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When Good News Is Bad News: The Misuse of Scripture as Seen in English and American Literature

PATRICIA MAGNESS

The high view of scripture presented by the Pastoral Epistles is perhaps most evident in the often memorized and recited verse of II Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

The phrases introducing this verse are equally affirming of scripture, calling them "the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15; NRSV). Scripture is presented as good news, inspired good news, useful good news, writings that lead to salvation and righteousness. All too often, however, scripture has been used as bad news, as a means to inflict guilt and assert personal power. All too often scripture has been used to manipulate, dominate, intimidate, and subjugate.

It is as if the 23rd Psalm had been revised so that instead of saying, "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me," it said, "Thy rod and thy staff they beat me." Instead of the words of scripture being used to free people from the heavy burdens of life and release them into lives of fruitful ministry, all too often scripture has itself become the burden breaking the backs of people and hindering them from ministry. The stepping stones have been turned into stumbling blocks, and the songs of liberation have been transformed into cries of captivity. The problem is not simply the accuracy of the quotation or even the validity of the interpretation; the problem is the wrongful use of scripture to crush and destroy people rather than restore them to fellowship with God and a full sense of their own humanity.

This sort of misuse of scripture is particularly evident to the student of English and American literature. Although one might hope that literary allusions to scripture would demonstrate the usefulness of scripture for a life of righteousness, it is more likely that these allusions will be used in ways that are demeaning, dominating and manipulative. A frequent pattern is for a person in power to use scripture to reinforce and increase that power; in other words, scripture becomes a means of domination instead of liberation. It is bad news instead of good news.

CHAUCE

A foundational work for students of English literature is *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. It is a lengthy poem, incorporating numerous tales into the framework of a pilgrimage. Knowledge of the Bible, including the Apocrypha, and of the writings of the church fathers is assumed for the pilgrims and the reader alike. All the pilgrims seem also to be well acquainted with classical mythology and history. Chaucer's own knowledge of scripture is evident in the fact that his works quote "freely and frequently from every book of the Bible and the Apocrypha."¹ The assumption underlying *The Canterbury Tales* is that these pilgrims are typical of the people of their time and that these people hold certain shared assumptions about scripture. One shared assumption, never stated, but clearly implied, is the authority of scripture and tradition. In some cases, these shared assumptions might strike the modern reader as humorous, for example, regarding Adam and Eve's primary sin as gluttony because they ate an apple.

One of the most memorable pilgrims described by Chaucer is the Wife of Bath. The section in which she tells her own life story and explains her opinions on marriage is as long as the General Prologue to the whole work. A remarkable feature of this section is the number of times she quotes scripture; she quotes from Genesis, Judges, I Kings, Job, Matthew, Mark, John, Corinthians, Ephesians, and I and II Timothy.² The themes that connect all these quotations are women and marriage. This exuberant lady dressed in red quotes the Bible, the church fathers, and other ancient authorities to defend herself against the common opinion of the time that she has been married too many times, to deal with the dominant belief of the time that celibacy was preferable to marriage, and to defend her right to speak at all in the face of a widespread tradition of misogyny.

The Wife of Bath delights in quoting scripture, from the verse in Genesis “be fruitful and multiply” to the Pauline instruction “better to marry than to burn.” Most readers of Chaucer would agree that she is selecting and manipulating scripture to justify her own conduct. And I think that most students of scripture would regard such selection and manipulation of the texts as a misuse of scripture, using scripture to justify one’s prior choices rather than learning from it and applying it to life. However, behind her personal misuse of scripture is another even more serious problem—the use of scripture by authority figures to oppress less powerful people. The Wife of Bath is carrying on one side of an argument, and her traveling companions know the other side well.

