoming a battleground for Christians who supported or opposed the war, and seeming to offer little on the nature of the afterlife, into which all too many young men had departed. Nevertheless, and if the war deepened confusion for some, in general terms the Bible served as a rock to which the nation clung during the storm of war, a rock that endured for another generation of Britons when faced with the still greater threat of Hitler's Germany 20 years later.

The centrality of the Bible in pre-war Britain

According to Timothy Larsen, a leading historian of the Bible and Victorian Britain, the Bible enjoyed a 'unique and extraordinary centrality' in the Victorian era.¹ This situation is profoundly important given that the generation of Britons that fought the First World War – its generals, its politicians and even the young conscripts of 1916 to 1918 – were practically all born in the reign of Queen Victoria and were very much products of Victorian society. This was a society upon which the Christian Scriptures exerted a profound and formative influence. Holy Scripture was common to the services of all Christian denominations, from the Quaker meeting to

the Roman Catholic mass. Although subject to different interpretations, the King James Bible was very much a shared text for Anglophone Protestants all over the world, and the Douai version of the Bible had a similar function for Anglophone Catholics. The teachings and values of this common text underpinned the British legal system, and dictated contemporary notions of public and personal morality. Biblical themes, stories, language and imagery saturated British art, literature and music. Scripture coloured and informed political discourse across the political spectrum, from Irish Unionism to Christian socialism. The Bible infused Britain's historic sense of national identity (like ancient Israel, Britain was a nation chosen by God for his providential purposes) and, through the missionary movement which sought to take the gospel to the world, it furnished a clear moral and spiritual justification for the British Empire. Their shared Scriptures endowed the British people with a powerful sense of the workings of divine providence in national and international life and, at the very heart of the British state, the coronation ceremony showed how deeply the concept of monarchy was rooted in Old Testament themes and conceptions.

Regardless of social class or religious denomination, knowledge of the Bible was generally understood to be the mark of a good education and a respectable background. It was widely read at home and in private, and, no less than reading, writing and arithmetic, it was integral to the curricula of the nation's schools. Whether in the public schools, church schools, or even the notionally secular board schools, British children were routinely exposed to biblical stories and teachings, the Bible also being central to the Sunday schools attended

(for shorter or for longer periods) by the overwhelming majority of working-class children in mainland Britain. Quite simply, the Bible was by far the most widely read, taught and studied book in British society and even agnostics, secularists and atheists had to be familiar with its contents in order to promote their own varieties

in the cauldron in the First World War the Bible continued to inform and to fortify the soul of the nation

NOTES

1. T Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 6.
2. SC Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 66.
3. A Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 154–5.
4. M Snape, *The Redcoat and Religion: The Forgotten History of the British Soldier from the Age of Marlborough to the Eve of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 94–5.
5. AK Yapp, *The Romance of the Red Triangle* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918), p. 212.
6. A Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 153.
7. GA Studdert Kennedy, *The Hardest Part* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918), pp. 49–51.
8. C Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (Belfast: McCaw, Stevenson & Orr, 1922), pp. 16–17.
9. S Menzies, *Sportsmen Parsons in Peace and War* (London: Hutchinson, 1919), p. 237.

of non-belief. So steeped were Britons in the Bible that its language and stories were used colloquially, as in phrases such as 'Job's comforter', 'prodigal son' and 'whited sepulchre'.

Nonetheless, there were problems with the position of the Bible in British society. The nation's unusually rich mix of Christian denominations (to say nothing of its two established churches) underlined the fact that the Bible was liable to be read and understood in many different ways. More recently, advances in geology and the impact of Darwinian science had thrown into question traditional and literal understandings of the Bible, and especially its accounts of creation. The growth of biblical (or 'higher') criticism had helped to accelerate this retreat from literalism in many church quarters.

