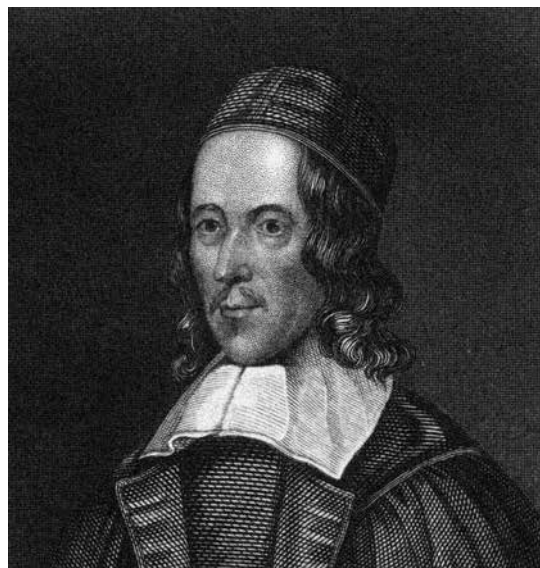


## “Thy Words Do Find Me Out”: George Herbert’s Devotional Reading of the Bible | BY BEVERLY BEEM

A previous version of this article was presented on October 22, 2011 at Walla Walla University for their day-long event, “Celebrating the King James Bible: The 400th Anniversary of the Translation That Changed the World (1611-2011).”

With the publication of the King James Version of the Bible in 1611, the possibility and even expectation that all believers could have access to a Bible, if not own one, and read it in their own language could not help but change the landscape of both literature and religious experience. It opened up a whole new world of literary allusions, forms, and themes that the reader could be expected to recognize and understand. And it opened up the reading of Scripture as a devotional practice available to all believers. Devotional reading of the Bible goes beyond furnishing the mind with information. It leads us to read the stories of the Bible as my story, its words as my words. It is a dialogue with God, an act of prayer, an act of faith, and an act of worship. Its purpose is not information, but transformation.

George Herbert’s collection of poetry, *The Temple*,<sup>1</sup> long recognized as a spiritual classic as well as a literary masterpiece, provides a case study in how devotional reading of the Bible can shape both a literary text and a devotional practice. Herbert, born in 1593, would have seen the King James Version published as the Authorized Version and widely used in corporate worship and private devotions. He was a younger son in a great and influential household, his mother a patron of the arts. His success as a scholar and orator at Cambridge gained him the attention of King James I and led him to serve in Parliament for a time, but, in 1630, when he was in his mid-thirties, he turned his back on public life, took Holy Orders in the Anglican Church, and spent the rest of his life as a country parson. He pastored a small church in Bemerton, near



George Herbert

Salisbury, until his death from consumption three years later. You might try to picture this aristocratic young man pastoring his small flock of farmers and laborers, helping to rebuild the church with his own funds, preaching, visiting his parishioners, walking the river path to Salisbury Cathedral to engage in the music, writing a classic book on pastoring called *The Country Parson*, setting a high standard indeed for the shepherds of God’s flocks—and writing poetry.

Shortly before his death, he entrusted a manuscript of his poems, which he described as “a picture of spiritual conflicts between God and my soul,” to his good friend, Nicholas Ferrar, with instructions to publish it if it might help “any dejected poor soul,” or else destroy it. The manuscript was a collection of 162 poems entitled *The Temple*. One can’t get beyond the title page without recognizing the importance of biblical allusion in this text. The primary meaning of “temple” in the Old Testament is the dwelling place of God, a holy place, a place of cleansing and atonement, but the meaning expands in later use to

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include the body of Christ as the new temple (John 2:19–21), the community of believers with Christ as the cornerstone; the individual believer as the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16–17); and the Christian church as a place of worship where one meets God. All of these meanings are operating in *The Temple*, and while his contemporaries were writing poetry distinguished by their wide-ranging allusions to classical literature and current events and discoveries in science and exploration, Herbert's poetry draws almost exclusively from the KJV of the Bible. His purpose for writing is devotional. His audience is God.<sup>2</sup>

### **The H. Scriptures, I and II**

As readers move through *The Temple*, they will note poems on specific aspects of the Old Testament temple, such as the altar, the sacrifice, the priesthood, and Aaron. Or the imagery will move into the world of the Christian church with poems on the church porch, the entryway, the floor, the lock and key, the windows, and various aspects of the liturgy and the church calendar.

Of all the furnishings in the temple, the Holy Scriptures is key in the transformation of the soul that takes place there. In the paired poems on The Holy Scriptures he describes the Bible as a book of "infinite sweetness" and the reader a bee, sucking every letter for the honey; it is a balm that comforts grief, mollifies pain, and restores health; it is a mirror that mends the defects it reflects; it is a well that cleanses the one who drinks; it is heaven's ambassador defending the soul against the powers of death and hell; it is a forerunner or gift sent by heaven, a token of joys to come; heaven itself lies flat on the page, open to those who approach it on bended knee like a lover approaching his bride, or the soul approaching God.

