

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Humanities & Social Sciences papers

Bond University

Year 2002

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Renaissance Bible and the Origins of
Modernity

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Fixing the Meaning of Scripture: The Renaissance Bible and the Origins of Modernity

**By Peter Harrison
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‘I believe that the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups.... At one pole we have the literary intellectuals ... at the other scientists.’ This observation of C. P. Snow, made over forty years ago in his famous book *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959), eloquently points to a fundamental rift in the modern west between those intellectuals whose stock in trade is words and scientists who deal with natural objects. The consequences of this deep division have been unfortunate. On the one hand, with the advent of post-modern theory, many of the disciplines of the humanities have been precipitated into an almost terminal crisis. For increasing numbers of observers, the humanities have abandoned their traditional mission of providing cultural guidance on questions of meaning and value and have sunk into a relativistic obscurantism. On the other hand, the natural sciences have given rise to remarkable technological advances and now exercise an unparalleled cultural authority. Yet the practitioners of science have tended either to ignore questions of meaning of value on account of a stated commitment to objectivity, or have sought to fill the gap left by the reticent liberal arts by offering reductionist accounts of human personhood and ethical values that are vacuous and inane.

In the brief compass of this essay I shall not prescribe a panacea to heal this unfortunate rift. However, I do hope to shed some light on the origins of this great divide in the hope that it may yield some new insights into our contemporary predicament and be suggestive of ways in which more damaging consequences of the polarization of the two cultures might be ameliorated. The origins of the distinct treatments of words and things in Western society, I shall propose, lie in a series of related revolutions that took place at the dawn of modernity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Surprising as it may seem, Scripture—its contents, the controversies it generated, the changing status of its authority, and most important of all, the new way in which it was read by humanists and Protestants—played a pivotal role in the origins of originating that division between

humanities and sciences which has given shape to modernity and which to this day dominates the intellectual landscape.

1. The Multiple Meanings of Scripture. In order to understand the magnitude and significance of these changes that took place at the inauguration of the modern age we need to consider how the interpretation of scripture had been linked to the interpretation of natural objects in the Patristic and Medieval periods. In the third century the Church Father Origen (c.185- c.254) set out the enormously influential view that created objects in the natural world bore deep symbolic meanings. Inspired by St Paul's observation that 'The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made' (Rom. 1.20), Origen contended that the key to understanding Scripture lay in discerning the meanings of the objects to which the words of scripture referred. Scriptural references to 'lions', for example, called for a knowledge of the multiple meanings of this creature. The lion might at times represent Christ, at other times, somewhat confusingly, the devil. While the literal sense of words was fixed, the allegorical sense of objects was not. Origen's system of biblical interpretation was subsequently refined by Augustine (354-430), who made explicit the theory of signs that lay behind it. According to Augustine, words refer unequivocally to objects (the literal sense), but objects themselves may refer to other objects (the allegorical sense).¹ The multiplicity of meanings that biblical texts may bear thus relates not to the ambiguity of words, but to the capacity of objects to act as symbols with multiple referents.

The upshot of this is that allegory was not, as modern readers often assume, a way of reading multiple meanings into a text. It was rather an elaborate procedure in which the reader was drawn away from the surface meaning of the words of scripture to the rich multiple meanings of the creatures. While determination of the literal sense of scripture called for an identification of a word with a particular object, determination of the allegorical sense called for an inquiry into the meanings of the objects themselves. Patristic and medieval allegory was thus informed by a theory of nature. Nature was primarily ordered and understood in terms of its meaning, rather than in 'scientific' terms to do with causal order, mathematical relations, or biological taxonomies. It was this practice of allegorical interpretation that gave rise to the commonplace 'the book of nature'. Augustine first used the expression in the fifth century, and it was subsequently adopted by medieval thinkers. 'The whole sensible world' wrote Hugh of St Victor (*d.*

1142), 'is like a kind of book written by the finger of God'. Each creature, he continued, is a symbol 'instituted by the divine will to manifest the invisible things of God's wisdom.' All the creatures of the world, agreed Alan of Lille (*d.* 1202), are 'books', 'pictures', and 'mirrors'.² This metaphor thus implied that the coherence of nature was to be found in its transcendental meanings. In the seventeenth century, the trope of 'the book of nature' was to become ubiquitous, but as we see, by then it had come to mean something quite different.

2. The Literal Sense and the Natural World. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation brought serious challenges to medieval practices of biblical interpretation and to the related symbolic conception of nature. With the new historical and philological interests of Renaissance humanists came a renewed emphasis on the literal or 'grammatical' sense of scripture. Protestant Reformers, for their part, invested Scripture with an unprecedented authority, and as a consequence favoured a system of biblical interpretation which could produce unambiguous meanings. That passages of scripture yield a single, authoritative, and univocal sense was of particular importance in the highly charged atmosphere of doctrinal conflict which characterised the era of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. In addition, the Protestant rejection of the authority of ecclesiastical tradition meant that the text of scripture was extricated from the rich web of gloss and commentary, much of which was informed by the allegorical readings of the Fathers and Doctors. In light of these considerations it is not surprising that both Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64) were to insist that passages of holy writ had a single, fixed meaning, which usually though not invariably) lay in the literal or historical sense. As theologian Hans Frei expressed it, 'the affirmation that the literal or grammatical sense is the Bible's true sense became programmatic for the traditions of Lutheran and Calvinistic interpretation.'³

The implications of these changes to the interpretation of Scripture were far reaching. The triumph of the literal sense over other levels of meaning brought about that familiar approach to texts which typifies modernity, in which texts have a single meaning which is identified with the intentions of its author. During the middle ages the literal sense had always been important as the foundation for subsequent symbolic readings, but it now

¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.ii.2.

² Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 32.20. Hugh of St. Victor, *De tribus diebus* 4; Alanus de Insulis, *Rhythmus de incarnatione Christi*.

took on an unprecedented significance. Equally importantly, because allegory had entailed a particular approach to natural objects, the early modern move away from reading multiple meanings into objects inevitably brought about dramatic changes to the way in which the natural order was viewed. Insistence on the primacy of the literal sense of scripture had the unintended consequence of cutting short a potentially endless chain of reference, in which word refers to object, and object refers to other objects. The literalist mentality of the humanists and reformers thus gave a determinate meaning to the text of scripture, but at the same time denied the possibility of assigning meanings to natural objects. Literalism means that only words refer; the things of nature do not. Thus it was that at the dawn of modernity the study of the natural world came to be liberated from the specifically religious concern of biblical interpretation, and the sphere of nature was opened up to new ordering principles. In essence, fixing the meaning of scripture and grounding it in the literal sense made it possible for new scientific readings of nature to replace the emblematic and symbolic readings typical of the middle ages.⁴

Indications of this momentous shift in the interpretation of words and things are thus evident not only in the writings of biblical exegetes but also in the works of early modern scientists, or as they were then designated, ‘natural philosophers’. Galileo (1564-1642) famously spoke of the ‘book of nature’, but in a quite novel way:

Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it.⁵

In this conception of nature, objects are stripped of any intrinsic properties and become geometrical entities. They are ordered by mathematical relations, not transcendental meanings. This transformation in the way of looking at nature was evident not only in the development of mathematical physics but also in the sphere of natural history. John Ray (1627-1705), the father of modern biological taxonomy, wrote that ‘proper natural history’

³ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 37;

⁴ Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), *passim*.

⁵ Galileo Galilei, *The Assayer*, in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, tr. Stillman Drake (New York: Anchor, 1957), pp. 237f.

excludes ‘hieroglyphics’ and ‘emblems’ or indeed anything which pertains to ‘Divinity’ or ‘ethics’.⁶ The emblematic, symbolic understanding of nature was thus to give way to new systematising principles based not on meaning and value, but on physical structure. The mathematical and taxonomic categories imposed by Galileo and Ray on physical objects and living things can thus be understood as an attempt to reconfigure a natural world which had been evacuated of order and meaning by the collapse of allegorical reading. In sum, it is commonly supposed that when in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries individuals began to look at the world in different way, they could no longer believe what they read in Bible. A more accurate characterization would be that when in the sixteenth century people began to read the Bible in a new way they found themselves forced to jettison tradition conceptions of the world. In short, the emergence of modern science was intimately related to a new literal way of reading the sacred text.