Furthermore, popular reception of the Bible was an abiding problem. Though respected as a source of divinely inspired truths, and as a sacred artefact, the Bible was far more widely owned than actually read. Even when it was the subject of devotional reading and study, it was often perused and quoted selectively, or poorly digested. There was even a problem with how the ubiquitous family Bible was regarded, it being widely considered 'lucky' for a household to have one.² Although the Bible informed and sustained personal and public morality, the essence of its ethical teaching was generally understood to be the Golden Rule. Finally, and in seeking to encourage religious habits, and notably churchgoing, among the working-classes, Christ's repeated denunciations of religious hypocrisy could prove double-edged, with clergy and devout laypeople liable to be dismissed in scriptural terms as mere Pharisees.

A contested text

The Bible is not a transparent or exhaustive rule book for the Christian life and some of its ethical teachings are clearly in tension (e.g. as in the case of Jesus' teachings on divorce). This is especially true of its teachings on killing in the context of war, with the debates of 1914 to 1918 emphasising its position as a contested text. For those inclined towards pacifism, the sixth commandment and the Sermon on the Mount, among other passages of Scripture, seemed both clear and binding. Against their arguments, supporters of the war could deploy large portions of the Old Testament, much better known than now, plus other sayings and teachings of Jesus and St Paul, such as, 'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace,

but a sword' (Matthew 10.34). Appeals to the underlying spirit of Scripture were no more conclusive. As the parable of the Good Samaritan does not hint at what its protagonist would have done had he stumbled across an armed robbery rather than its aftermath, in the context of Britain's war with Germany (and of the unprovoked invasion and rape of Belgium in particular), was it the duty of the Christian to shun the war or to go to the assistance of one's neighbour? Both approaches were problematic. Those who invoked the sixth commandment could be accused of privileging one commandment over the other nine and, given recent progress in biblical scholarship, of misrepresenting a commandment against wilful *murder*. Equally, those who invoked 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15.13) seemed to be over-taxing its application in connection with the nation's growing number of war dead.

Ultimately, the Bible furnished a rich and varied repertoire of themes and figures that could be invoked to support Britain's war effort, while simultaneously providing a store of proof texts that could be cited just as fervently by the small minority of Britons who opposed the war for religious reasons. According to various British commentators, Germany was the new Assyria, the arrogant despoiler of nations (Isaiah 10.12–14). Furthermore, in view of Germany's transgressions, the righteousness of Britain's cause, and the redemptive connotations of their self-sacrifice, the manner and purpose of the deaths of Britain's soldiers (all of whom were volunteers before the introduction of conscription in 1916), were widely conceived as analogous to that of Christ himself. Besides the reassurance that could be found in John 15.13, Jesus had also said, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.' (Luke 9.23).

However, the introduction of conscription in 1916 gave rise to the new phenomenon of the conscientious objector, men who were required to make their case for an exemption from combatant service before local tribunals. Although by no means all of them based their objections on religious grounds, and not all religious objectors were 'absolutists' who would play no part in the war effort, the place of the Bible in British society ensured that religiously motivated objectors were able to offer the most cogent and compelling arguments in favour of their case. At many local tribunals, therefore, committees of assembled worthies (which could include clergymen) had ample opportunity to bandy scriptural texts with those seeking exemption. At Preston, for example; the case of one conscientious objector was dismissed after he misquoted Matthew 10.34, wrongly claiming that Jesus had come to bring peace, not a sword; on the other hand, another had his case upheld after he demonstrated a more persuasive knowledge of the Sermon on the Mount.³

The Bible and the armed forces

It says a great deal about the enormous value attached to the Bible in British society that Holy Scripture had

been part of the standard kit of the British soldier since 1825, when the Duke of York, the army's commander-in-chief, had ordered that every literate soldier should be issued with a Bible at public expense.⁴ Despite the fact that the War Office issued portions of Scripture and approved prayer books to the other ranks as a matter of policy, as in previous conflicts an immense effort was devoted by civilian agencies to the task of supplying the Word of God to the soldiers of the British army. According to Sir Arthur Yapp, the YMCA alone distributed 'Millions of Testaments and gospel portions' free of charge to serving soldiers during the First World War.⁵ These were, however, only some of the 40 million Bibles, prayer books, hymn books and tracts that Alan Wilkinson estimated were distributed to British troops by civilian religious agencies in the first half of the war,⁶ the equivalent of approximately six items for every British soldier or sailor who served in the course of the entire conflict.