With the Bible described in images of ultimate worth, power, and beauty, Herbert proceeds to explore how the mind of the reader can embrace this text. How does this book work that makes it different from all other books? Using the metaphor of a "book of star-

res" and the reader an astronomer finding the constellations, he says, "Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine, And the configurations of their glorie!" Each verse shines like a star in the night sky, alone and beautiful, but each star is part of a constellation of other stars that give it an even brighter light or richer meaning.

This verse marks that, and both do make  
a motion

Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie.

"The H. Scriptures II," ll 6-7

Finding the stars of a constellation and seeing them in their new, more complex, context enriches the meaning that each single star can bear. He repeats the concept in a new metaphor of three herbs mixed together creating a new potion, more powerful than each alone. "Such are thy secrets," he says, but do they work? Is the constellation an accurate guide to the heavens? Is the potion a medicine for the soul? The proof is in the speaker's own life. "My life makes good" the text. My life proves the text, a living, speaking, acting commentary on the text. The purpose of the text is to guide the "Christians destinie" and the Christian's life "comments back on thee."

In the clearest description of what devotional reading of the Bible is all about, he says,

for in ev'ry thing

Thy words do finde me out, & parallels  
bring,

And in another make me understood.

"The H. Scriptures II," ll. 9–11

Devotional readers see themselves in the text. This is God's word to them. God's word can find the reader out. And the reader finds healing and redemption. The proof is in the Christian life, as the believer participates in the gospel story. "Parallels bring," says Herbert. In understanding the stories of the Bible, readers understand their own story, and their place in the great story of redemption. In the devotional reading of the

Bible, readers come to understand themselves.

Herbert reflects the Reformation “insistence on the sufficiency and primacy of Scripture” and on the authority of believers to read and interpret Scripture with the help of the Holy Spirit. In the “living language” of the Bible, the reader meets God, as ancient Israel met him in the temple. The result of this encounter is transformation.<sup>3</sup>

In the 162 poems of *The Temple*, Herbert dramatizes this transformation. He creates a speaker, a Christian Everyman, and through him explores “the nature of divine and human intimacy.”<sup>4</sup> The growth of love between God and the soul is essentially a narrative. Much like the psalmist, he laments and loves:

### Bitter-sweet

Ah my deare angrie Lord,  
Since thou dost love, yet strike;  
Cast down, yet help afford;  
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet praise;  
I will bewail, approve:  
And all my sowre-sweet dayes  
I will lament, and love.

Like Jacob, he wrestles with God. Like the Psalmist he complains to God and praises him at the same time, and, like the prophets, he reasons with him and calls for mercy and judgment. Aware both of his sinfulness and of Christ’s sacrifice, he catches fragmentary glimpses of Divine love and says longingly, “What wonders shall we feel, when we shall see Thy full-ey’d love” (“The Glance”).

### Love III

The narrator in *The Temple* sees through a glass darkly but longs for that fuller glimpse that comes in the very last poem, “Love III,” where he comes face to face with “quick-ey’d Love”:

### Love III

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul  
drew back,

Guiltie of dust and sinne,  
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow  
slack

From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lack’d any thing.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did re-  
ply,  
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let  
my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore  
the blame?  
My deare, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste  
my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.

“Love III” is the climax of the dialogue between the soul and God. It dramatizes the relationship of divinity and humanity in the language familiar to readers of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> The setting is a feast, prepared by Divine Love, Herbert’s characteristic name for God, clearly echoing the biblical identification of God as Love (1 John 4:8). The banquet setting grows from multiple connections with the Bible. “He brought me to the banqueting house,” says the Beloved in the Song of Solomon, “And his banner over me was love” (Song of Sol. 2:4). The Communion table, with Love as the Host, an unspoken pun, would have been a ready connection to Herbert’s readers, as well as the banquet parables of Jesus, and the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9). The eschatological setting of Christ welcoming his people to the longest table is supported by the themes of the preceding four poems: “Death,” “Doomsday,” “Judgment,” and “Heaven,” though even now,

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through the Scriptures, the liturgy, and the sacraments, the soul can have intimations of this ultimate face-to-face encounter with Love. We have watched the dialogue, the back-and-forth play, between the speaker and God throughout the 162 poems of *The Temple*. This is the last one. How is it going to end? We watch the drama play out.

“Love bade me welcome.” Love initiates the conversation. And the dramatic situation is set. Love is the host who has spread out the banquet and now welcomes the guest. The narrative really should end right here. The host welcomes; the guest accepts. But, “yet,” the next line begins with an adversative, a contrary motion. Not for the first time, the speaker resists the divine movement on his soul. Here is where the drama begins. For some reason, after 161 poems, “my soul drew back, guiltie of dust and sinne.” A biblical allusion can be as simple as a single word, if that word rings in the memory and imagination, and “dust” is a frequent image in the King James Bible for the fallen human condition: “Shall the dust praise thee?” (Ps. 30:9); “He remembereth that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14); Abraham says in bargaining with God over Sodom, as if to excuse his audacity, “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27). Can humanity sit at Love’s table in his mortal, fallen condition? Well, no. Something must happen, and we see, as the poem unfolds, that it already has.

“Quick-ey’d Love” pursues the reluctant guest. As the soul draws back, Love draws near, “sweetly questioning, / If I lack’d any thing.” “A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here.” He doesn’t ask for much: just a whole new self. The King James Bible renders it as putting on the “new man” (Eph. 4:24) or “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17). “Love said, ‘You shall be he,’” the new man, the new creature you have asked to be.

That should finish the conversation, but the guest comes back with an objection. “I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare, / I cannot look on thee.” He addresses love with the intimacy of

someone who knows God well. He falls into a long line of prophets who respond to God’s call with a heart-felt, “But I can’t. Not me.” Moses argues extensively with God, “O my Lord, I am not eloquent,” but “I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Ex. 4:10). Isaiah cries out “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, . . . for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). The speaker is in good company. And the dilemma is clear. God calls, but how can we look on the face of God. To look on God is death. “Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God” (Ex. 3:6). “Ah my deare, I cannot look on thee.” A lover longing to be loved speaks the language of dust and sin, aware that he dare not look on the face of Love.

But Love is up to the challenge. The face of Love he dare not see is smiling. God is holding his hand. “Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, / Who made the eyes but I?”

“Who hath made man’s mouth?” says God to Moses. “Have not I the Lord?” (Ex. 4:11). I made your eyes, says Love, they can look on me.

The guest comes back with more arguments. “Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them.” Going beyond the arguments of Moses and Isaiah, he now evokes the NT words of the Syro-Phoenician woman in a strange inversion of poetic images. The woman asks Jesus for healing for her daughter. Jesus refuses by saying it is not right to give the children’s bread to the dogs. The woman cannot be turned away and, matching Christ’s wit, she says in the language of the King James Bible, “Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table” (Matt. 15:27). The two stories are in direct opposition to each other. The woman will not be turned away by Christ who refuses to allow her a place at the table. Herbert’s speaker refuses to take his place at the table where Love freely invites him. These two strange stories are united by the words of opposition, “Truth Lord, but.” The woman’s argument earns her the praise of Jesus, who says, “O woman, great is thy faith.” The speaker shows no sign of faith.

Love, who has evoked his authority as the Creator, is rebuffed by the speaker's claim to the fall. Truth, Lord, you made the eyes, but "I have marred them." And then the despairing cry, "Let my shame go where it doth deserve." Where does guilt go when our sins are forgiven? Where does shame go when we are accepted and welcomed? The King James Version speaks of bottomless pits and the depths of the sea, but there is a bigger issue here. Now we are getting to the crux of the argument. We have been circling it, but we can't avoid it any longer.

"And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?" "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" says Jesus to Nicodemus (John 3:10). Do you not know the most fundamental truth of Christianity: Love bore the blame. That is why God bears the name of Love. The guest of God is no longer the dust-covered sinner. He is a new creature. Because Love bore the blame, he is the guest, worthy to be here.

The guest has no argument against the mind-boggling reality of the cross. But he is not giving in yet. He will draw out his own trump card: "My deare, then I will serve." As the Father rushes the prodigal son to the banquet table, the son protests "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15:18-19). The Father doesn't let him finish his speech. He isn't arguing the case. He is too busy calling the neighbors to the feast.

Love is through arguing, as well. Love's case is ultimately not based on reason. It is based on Love. Love's feast is not to be debated, or even understood. It is to be eaten. "O taste and see that the Lord is good," says the Psalmist (Ps. 34:8). "You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat." Love speaks the invitation in words resonant with Isaiah's call to Israel, "Shake thyself from the dust; arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem" (Isa. 52:2).<sup>6</sup> Jesus depicts the heavenly feast God prepares for his servants, when "he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them"

(Luke 12:37).<sup>7</sup> For the first time, the guest has no words. There is nothing more to be said. Love has the last word. In a grand understatement, typical of Herbert, the soul silently assents, "So, I did sit and eat."

This dialogue between God and the soul takes its imagery and themes from the Bible. Allusions, which tickle the memory and bring up a whiff of another story, another passage, bring us to a deeper understanding of the text. We can see how deeply present the language of the King James Version of the Bible was in the minds of the poet and his readers and how powerfully it can be used in a devotional reading where the words of Scripture are spoken as our words, where the stories of the Bible are retold as our story, my story. And in Herbert's new parable with old images, we, too, sit and eat. ■



**Beverly Beem** came to Walla Walla University in 1976 and declared it home. After graduating from Union College she received a MA from Andrews University and a PhD in Renaissance Literature from the University of Nebraska—Lincoln.

## Footnotes:

1. F. E. Hutchinson, ed., *The Works of George Herbert* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941). This is the definitive edition of Herbert's works, though many others are available. All quotations from Herbert are from this edition.

2. Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 116–127.

3. William G. Witt, "George Herbert's Approach to God: The Faith and Spirituality of a Country Priest," *Theology Today* 60, no. 2 (July 2003): accessed October 2, 2011, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/004057360306000206>.

4. Ibid.

5. Bloch, *Spelling the Word*, 98–112.

6. Chana Bloch, "George Herbert and the Bible: A Reading of 'Love (III),' " *English Literary Renaissance* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 336.

7. Ibid.

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