Part of the humor that Chaucer is setting up is that a mere woman would take on the powerful voices of the church fathers and theologians such as Jerome and Tertullian who were widely regarded as authoritative. As a student of literature, I recognize the humor of the situation, but as a student of scripture I am disturbed to find centuries of scriptural interpretations that regard women as particularly evil, and as more evil than men. Chaucer incorporates much of this misogynist tradition into the words of the Wife of Bath by having her quote extensively from a book owned by her fifth husband, a student who reads to her every night from a manuscript of collected sayings about the wickedness of women. He begins with the wickedness of Eve and proceeds to the wickedness of Delilah, continues with stories from Greek and Roman legends, then pauses to quote from the Bible and Apocrypha. The Bible was not the only or even the main source for the volume of words directed against women, but the words of the Bible were included in the argument; thus in the minds of both men and women, it came to be commonly accepted that the Bible itself taught that women were more inclined to evil than men. It was accepted as biblical teaching that women were less reasonable and more susceptible to temptation.

The Wife of Bath listened to her husband read from his book that Eve’s wickedness was responsible for all the wretchedness of mankind, the cause for Christ’s suffering, and the reason that all mankind was lost.³ All human beings were lost through the wickedness of women. Even the boisterous, exuberant, confident Wife of Bath is eventually worn down by the repeated criticism, commenting, “Who could imagine, who could figure out the torture in my heart?”⁴ The Wife of Bath, with her special talent for manipulating texts, was only rarely slowed down by such teachings. The pilgrims who listen to her are, quite rightly, astonished by her manipulations of texts to justify her own behavior, and modern-day readers—if I may judge by my own students—are variously amused, amazed, and outraged.

But the real problem exposed in her life story is the generally accepted attitude of that time that scripture regarded women as inherently inferior to men. And students of English literature who have little personal knowledge of scripture have been influenced to regard the Bible as a primary source of attitudes that are degrading to women. Whether these students accept or oppose the denigration of women, they see scripture as the source of negative attitudes toward women. And while the Wife of Bath vigorously opposed these attitudes, many less bold women have been smothered by such overwhelming tirades against women, especially when the argument seemed to come from the ultimate authoritative text, the Bible.

As a teacher of literature who is committed to the authority of scripture, I wish I could celebrate *The Canterbury Tales*, which quotes so freely from scripture and regards it as an authority for faith and practice. Not only was it popular in its own time, it also is read in high school and college English classes wherever English is taught. But it incorporates the use of scripture as a means of reinforcing the rights and privileges of those in power while demeaning those with less power. The very popularity of the character and tale of the outrageous, hilarious, delightful, provoking Wife of Bath means that the Bible continues to be tied to a misogynistic view of women partly as it exerts a subtle influence on those who are students of scripture and especially in the minds of those students who have very little knowledge of scripture in any other context.

CHARLOTTE BRONTE

In the 14th century, English literature was dominated by poetry. By the 19th century, the novel was beginning to make its mark. Still fighting for respectability as a literary form, the novel had definitely achieved the status of popularity with readers. One of these very popular works was *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847 under the pseudonym of Currer Bell. The author, Charlotte Bronte, used a pseudonym for a number of reasons, one of which was that she thought the novel would be received with more seriousness if readers believed the author was a man.

Charlotte Bronte was the daughter of a clergyman, and she was raised to be very knowledgeable about the Bible and church teachings. Thus, it is not surprising that *Jane Eyre* has many references to scripture and to Christian teaching. Many of these references do show the use of scripture in helpful and life-giving ways; for example, when Jane is faced with the decision of being a wealthy, pampered mistress to a married man or being left without house, family, or income, she debates in her mind using Christian principles. Jane leaves her beloved Rochester, quoting to herself in the moment of decision Psalm 22: "Be not far from me, for trouble is near: there is none to help."⁵ In a conversation with Helen, her dearest friend at school, Jane is counseled to love her enemies; although she believes herself incapable of such love, she is full of admiration for Helen who lives by the principles of the Sermon on the Mount.⁶

In contrast to these applications of scripture, the novel also displays the misuse of scripture: the use of scripture to condemn the powerless and manipulate the humble. One of the most heart-breaking sections of the novel is set at Lowood Institution, a residential charity school for young women. Presiding over the school is the formidable Mr. Brocklehurst, whom Jane had initially met in the home of her cold-hearted aunt. At their first meeting, Mr. Brocklehurst quizzes the 10-year-old Jane on her spiritual condition:

"Do you say your prayers night and morning?" continued my interrogator.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you read your bible?"

"Sometimes."

"With pleasure? Are you fond of it?"

"I like Revelations [sic] and the book of Daniel, and Genesis and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job and Jonah."

"And the Psalms? I hope you like them."

"No, sir." [...] "Psalms are not interesting," I remarked.

"That proves you have a wicked heart; and you must pray to God to change it: to give you a new and clean one: to take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."⁷

Although Jane tries to be a good girl and is a fairly timid 10-year-old child, Mr. Brocklehurst consigns her to hell three times in their very first conversation. As a representative of the authority of the Bible, he offers no compassion or encouragement, only condemnation and fear.

Mr. Brocklehurst also misuses scripture in his administration of the charity school. His method of managing the charity school invalidates the very word "charity." He speaks with pride of teaching the girls

humility, and he boasts of his educational program, which is designed to “mortify in [the girls] the worldly sentiment of pride.”⁸ One might excuse his insistence on extremely plain clothing and simple food, but he is so strict that the girls are often cold and hungry. On one occasion, Mr. Brocklehurst scolds the school superintendent for serving a lunch of bread and cheese because she knows that lunch is not permitted. When she explains that she allowed a lunch because the breakfast porridge had been burned and inedible, he is not persuaded. Rather he responds warmly:

A brief address on those occasions would not be mistimed, wherein a judicious instructor would take the opportunity of referring to the sufferings of the primitive Christians; to the torments of martyrs; to the exhortations of our blessed Lord himself, calling upon his disciples to take up their cross and follow him; to his warnings that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God; to his divine consolation, “if ye suffer hunger or thirst for my sake, happy are ye.” Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge into these children’s mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!⁹

Mr. Brocklehurst uses scripture as an excuse to keep young girls hungry while he himself is comfortable and well-fed. He quotes the call of Christ accurately but misuses it to oppress children.

In another scene, Mr. Brocklehurst insists that the superintendent cut off the girls’ hair, defending his decision with several Biblical allusions, including an allusion to I Tim 2:9:

I have a Master to serve whose kingdom is not of this world: my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel; and each of the young persons before us has a string of hair twisted in plaits which vanity itself might have woven: these, I repeat, must be cut off.¹⁰

The hypocrisy of Mr. Brocklehurst is made completely clear when at that moment his wife and daughters enter the room, “splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs” with hair “elaborately curled.”¹¹ Mr. Brocklehurst, a wealthy man who controls the Lowood Institution and the lives of many girls and women, uses scripture to demean them while increasing his power over their lives. He controls their food, their clothing, and even their hair. He may quote correctly, but misuses scripture for his own gain and to their harm.

Lest readers comfort themselves with the knowledge that “this is just a novel,” I need to add that Bronte based this section of the novel on her own experience at a charity school for the daughters of poor clergymen. Although Bronte does not claim to be using exact words and incidents, she never forgot the soul-crushing experience of being at that school in which conditions were so bad that two of the four Bronte sisters died. Charlotte herself never fully recovered from the physical deprivations experienced there.

The third section of *Jane Eyre* is set primarily at Moor-House, the home of St. John Rivers and his adult siblings. Jane relishes the experience of being part of a loving family and participates eagerly in their studies and their conversations. In her joy in the role of a sister, she is entirely unprepared for the proposal of St. John who asks her to marry him in order to go with him as a missionary to India. He makes it clear that he has no special love for her and that he expects her to have no special love for him, proposing marriage with these words: “Jane, come with me to India: come as my help-meet and fellow-labourer.” When she objects, he continues:

God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary’s wife you must—shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service.¹²

At her every resistance, he counters with scripture to convince her that she must obey him. She expresses her lack of ability, and he counters by affirming her humility, describing his own humility and referring to I Timothy, "Like Paul I acknowledge myself the chiefest of sinners."¹³ When she says she will go with him as a sister but not a wife, he claims that statement as consent and says "you have already as good as put your hand to the plough: you are too consistent to withdraw it."¹⁴ After her continued objections to marriage, he presses her with this warning, "It is not me you deny, but God."¹⁵ That evening for their devotions, St. John selects this passage from Revelation:

He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.
But the fearful, [and] the unbelieving, ... shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."¹⁶

Like the Wife of Bath, he selects scripture to fit his own desires, justifying his own choices. Rivers, however, goes beyond the Wife of Bath in two ways: he is in the powerful role of spiritual leader, and he uses scripture to condemn those who refuse his selfish wishes. He confuses and fuses his own desires with the commands of scripture in an attempt to increase his authority and manipulate his listener. St. John Rivers may be quoting accurately, but he is misusing scripture.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Writing in the same decade as Charlotte Bronte but in a different genre, Frederick Douglass also made extensive use of scripture in his narrative. An escaped slave, Douglass became a noted abolitionist speaker, and his autobiography was widely read as the nation debated the issue of slavery. It was a very popular work, selling "5000 copies in the first four months of publication."¹⁷ Frederick Douglass, like Geoffrey Chaucer and Charlotte Bronte, had extensive knowledge of scripture and could with ease weave biblical phrases, allusions, and imagery into his work.

He had also listened throughout his childhood and youth to slave owners use scripture to condemn the conduct of their slaves, and his writing echoes this cruel use of scripture. Chapter IX of the narrative focuses on Master Thomas Auld, whom he describes as a mean, cruel, and cowardly man. Douglass here uses the word "mean" in a precise sense, as in stingy, small-minded and base. Douglass recalls the occasion when Thomas Auld attended a camp meeting and "experienced religion."¹⁸ At this point, Douglass "indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane."¹⁹ In fact, Thomas Auld became worse because "after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty."²⁰ One incident in particular Douglass describes in some detail:

I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes."²¹

It is no wonder that Douglass concludes that

the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection.²²

He is certain that "religious slaveholders are the worst."²³

Nineteenth-century slave owners, relying on their interpretation of scripture, used the curse of Ham to justify enslaving Africans. Douglass is well aware of this common use of scripture, but interestingly enough he does not directly attack this interpretation of Gen 9:25. Rather he describes the numerous children of white slave owners and African slave women, observing that

if their increase will do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.²⁴

Douglass was so offended by the use of scripture to defend slavery and violence and so eager to have his position on scripture clearly understood that he actually added an appendix to the narrative of his life in order to explain his position precisely. Douglass insists on the great difference between “the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ.” Specifically, Douglass states:

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.²⁵

Douglass was outraged by slavery, but he was equally outraged that scripture should be used in defense of such an inherently evil institution.

HARRIET JACOBS

Douglass was not the only writer to deplore the use of scripture in defense of slavery. Harriet Jacobs, whose life narrative was published in 1861 under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, also noted the frequent use of scripture by slave owners. Her first knowledge of scripture came from her loving mistress who cared for her tenderly, taught her to read, and generally made her childhood a pleasure. But when Harriet was 12 years old, her mistress died and, instead of leaving her free, she willed her to a 5-year-old niece.

Harriet was devastated and shocked, thinking:

My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s Word: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.” But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor.²⁶

In this case, what Harriet Jacobs experiences is not the twisting of scripture against her, but the ignoring of a clear scriptural teaching because of moral blindness, an inability to see the connection between the verses the mistress was teaching this bright child and the bright child herself.

One important issue raised by Jacobs is the question of what texts will be quoted. Recognizing the complexity of the scriptures, Jacobs realizes that the selection of a text makes a great difference. Although the slaves were not often permitted to attend church, Jacobs recalls the occasion they were invited to hear the preaching of the Rev. Mr. Pike. His text for the day was, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”²⁷

His interpretation of this text made it particularly terrifying and accusatory, beginning like this: “Hearken ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil.” He continues, “Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you.” The Reverend Mr. Pike concludes, “If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master.”²⁸

Pike uses scripture to maintain and extend power for the slave owners while attempting to intimidate the slaves. He quotes accurately, but he misuses scripture by using it to increase the power of the powerful and to subjugate the powerless. Interestingly enough, according to Jacobs, his intimidation does not work. After the benediction, the slaves go home and hold their own service, "shouting and singing," totally rejecting the message of Mr. Pike. These slaves recognize that, as Jacobs puts it, "There is a great difference between Christianity and religion at the south."²⁹

Jacobs experiences the complete twisting of scripture when her master, Dr. Flint, becomes a Christian and insists that to be an obedient Christian slave she must submit to his sexual desires. Dr. Flint says to her, "if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife." When Harriet Jacobs objects that the "Bible didn't say so," he explodes,

How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible? ... What right have you, who are my Negro, to talk to me about what you would like and what you wouldn't like? I am your master, and you shall obey me.³⁰

There is power in selecting a text and power in interpreting texts, and Jacobs herself chooses quite a different text of scripture from those used by Pike and Flint. After her escape from slavery, she continues to be endangered by the Fugitive Slave Law, and one Sunday while listening to church bells, she asks herself:

Will the preachers take for their text, "proclaim liberty to the captive, and the opening of prison doors to them that are bound"? or will they preach from the text, "Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you"?³¹

She knows, of course, that they will select neither text, or if they should choose these texts that they will be as deaf to them as her own mistress who taught her about the love of God but didn't set her free.

CONCLUSION

These accumulated literary allusions to the use of scripture to make life worse for people who are already marginalized by the power structures in society is instructive on many levels. It can be generally helpful to students of scripture to recognize how scripture is used in the wider culture, to see how widely read and influential authors such as Chaucer, Bronte, Douglass, and Jacobs have used scripture. In all these cases, the writers regard scripture as authoritative, and in all these cases there is evidence that scripture is regarded as life-giving.

Yet even in that context of respect and appreciation for scripture, the authors present numerous examples of scripture being used by people in power—whether slave owners, directors of charity schools, religious authorities, or husbands—to extend their personal power and further subjugate and humiliate the people under their control. The consistency of this pattern leads to a further conclusion: the good news of scripture becomes bad news whenever it is used by the strong to control the weak.

And because the temptation to use scripture in one's own justification seems almost irresistible, people in authority—which probably includes most of us in one way or another—need to be very careful in their use of scripture. While I Tim 3:16 includes the words "reproof" and "correction" in the list of things for which scripture is useful, it is important to note that the result of such reproof and correction is not supposed to be increased power for the speaker or condemnation or control for the listener but rather so that "everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (3:17).

These examples from Chaucer, Bronte, Douglass, and Jacobs suggest that the reproof and correction need to come from the powerless to the powerful rather than the reverse. The seductiveness of power itself may make it almost impossible for those in power to use scripture to correct those under their power without becoming implicated in the abuse of power and the misuse of scripture. At the very least, any person in

authority should use scripture with care, never to gain personal power, and always with the clear understanding that fundamentally the gospel is good news.

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END NOTES

- 1 Nevill Coghill, "Introduction," *The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Penguin, 1977), xiii.
- 2 For annotations of these allusions see J. B. Trapp, Douglas Gray, Julia Boffey, eds., *Medieval English Literature: The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 195-216.
- 3 Chaucer, translation by Coghill, 277.
- 4 Ibid., 279.
- 5 Ps 22:11, quotation from Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- 6 Ibid., 58-59.
- 7 Ibid., 33.
- 8 Ibid., 34.
- 9 Ibid., 63.
- 10 Ibid., 65.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 407.
- 13 Ibid., 407.
- 14 Ibid., 410.
- 15 Ibid., 414.
- 16 Rev. 21:7-8; Bronte, 422.
- 17 Frederick Douglass, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: New York American Library, 1987), xi.
- 18 Ibid., 287.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 288.
- 22 Ibid., 301.
- 23 Ibid., 302.
- 24 Ibid., 257.
- 25 Ibid., 326.
- 26 Harriet Jacobs, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1987), 344.
- 27 Ibid., 397.
- 28 Ibid., 398.
- 29 Ibid., 403.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid., 510.