According to the Anglican chaplain GA Studdert Kennedy, the celebrated 'Woodbine Willie', the prevailing attitude of soldiers towards the Bible was affectionate and idiosyncratic: "Yes, I'll 'ave one, sir; you never know your luck; it may stop a bullet." According to Kennedy, who was writing in 1917, 'There are thousands of Bibles carried that are not read. That is certain. If you give them out broadcast, that is bound to be so. The Bible, specially the New Testament, has an enormous circulation in the trenches, yet I very rarely come across a man who knows very much about it.' Kennedy went on to make a telling comparison: 'I find quite common among men a kind of inherited respect for the Bible. They seem to think of it very much as a decent man thinks of his grandmother. It is ancient, and therefore demands respect; but it is utterly out of date and cannot be taken seriously, except by parsons.'⁷ While numerous Bibles and New Testaments were undoubtedly kept and treated as mere talismans, giving rise to numerous stories of bullet or shrapnel-stopping Bibles, there were many soldiers who made full and orthodox use of Scripture for devotional purposes. According to Cyril Falls, who served with the 36th (Ulster) Division, 'The General commanding the 4th Division, to which the 36th was attached for instruction after its arrival in France, spoke of his astonishment at finding so many Ulstermen reading their Bibles.' As Falls remembered: '[I]t was not uncommon to find a man sitting on the fire-step of a front-line trench, reading one of the small copies of the New Testament which were issued to the troops by the people at home. The explanation was that, on the one hand, religion was near and real to them; on the other, that they were simple men. They saw no reason to hide or disguise that which was a part of their daily lives.'⁸

Naturally, for the fearful and wounded the Bible was a very common and accessible resort. Maurice Peel, an Anglican army chaplain and the grandson of a former prime minister, relayed biblical texts to the men of his battalion by word of mouth before they went over the top, his last message to them being 'Jesus said, "I am with you always"' (Matthew 28.20).⁹ A few weeks after the carnage of 1 July 1916, the bloodiest day of the First

World War for the British Empire, Gerald Brennan, an officer in the 5th Gloucestershire Regiment, remarked on the manner and extent to which the Bible had been used by those fatally wounded on the first day of the Battle of the Somme: 'The wounded, who could not be brought in, had crawled into shell holes, wrapped their waterproof sheets round them, taken out their Bibles, and died like that.'¹⁰

For generals as well as ordinary soldiers, the Bible also proved a source of solace and inspiration. Bearing a colossal weight of responsibility, Sir Douglas Haig, the often unfairly maligned Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front from December 1915, frequently reflected on Scripture in his diary and to a select group of confidants. According to Haig's chaplain, the Scottish Presbyterian George S Duncan: '[The Bible] influenced, perhaps unconsciously, both his ways of speech and his general outlook, without necessarily implying that he knew much about its origins or its theology. I have no reason to think that Haig's knowledge of the Bible was either profound or extensive. He certainly gained from it a sense of the divine Presence and Power; and this assurance meant much to him. In a broad general sense he valued it especially for the deep seriousness that characterised its message from the beginning to the end, and for the light which it shed for him on the whole duty of man.'¹¹

The wider experience of a world war inevitably evoked a variety of responses to Scripture from among Britain's fighting men. Products of a pre-war culture that was steeped in knowledge and awareness of the Bible, many of the war poets evinced a literary response to the war that was heavily coloured by Scripture. For example, and inspired by the wayside shrines that dotted the landscape of northern France and Belgium, Wilfred Owen's poem 'At a Calvary near the Ancre' invoked the Beast of the book of Revelation, as well as the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion.