3. Words, Images, and Rites. The evacuation of symbolic meaning from the natural world and the typically modern emphasis on the centrality of the literal word was reinforced by other elements of reformed religion. It was not only natural objects which were denied signifying powers but also those human artifacts which had been designed solely to exercise a symbolic function. Protestant iconoclasm thus represents in a graphic, if unfortunate way the desire to restrict to words those capabilities once shared with alternative modes of representation. Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries religious images painted onto canvas or plaster, constructed from pieces of stained glass or coloured tile, or carved into wood and stone, were sacrificed on the altar of iconoclasm. Historian Eamon Duffy has suggested that for the faithful of this period ‘Reformation was a stripping away of familiar and beloved observances, the destruction of a vast and resonant world of symbols’.⁷

New liturgical practices also played a role in the modern elevation of literal word over symbol. The whole sensory context of Protestant worship—visual, spatial, auditory—was quite radically different to what had come before. In reformed churches, the central focus of worship shifted from the Mass and its symbolic objects to the reading of scripture and its exposition. The doctrine of transubstantiation, upon which much of the significance of the Mass had lain, was condemned as the paradigm case of idolatry in which ordinary

⁶ John Ray and Francis Willughby, *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby* (London, 1678).

⁷ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altar: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 591.

elements were blasphemously worshipped as the very being of God. Criticism of the Catholic Mass extended to the whole range of sacramental acts which had played a central role in the regulation of medieval lives from birth to death. The term *sacramentum* had been used by the Fathers in the broad sense of ‘figure’, ‘allegory’, ‘enigma’—the same categories used to interpret sacred scripture. Augustine’s meaning of *sacramentum* had thus been ‘inseparable from the spiritual interpretation of scripture itself.’⁸ With the denial of the symbolic aspects of the interpretation of scripture, the sacramental emphasis of medieval piety was also reframed. In a number of the more radically reformed liturgies even the Mass was reduced to a memorial meal. The change in the status of this rite was profound. Miri Rubin writes that ‘in the Middle Ages the languages of religion provided a language of social relation and of a cosmic order; it described and explained the interweaving of natural and supernatural with human action, in a paradigm which from about 1100 was one of sacramentality, with the Eucharist at its heart.’⁹ By the end of the sixteenth-century this symbolic world was beginning to unravel, and its once potent vision of the cosmic order, of the deeper meanings of the material realm, of the interpenetration of natural and supernatural, began an irrevocable decline. Its central rite was retained merely as a concession to the ignorant—in the dismissive pronouncement of the Augsburg Confession (1530): ‘For therefore alone we have need of ceremonies, that they may teach the unlearned.’¹⁰ By promoting the culture of the literal word the Protestant Reformation effected a dramatic contraction of the sphere of the sacred, forcibly stripping objects, natural and artificial, of the roles they had once played as bearers of meaning. The ideology of Protestantism and the material practices it propagated played a key role in that profound transition in which, in the words of historian Lawrence Stone, ‘Europe moved decisively from an image culture to a word culture’.¹¹

The origins of the modern world are thus intimately related to revolutions in the sphere of religion: the sacred rite which had lain at the heart of medieval culture was replaced by a sacred text, literal words took the place of symbolic objects, and the enactment of sacramental rituals increasingly took second place to the recital of propositional beliefs. With these changes came the disintegration of that unified interpretive practice which had

⁸ Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 241-59.

⁹ Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 1.

¹⁰ Gerald Bray (ed.), *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1994), p. 625.

¹¹ Stone, ‘Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900’, *Past and Present* 42 (1969), 67-139 (78).

assigned multiple meanings to both natural world and sacred text. Now meaning and intelligibility were ascribed to words and texts alone, and living things and inanimate objects were cast adrift, eventually to submit themselves to new mathematical and taxonomic ordering principles. The natural world, once a transparent realm which linked words and eternal truths, lost its meanings and became opaque to those interpretive practices which had once elucidated it, and it was left to an emerging natural science to reinvest the created order with intelligibility. In this manner one of the hallmarks of modernity—the triumph of the written text and the identification of its single meaning with authorial intention, was to give rise another—that systematic, reductionist understanding of the world embodied in the now prestigious practices of natural science.

4. The Bible, the Natural World, and the Post-Modernity One of the advantages of living in a postmodern world is that it allows for a sober appraisal of those conditions which allowed for the emergence of modernity. Postmodernism has some unfortunate features—irritating abuses of language, obsession with ‘theory’, and a tendency to equate obscurity with profundity. But its advent serves at least to provide us with a useful historical perspective on the assumptions of the age which preceded it. We are now in a position to understand that the notion of the primacy of the literal sense of the biblical text arose quite late in the West, and that the related idea that meaning always lies in the single sense intended by the author is one which emerged out of a particular set of historical circumstances. The long historical view, in other words, enables us to see that what might otherwise have been thought of as the ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ way to approach the biblical text arose out of specific cultural conditions. If these developments originally provided clarity of meaning and made it possible for scripture to exercise an unprecedented doctrinal authority, there were less happy consequences.

The evacuation of meaning from the world of nature opened it up not merely to scientific explanation but to material exploitation. When, on account of new interpretive practices, nature ceased to act as a mirror of transcendental truths and a book of moral lessons, its value was reduced to its material utility. That the book of nature is no longer so much read as exploited is thus an indirect consequence of the changed reading practices of the modern age. The apparent indifference of science to the fortunes of the natural world should come as no great surprise. What is sometimes perceived as the moral neutrality, or more pejoratively, the moral bankruptcy of the sciences, is one of the consequences of the

fact that nature can no longer be read in tandem with scripture, and that the manifold meanings of the creatures have now become obscure. The silence of nature is thus the precondition for its exploitation.

If the natural world has lost its authority as a repository of symbolic theological truths, Scripture has also suffered an irretrievable loss of status on account of the shift to the primacy of the literal sense. Fixing the meaning of Scripture in a way originally designed to bolster its authority has paradoxically produced the opposite effect. There is, after all, a difference between reading the Bible literally and holding the words of the Bible to be literally true. Thus the triumph of the literal approach to scripture opened up for the first time in the history of biblical interpretation the real possibility that parts of the Bible could be false. In order to see the force of this, we need only consider the conditions which led to the implementation of allegorical readings of scripture in the first place. It was Origen's achievement to have put in place a system which virtually guaranteed the truth of every word of scripture. That which was not literally true—and here Origen included the Genesis accounts of creation—was true at some more elevated level. Medieval exegetes also saw as their exegetical task that of reconciling biblical texts with each other and with known truths. Resort to allegory and other non-literal levels of interpretation made this possible. It is not surprising that with the dismantling of the rich multi-layered mechanisms of medieval interpretation the text of scripture was for the first time exposed to the assaults of history and science. While the Protestants' insistence that passages of scripture be given a determinate meaning proceeded from the purest of religious motives, this inadvertently set in train a process which would ultimately result in the undermining of that biblical authority which they so adamantly promoted.

Finally, it is worth observing that the triumph of the literal sense was the beginning of a long process of development which culminated in that objective and scientific approach to the Bible now known as historical criticism. This approach also served the purposes of Protestantism and, more broadly the European Enlightenment, which insisted upon a rational religion that could be justified according to universal canons of reason. An integral part of the Enlightenment project was the attempt to show that the Bible spoke univocally, and that its legitimate literal meaning could be objectively discerned through the application of a systematic hermeneutical procedure. In consequence, the interpretation of the Bible became a science, a process which was legitimated by its

conformity to the principles of historical research. The determination of the literal meaning of the biblical text, a task that had now come to assume a vital importance within the Christian tradition, was thus delegated to those in possession of the relevant disciplinary expertise, being too important to be entrusted to those with a direct interest in it. In short, the modern interpretation of scripture, like the modern interpretation of nature, has ceased to be a religious activity. The current environment of postmodernism provides a welcome opportunity to take stock of the hermeneutical legacies of the past, to consider what is of value and what is not. Perhaps it is now time to reclaim the Bible as a religious document and even to revisit those interpretive strategies of the middle ages, a period during which the Bible spoke in many voices.

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