For many others, the ethical dilemmas of killing were never properly resolved. While on the Somme, the Anglican chaplain EC Cross was tasked with one still burning question: 'Come on, Padre, what is your answer to this? *Thou shalt not kill*. What do you make of that commandment now?'¹²

The Bible also underlined the British soldier's commonality with his German adversary, sometimes helping to moderate the conduct of the war on the Western Front. Most famously, the spirit of Luke 2.14, 'on earth peace, good will toward men' (KJV), was at the heart of the legendary Christmas truce of 1914. In the heat of battle, demoralised German soldiers were also observed to produce their own Bibles and Testaments while trying to surrender.¹³

Away from the Western Front, for hundreds of thousands of British soldiers the hard campaigns against the Turks in Palestine and Mesopotamia took place against a biblical backdrop that seemed familiar, if only from childhood memory and imagination. Significantly, and conscious of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem

10. J Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Pimlico, 1991), p. 269.

11. GS Duncan, *Douglas Haig As I Knew Him* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 114.

12. IWM Documents, EC Crosse, 80/22/1.

13. M Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 190.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

16. A Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2012), pp. 257–8.

17. MD Chapman, 'Anglo-German Theological Relations during the First World War', *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 7 (2000), pp. 109–26; CE Bailey, 'The British Protestant Theologians in the First World War: Germanophobia Unleashed', *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984), pp. 195–221 at pp. 208–10.

18. AJ Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: A Study in Clerical Nationalism* (New York: Praeger, 1989), p. 27.

prior to his Passion, and of the Kaiser's showy entry into the Holy City on horseback some years earlier, General Sir Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem on foot, and essentially as a pilgrim, when the city fell to the British in December 1917.¹⁴

A heightened interest in Scripture

For civilians no less than soldiers, the war engendered a heightened interest in Scripture, a common practice on the home front being to follow an agreed scheme of Bible reading with a spouse or near relative in the armed forces in order to ease the pains of separation and anxiety.¹⁵

Inevitably, a war of this magnitude also stoked an appetite for prophetic and even apocalyptic readings of the Bible. As war had traditionally been perceived as a divine means of chastising a sinful nation, another perception grounded on the biblical history of ancient Israel, churchmen often urged Britons to examine their own sins, both personal and societal. Acting on these convictions, during the latter half of the war both the Church of England and the principal Presbyterian churches in Scotland sought to renew church life by means of national campaigns which focused on the need for national self-examination and repentance. However, given Jesus's words in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark concerning the signs that would herald his return and the end of the world (Matthew 24.6–7 and Mark 13.7–8), the unfolding events of the war were widely construed in light of the book of Revelation.

Although reflected in the wartime boom in sensational pamphlets such as *The Years 1914 to 1923 in Bible Prophecy* (1914) and *The Great War as Foretold in the Bible* (1915), these intimations of apocalypse also stoked the widespread credence that was given to the story of the Angels of Mons, and lent credibility to rumours of a Canadian soldier who had been crucified by the Germans near Ypres – in a typically blasphemous parody of the crucifixion. Later, the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 fed apocalyptic speculation on both sides of the Atlantic, the British government's pledge of support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine seeming to mark the beginning of the end times for many premillenarian evangelicals.¹⁶ Significantly, at the same time the war also served to undermine the credibility and respectability of higher criticism and other manifestations of German theological 'modernism'. With its intellectual roots in Germany, some British commentators were even tempted to link the gradual, pre-war undermining of Christian orthodoxy in Germany with its lapse into apostate barbarism in 1914.¹⁷ As one Anglican commentator lamented, 'As a scholar you may cut the Bible into shreds, but as a citizen you must not snip a button from the Kaiser's uniform'.¹⁸

In one vital respect, however, some of the bereaved appeared to look to the Bible in vain. Belief in Hell and in eternal punishment had been waning in British society since the mid-Victorian period, and the mass mortality of the war years did nothing to urge the revival of this old and fearsome orthodoxy. Unfortunately, for Protestants Scripture seemed silent on the nature of the afterlife,

and especially on the fate of those souls that seemed unfit – for the time being at least – to enter heavenly glory. While this fuelled an often desperate dabbling in spiritualism on the part of some of the bereaved, a practice that orthodox Christians believed to stand condemned by the Old Testament's account of Saul's dealings with the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28.3–25), it was also reflected in the fuzzy and allusive manner in which the war dead were remembered, there being no firm consensus as to their whereabouts.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Good Book proved to be an enduring source of comfort, if not detailed explanation. Gathered at the war memorial in Royston in 1922, one speaker advised the bereaved that they should return to their callings, like King David had done, despite the loss of their sons.²⁰

On a more intimate level, scriptural texts were commonly chosen as inscriptions for the headstones of loved ones – favoured texts being John 15.13 ('Greater love hath no man ...') and Matthew 25.21 ('Well done, thou good and faithful servant ...') The Bible also influenced the design and inscriptions of large numbers of public war memorials. That of the Machine Gun Corps, for example, when erected in 1925, featured a statue of the boy David and bore the inscription 'Saul hath slain his thousands but David his tens of thousands' (1 Samuel 18.7). Under the aegis of the Imperial War Graves Commission, a Cross of Sacrifice and Stone of Remembrance became standard fixtures of every British war cemetery. The legend inscribed on the base of the Cross of Sacrifice was devised by Rudyard Kipling, inspired by a text from the deuterocanonical Book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), 'Their name liveth for evermore' (Sirach 44.14). Furthermore, the 'Great Stone of Remembrance', a simple stone altar, evoked Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the angel's consoling words 'now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me' (Genesis 22.12 KJV).

Conclusion

Deserving of much greater and deeper study, the experience of the First World War underlined, rather than diminished, the abiding importance of the Bible in British society. A perennially complex, contradictory and perplexing text, it nevertheless conditioned the response of a whole generation of Britons to the worst conflict in their nation's history. Simultaneously a source of legitimation and condemnation of the war, and of fevered speculation as to its meaning and outcome, it nonetheless provided millions of British soldiers and civilians with an indispensable sense of consolation, inspiration, unity and stability. Though the Bible was variously appreciated and digested in society at large, and although its integrity and standing had been challenged by scientific and scholarly advances in the nineteenth century, in the cauldron in the First World War it continued to inform and to fortify the soul of the nation, proving a resilient and vital means through which the war and its unprecedented sacrifices could be understood, remembered and endured.

19. M Snape, 'Civilians, Soldiers, and Perceptions of the Afterlife in Britain during the First World War', in P Clarke and T Claydon (eds), 'The Church, The Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul', *Studies in Church History* 45 (2009), pp. 371–403.

20. J Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 96.

The first British official war artists' scheme was set up by the government in 1916. Although several female artists were approached either by the British War Memorials Committee or the Ministry of Information, none of them completed commissions for the official schemes.

First World War. How The First World War Shaped The Poetry Of Siegfried Sassoon. Born in 1886, Siegfried Sassoon became one of the best-known - and most controversial - poets and novelists to emerge from the First World War as a result of his increasingly anti-war stance. In his autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*, he wrote one of the most enduring memoirs of the First World War and the Somme in particular. Share this Share on twitter Share on facebook. Imperial War Museums home. A brief account of Britain's role in the First World War which, though a global conflict, would always be won - or lost - in Europe. A summary of the conflict and Britain's part in it. The 1914-18 war was a global conflict. British forces, and those of her Imperial Dominions - particularly Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India and South Africa - fought in Africa, Italy, the Middle East, Salonica (Greece) and Gallipoli (Turkey), as well as on the Western Front (northern France/south-west Belgium) and, of course, on the high seas. But it was predominantly a land war and the outcome was always going to be determined by whoever won in Europe. When Britain entered World War One, it did so in the name of 19th century liberal values - the rights of small nations and the rule of law. What justified these claims, which became the touchstone of British propaganda, was Germany's invasion of Belgium, as its army bypassed France's eastern defences by swinging round them to the north. Britain and the Great War 1914-1918 by John Bourne (London, 1989). *Blighty: British Society and the First World War* by GJ de Groot (London, 1996). *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict* by John Turner (New Haven and London, 1992). Top. About the author. Hew Strachan is Chichele Professor of the History of War and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford.