

THE ROLE OF THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE UPON EVANGELICAL ANGLICAN READING AND  
INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

By

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## **Abstract: The Role of the Doctrine of Scripture upon Evangelical Anglican Reading and Interpretation of the Bible**

This thesis explores the relationship between the espoused doctrine of Scripture and the practice of biblical interpretation in an Evangelical context, focusing particularly on British Anglicanism, albeit with wider application and implications. The project investigates the extent to which the beliefs that Evangelical readers hold about the Bible influence their interpretative practices and conclusions.

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of relevant empirical research on the dynamics of evangelical Bible-reading to identify the 'research gap' that this thesis seeks to address in focusing on the doctrinal underpinnings of interpretation. Chapter 2 then offers a theoretical foundation for the research, providing background to the development of biblical beliefs within Evangelicalism and Anglicanism respectively, and together. This leads to the identification of beliefs about the Bible and interpretative practices that evangelicals might reasonably be expected to demonstrate, by drawing upon the writings of key popular evangelical Anglicans, concluding that this group believe that the Bible is authoritative, inspired, sufficient, clear, consistent and historical. I then connect these beliefs to their hermeneutical counterparts and show how British Evangelicals are taught to read with doctrinal commitments in mind, to adopt the historical-grammatical approach, and to read canonically, for application and with and through the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 3 turns to introduce the fieldwork, which comprised six UK-based focus groups reading and discussing three biblical texts. Three of these groups consisted of participants who had undertaken at least a year of formal theological education; the other three had no such training. The methodology of the research is provided and the focus group participants introduced. Chapter 4 then continues with a focus upon the texts which were selected for participants to read. The rationale for their inclusion is described, followed by an overview of relevant scholarship and descriptions of each focus group's discussion.

Chapter 5 then focuses on the influence of the doctrine of Scripture. This is assessed according to participants' responses to the text challenges, the explicit comments that participants make about the nature of the Bible and the hermeneutical practices they employ. These insights into the influence of a person's beliefs about Scripture upon reading are then placed in the context of other interpretative influences in chapter 6, that became evident from participants' discussion. These included their doctrine of God, the text's genre and the reader's unique context. The thesis thus explores how these influences impact approaches to the text, but also views on the doctrine of Scripture itself.

Chapter 7 reflects on the emerging view of the doctrine of Scripture's role in interpretation in relation to the transformation of text, by putting participants' view of Scripture in conversation with hermeneutical theory that posits the text is able to affect the reader. Finally, chapter 8 compares the responses of theologically-educated and non-educated participants on the dynamics of approaching the text, illustrating how theological education produces more diversity in thought and stronger views on both the liberal and conservative ends of the evangelical spectrum and increases the likelihood of certain hermeneutical practices.

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# CHAPTER ONE: SITUATING THE RESEARCH

## 1: 1. Nature of the Research

This research explores the role of the doctrine of Scripture in Evangelical Anglican interpretation of the Bible. The research consists of six focus groups of Evangelical Anglicans reading and discussing three biblical texts. Half the groups were theologically educated, and half were not, to explore whether theological education made any difference to the dynamics of interpretation and beliefs about the Bible.

This chapter explains my interest in the research topic, the field in which sits and an overview of recent pertinent research to establish the distinctive contribution my research will make.

### 1: 1.1. Research Interest

Having grown up as a Christian in and around Evangelical Anglican churches and culture, my initial interest in Theology stemmed from my personal faith commitment.

Upon learning biblical criticism and systematic theology as part of my undergraduate Theology degree, I became fascinated with the Bible, particularly the doctrine of Scripture. At first, I was interested in the origins of the doctrine of Scripture – where did these beliefs come from and how do people come to accept them for themselves? My undergraduate and master's theses reflected this concern, exploring the Bible's self-validation and apologetic approaches to the doctrine of Scripture, respectively.

This then developed into an interest in the function of the doctrine of Scripture. In particular, my experiences as part of bible study groups and church small groups ignited the suspicion that the

doctrine of Scripture is only one of potentially several factors that determine interpretive practices and conclusions. Those I read the Bible with often seemed motivated to interpret in a way that would secure outcomes that were in keeping with their pre-existing theologies, ideologies and lifestyles. The doctrine of Scripture certainly played a role in interpretation, but it didn't seem to prescribe particular interpretive methods or hermeneutical activity.

These dynamics I witnessed also seemed to be reflected on a broader scale in the debates within the Christian public sphere regarding ethics, such as gay marriage. These divisive issues highlighted to me that belief in certain attributes of the Bible did not guarantee the same interpretive results. Evangelical Christians agree the Bible is the Word of God, but do not agree on what it means. This led me to an interest in the relationship between the doctrine of Scripture and interpretive practices.

Christians often profess an *explicit* doctrine of Scripture using terms such as 'authoritative', 'inerrant', 'inspired', 'God's Word', 'sufficient' and so on, yet frequently seem to hold to a somewhat different *implicit* doctrine of Scripture that gives meaning and nuance to such assertions through the hermeneutical practices employed in their individual context. One of the key findings of the Anglican 'Bible in the Life of the Church' research project supports this insight:

A major finding of these investigations is that how Anglicans engage with the Bible turns out to be just as important as its content. This perhaps unnerving claim does not contest the unique place and authority which the Scriptures have in Anglican life, but it does point to the significance,

perhaps thus far overlooked, of the contexts in which and processes by which they are heard and read.<sup>1</sup>

Christians are, in principle, holding to the same general beliefs about the Bible but the outcomes of these beliefs are related to the processes and contexts of interpretation. To what extent does the doctrine of Scripture prescribe interpretive practice in theory, and how does this match with what happens in practice? How do different contexts affect this dynamic?

I sought to answer these questions by exploring the reality of Evangelical Anglican belief, turning my informal observations into a research project that would give me the data to investigate these dynamics.

The cause of my interest in the questions above determined the empirical course of the research. My questions arose primarily from informal observation, and I wanted to formalise this process and explore how Bible interpretation happens in reality. This suggested that the best format for my research would be a version of what I had witnessed – groups of people discussing the Bible together, i.e., a focus group. A more detailed rationale for this approach can be found in 3:3.

That the research would contain a comparative component was born from appreciation of the importance of context to the interpretive process. The relationship between dogmatic statements about Scripture and the interpretative strategies employed by readers appears to be complicated by culturally and contextually embedded practices existing across a span of more and less formal theological reflection. I wanted to contrast two ‘levels’ of such theological reflection and thus include two demographics within my research: theologically educated Evangelical Anglicans and non-theologically educated Evangelical Anglicans. If the two categories of participants

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<sup>1</sup> Clare Amos, ed. *The Bible in the Life of the Church* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2013).

demonstrated significant differences in their doctrine of Scripture and/or interpretation, then it would provide further context as to the dynamics at play.

## 1: 2. Research Field

My research stands at the intersection of a number of fields and therefore has a broad disciplinary base. My focus on the doctrine of Scripture draws upon the field of systematic theology, but as this is being examined in relation to interpretation, the research is more at home in the field of hermeneutics. Moreover, the empirical nature of my research situates it alongside studies with methodologies drawn from the social sciences, which has overlaps with the field of practical theology. Additionally, the particular demographic of my research situates it within the field of Evangelical and Anglican studies.

The doctrine of Scripture within Evangelical Anglicanism is covered in the next chapter, but in the form of a historical and contemporary overview of Evangelical Anglican attitudes towards Scripture, rather than an account of recent systematic scholarship on the doctrine of Scripture.

This is because my research focuses upon what people actually believe in practice about the Bible, rather than what recent theological scholarship claims about the nature of the Bible. The focus is therefore on contemporary and popular-level ideas about the doctrine of Scripture within Evangelical Anglicanism and the following chapter sets these out as a baseline against which to assess the interpretive activity and doctrinal beliefs of my research participants.

Before this doctrinal and denominational overview however, the overview below seeks to locate my research amongst recent studies that encompass a key cross-section of the above fields: existing empirical research related to biblical interpretation. Before introducing some specific



relevant studies, I will outline a brief context as to the rise of this empirical research about the Bible, touching upon the field's roots in relation to hermeneutics and practical theology. I will then describe recent empirical research related to Bible reading and summarise what these studies have collectively established germane for my purposes. Against these insights I will identify how my research will build upon what has already been discovered and what unique contribution it offers to the field.

### 1: 2.1. Background to Empirical Bible Reading

In the last 20 years, as I will demonstrate, there have been increasing efforts to understand the bible reading of 'ordinary readers', the everyday reading and interpretation that Christians do as they look to Scripture for guidance in matters of faith and life. Such studies have been conducted utilising the methods of the social-sciences to gather 'data' that reflects the reading habits and practices of Bible-readers 'on the ground.'

### 1: 2.2. Hermeneutics: The Turn to the Reader

This growing field is largely the result of changes in hermeneutical theory that began to occur during the mid-twentieth century. Amongst literary critics, focus began to shift from the author to the reader. This 'turn' to the reader, or the 'reader-response' movement recognised the role of the reader in creating a text's meaning. Rather than find the meaning of a text in the author's intentions, it was recognised that readers have a significant role to play in this process. A key figure in the rise of reader-response criticism is Louise Rosenblatt, who put forward a transactional

theory between text and reader.<sup>2</sup> She posited each reading event as a unique transaction between the reader and the text, arguing that this was where meaning was to be found. Additionally, Stanley Fish theorised that it is interpretive communities that define reading practices and interpretation.<sup>3</sup> As such, for Fish, interpretation is never wholly subjective because one's subjectivity is formed within the context of one or more communities.

This literary movement was underpinned by developments in philosophical hermeneutics, where the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer arguably dominates. One of Gadamer's key contributions is the recognition that one's 'pre-understanding', or prejudice, that they bring to all acts of interpretation, is not something to be overcome but the grounds upon which any understanding is possible.<sup>4</sup> Gadamer proposed that interpretation involves a 'fusion of horizons' between the text's horizon and the reader's horizon, which is their respective 'pre-understanding' according to their historical situatedness.

Within contemporary theology, Anthony Thiselton has engaged in widespread inter-disciplinary dialogue between the composite fields of hermeneutics and placed these insights in relation to the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Thiselton is not alone in this task of utilising hermeneutics for the benefit of biblical interpretation. Many theologians and biblical scholars have sought to engage hermeneutical theory in relation to the Bible.<sup>6</sup> However, the majority of such literature that integrates hermeneutics with the Bible is based on theory. Somewhat ironically, the hermeneutical focus

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<sup>2</sup> Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: the collected writings and new essays of Anthony Thiselton* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> For example: Walter Bruggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); David Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

upon the reader does not actually include real readers, but rather a hypothetical or idealised reader. Hermeneutical biblical scholarship has not typically engaged theory with practice by observing how interpretation actually happens.

### 1: 2.3. Liberation Theology and Contextual Reading: Ordinary Readers

Where the reality of the 'ordinary' reader first began to be recognised was in the Liberation Theology movement of South America. It was here that liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutirérrez recognised the importance of reading the Bible from the experience of the marginalised and oppressed. Those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy had an invaluable perspective from which to interpret the Bible. Interest and value in what the 'ordinary' reader has to offer began here and grew, leading to the Contextual Bible Study (CBS) of Gerald West in South Africa. CBS seeks dialogue between the biblical text and the reader's context, as in liberation theology, but is unique in seeking a dialogue between the ordinary reader and the scholarly reader, particularly recognising the value and validity of the former.<sup>7</sup> This dialogue has paved the way for biblical research which prioritises the 'social location' of the reader, recognising that acknowledgement of particular facets of one's social location (such as personality,<sup>8</sup> gender,<sup>9</sup> place<sup>10</sup>) informs how one reads and understands the biblical text.

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald West, 'Locating "Contextual Bible Study" within Biblical Liberation Hermeneutics and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics,' *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1-10, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2641>.

<sup>8</sup> For example: Andrew Village, 'Biblical Conservatism and Psychological Type,' *Journal of Empirical Theology* 29, no. 2 (2016): 137-159, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341340>

<sup>9</sup> For example: Silvia Arzt, 'Reading *the Bible* is a Gendered Act,' *Feminist Theology* 29, vol. 10 (2002): 32-39.

<sup>10</sup> For example: Louise Lawrence, *The Word in Place: reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts* (London: SPCK, 2009).

This hermeneutical turn to the reader, both theoretical and practical, in combination with methodological approaches from the social sciences, has led to the growing field of empirical research which attempts to understand what readers actually 'do' when they attempt to interpret the Bible. This type of research is fundamentally different to CBS as it is *research* with a goal of gathering data and capturing behaviour and belief, rather than collaborating in constructive engagement with the Bible. By utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods, this body of empirical research upholds the value that CBS places on the ordinary reader and seeks to observe what these readers do with the text.

#### 1: 2.4. Practical Theology: Lived Practices

Reflecting on the lived practices of Christians is a key component of practical theology. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat define practical theology as 'critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the word, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.'<sup>11</sup> In pragmatic terms, Richard Osmer defines the four tasks of practical theology as the descriptive-empirical task which asks, 'what is going on?'; the interpretive task which asks, 'why is this going on?'; the normative task which asks, 'what ought to be going on?' and the pragmatic task which asks, 'how might we respond?'.<sup>12</sup> Whilst my research has clear and significant overlaps with the field of practical theology, my engagement with the final two tasks, normative and pragmatic, is limited. I seek to understand the dynamics of what is 'going on' in relation to the influence of the doctrine of Scripture upon interpretation, but I will be understanding these dynamics against

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<sup>11</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2008), 4.

postulated theories of what is normative, rather than seeking to determine what should be normative and what steps are needed to achieve this.

#### 1: 2.5. Empirical Hermeneutics

My research is therefore situated amongst what might be termed 'empirical hermeneutics', a field that is indebted to liberation theology, contextual bible study and the social sciences. It begins with raw data of what readers actually do when they read the Bible and then reflects on these practices in light of theological and hermeneutical theory relating to the doctrine of Scripture and interpretation.

What follows is an account of similar 'empirical hermeneutical' research that has recently been undertaken. More studies could have been included, particularly from different global contexts, but the research selected here has been chosen because it shares significant contextual elements with my own research. The seven research projects summarised below are grouped according to the specific insights they afford for my own research.

### 1: 3. Empirical Research on Evangelical Biblical Interpretation

The following four research projects all engaged with specifically Evangelical demographics. My overview highlights the insights that are of most relevance for my own project's focus upon the doctrine of Scripture.

#### 1: 3.1. Brian Malley, How the Bible Works

One of the earlier efforts to understand the bible reading of Evangelical Christians comes from

Brian Malley.<sup>13</sup> His qualitative research was gathered from a church in America through interviews with church members, a survey of the congregation and observation of the church's services, groups and practices over a number of years.

A key difference between Malley's research and my own is his cognitive approach. As a result, Malley posits that the Biblicist tradition Evangelicals learn and inherit is primarily a set of cognitive skills rather than theological beliefs or behavioural practices/habits. His dominant cognitive focus therefore doesn't leave room for an exploration of how interpretative activity might be doctrinally underpinned, rather than merely the product of developing a set of cognitive skills.

One of Malley's most significant claims is that the goal of Evangelical hermeneutics is transitivity, the activity of validating beliefs by making a connection between them and Scripture. Malley claims that Evangelicals seek to corroborate their beliefs in the biblical text so that traditional doctrines become traditional interpretations. However, there is not one set way in which beliefs and the biblical text are connected, rather a variety of such connections can be made. This connection between text and belief does not take a particular form as long as some connection exists, thus Malley claims that whilst an *interpretative* tradition exists (connecting beliefs with the biblical text), Evangelicals 'are not inheritors of a *hermeneutical* tradition, a socially transmitted set of methods for reading the Bible'<sup>14</sup> (the form of connection between belief and the Bible). This raises interesting questions about the relationship between theology and Scripture, which Malley's research does not explore. Evangelicals claim their beliefs are biblically founded, but if transitivity is in operation, what might happen when a biblical text does not support the prior belief frameworks in place?

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<sup>13</sup> Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 119. (Emphasis my own)

A further key to Evangelical interpretation that Malley identifies is relevance. Malley notes that the understanding of God as author of Scripture heightens the human instinct to search for relevance in a way that makes bible-reading amongst Christians a unique activity. Whilst Malley identifies relevance as a result of belief in the Bible's nature, Malley's links between the doctrine of Scripture and interpretation could be illuminated here. His insights prompt me to ask what it means for the text to be 'relevant'? Might interpretive practices for establishing relevance vary according to a text's content?

Through interviewing participants Malley identified that though biblical authority is presented as a consequence of divine inspiration in official accounts of the doctrine of Scripture, 'psychologically, it is authority, not inspiration, that is the premise, and inspiration, not authority, that is the consequence.'<sup>15</sup> This suggests the authority of the text is a more predominant aspect of Evangelicals' doctrine of Scripture. As a consequence, Malley noted a practical working understanding of the nature of inspiration was lacking amongst his participants, leading him to suggest inspiration forms an ultimate sacred postulate (USP) – a belief that is fundamental even without evidence, kept alive by the discursive community. It will be fruitful to see if these insights are reflected in a British context and to what extent they prove to be true in discerning dispositional beliefs about the Bible (expanded in 3:3) that arise in action, i.e. during bible reading. A limitation of Malley's research that I seek to address is that his methodology means he is unable to comment on interpretation *in practice*, instead focusing on *theory* (gained from interviews) or the results of interpretation (sermons). James Bielo's research also provides an important corrective to this, to which I now turn.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 136.

### 1: 3.2. James Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*

James Bielo's research<sup>16</sup> is based within the United States with a focus on the nature of group bible study as a social phenomenon. He spent 19 months observing and recording 19 different Evangelical bible study groups, totalling 324 meetings, and offers insights into the social nature of bible reading and how interpretative practices function within a group. In contrast to Malley's cognitive approach, Bielo investigates Bible study groups from an anthropological perspective, with an interest in understanding the cultural significance of Bible study groups as a social phenomenon in the US.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Malley, Bielo's approach of recording Bible studies allows for important insights of how interpretation occurs in practice, rather than in theory, allowing for processes and not just results to be seen.

Bielo identifies three general principles of Evangelical handling of the Bible in the US (the first two of which stand in line with Malley's insights above): a disavowal of literalism as a hermeneutic method, an agenda of applicability to the everyday lives of readers and a close relationship between the biblical text and action. He then goes on to offer three 'textual ideologies' that determine Evangelical biblical engagement, which are both presuppositions about the nature of the text, as well as textual practices associated with it that function in a similar fashion to genre. As with Malley, the distinction between the presupposition (or doctrinal belief) and the textual practice is not nuanced in this account. My question remains, how do beliefs and practices relate? What other factors might complicate this dynamic?

The first of Bielo's 'textual ideologies' is biblical authority. This concept is derived primarily from claims of divine authorship and is evidenced in an Evangelical unwillingness to challenge the text

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<sup>16</sup> James Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Bible Study* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 5-6.



overtly. Dealing with apparent contradictions either within the biblical corpus or in the interface between biblical statements and the reality of life experience is a consistent challenge to the authority of Scripture.

Next Bielo identifies relevance, as Malley does above, which he claims guarantees fresh readings regardless of the number of times a text is read, as well as precise application to specific situations. Relevance is consequential to biblical authority 'because only the "Word of God" possesses this inherent assurance to forever be directly, personally applicable.'<sup>18</sup>

The third textual ideology Bielo identifies is biblical textuality, reading the Bible as a whole in a canonical fashion. This too, like relevance, is contingent upon the authority of Scripture and its author being God. The practices of intertextual linkage and resolving tensions are identified as an attempt to protect this textual ideology.

Bielo's findings underscore the assumption of my own research, that beliefs about the Bible influence interpretation, but his research is not geared towards exploring this connection, as mine will be. As a result, Bielo does not consider other controlling ideologies involved in Bible reading, and how these relate to Bible ideologies. What about other doctrinal or theological ideologies? Or cultural ideologies? Moreover, by framing doctrinal beliefs as 'ideologies', Bielo does not do full justice to the complex systematic theological underpinnings of these Bible beliefs, which I shall seek to explore.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 59.

### 1: 3.3. Andrew Rogers, Congregational Hermeneutics

Andrew Rogers's UK-based research<sup>19</sup> is some of the most comprehensive within the field of 'ordinary reading'. His comparison of two churches in London (identified by the pseudonyms Holder Church and Fellowship Church) considers the whole of the church's life and activity through a combination of interviews, participation and observation in services, small groups, church events and individual conversations. The two churches in question provide an interesting contrast to one another, with Holder Church's bibliocentrism highlighting how congregational culture impacts the hermeneutics employed in 'ordinary reading'.

As with both Malley and Bielo, Rogers notes the hermeneutic goals of the churches – that God will speak through the Bible and that the Bible will be relevant to the life of the individual. He stresses the implicitness of both the nature of Scripture and the hermeneutic activity of the churches and develops the concept of a congregational horizon and its critical role in shaping the activity of bible reading. By noting different hermeneutical practices that occur publicly, within small groups and personally, Rogers' congregational horizon highlights how hermeneutical practices 'have their own particular development set within specific Bible uses and settings that gave them their own hybrid distinctiveness.'<sup>20</sup> This is an important critique of Malley who argued that there is no hermeneutical tradition in terms of the methods that Evangelicals employ in relation to the Bible. In contrast, Rogers claims that a hermeneutic tradition does exist but is embedded in 'congregational discourses, actions, artefacts and mediators.'<sup>21</sup> Whilst the congregational influence upon interpretative methods is an important dynamic to consider, Rogers's research lacks

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 116.

adequate exploration of the congregational impact upon reader's doctrine of Scripture and how this affects hermeneutical practices.

Whilst differing from Malley on the cognitive location of interpretative traditions, Rogers agrees that epistemological concerns act as a driving force in the array of hermeneutical options. This is especially considering Rogers's observation that hermeneutical indeterminacy is given more space and allowance for secondary issues but not those relating to issues of salvation.<sup>22</sup> This raises two points worth exploring further: first, if interpretation is largely driven by epistemology, how does this relate to the doctrine of Scripture? Does the Bible's role as foundational for knowledge demand it be understood as inerrant? Do interpretative practices reflect this? Second, if the theological content of a passage has a role to play in how it is interpreted, what might this mean about the role of the doctrine of Scripture for interpretation? These are questions my research will explore.

#### 1: 3.4. Ruth Perrin, *The Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals*

Ruth Perrin's research focuses on a millennial Evangelical demographic and her UK-based focus groups of self-led bible studies allows for a context in which the interpretative strategies, theological priorities and attitudes towards bible reading are articulated, observable and open to analysis.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most striking outcomes of Perrin's observations was the devotional and theological concerns which readers brought to and sought from the passages. Perrin notes that her focus group participants read with a canonical understanding of the Bible (as in Bielo), and typically

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>23</sup> Ruth Perrin, *The Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

‘with’ the text, using the text itself as a benchmark in order to analyse the propriety of ideas or thoughts. Perrin refers to this reading style as ‘compliant’, noting an absence of self-reflection concerning the expectations and cultural background her participants brought to the process. Interestingly, Perrin reports that the groups were not overly concerned with objective meaning and the authors’ original intention.<sup>24</sup> This is likely a consequence of the texts in question being narrative in genre. By only including one genre, Perrin’s insight into the dynamics of hermeneutics is limited, particularly with regards to the role of the doctrine of Scripture. Certain hermeneutical activity might occur when God’s Word takes a narrative form, but Perrin’s research leaves the question of whether this activity might change according to the genre at hand?

Some of the most interesting data to come out of Perrin’s research for my purposes was her groups’ understanding of acts of violence attributed to God. It was here that the groups’ unspoken doctrine(s) of Scripture came into contention with their doctrine of God. It was at this point that a variety of interpretative approaches came into play in order to uphold both doctrines. Perrin organises these responses into five categories: 1) unquestioning acceptance, 2) reader limitation, 3) uncomfortable resignation, 4) explicable misrepresentation, 5) partial resistance.<sup>25</sup> Partial resistance came the closest to breaching unspoken doctrinal boundaries within the group. Perrin notes,

For a majority of the time, participants were prepared to accept the text as authoritative and truthful, it was only when anxieties emerged about the theological or ethical message of the narrative that participants engaged

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 234-37.

these negotiations, demonstrating varying levels of willingness to challenge it or strategies to engage it.<sup>26</sup>

This suggests readers approach Scripture through a theological or ethical framework. It would seem that the doctrine of Scripture determines and shapes reading but only without contest when the readings this produces are in line with a wider theology. This 'wider theology' recalls Malley's distinction between traditional beliefs and interpretation and relates to the complex dynamic between theology and Scripture. Though Perrin insightfully observes these dynamics occurring, she does not reflect on what this means for the doctrine of Scripture in practice, which my research will seek to do.

## 1: 4. Comparative Empirical Research on Bible Reading

The following two empirical research projects do not have a specific Evangelical demographic as those above but include a comparative angle in relation to theological education, as my research will. My overviews therefore focus on the insights they afford as to the role of theological education in relation to interpretation, and how a focus upon the doctrine of Scripture will develop these.

### 1: 4.1. Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People*

Andrew Village's study has important statistical analysis to bear upon my own research,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 237.

considering its scope within the Church of England in the UK.<sup>27</sup> His research is distinct from those overviewed so far, first, in gathering quantitative data, allowing for a broad research field and second, in focusing upon an Anglican demographic. His research is therefore the only study to share my demographic, Evangelical Anglicans, though such participants only form a subset of his entire demographic. Village's data was collected from 404 questionnaires completed by members of a range of Anglican churches and subsequently analysed for determinative patterns and correlations.

The most important insights gained from Village's survey for my own purposes is the correlation of education with Bible reading attitudes and practices. He found higher levels of education are associated with a move away from 'conservative' to more 'liberal' beliefs about the Bible. As such, the practice of literalism declined with increasing education, even more so amongst those with theological higher education. However, within Evangelicalism, education made no impact on the practice of literalism, something that Village suggests could be linked with charismatic experience:

charismatic belief shapes both the way that Christians interpret their present-day experience and the way that they interpret the Bible. There is coherence between God experienced personally, God at work in the world and God revealed in Scripture, but the key factor is personal experience.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, if one has experience of and belief in the extra-ordinary activity of God, one is more likely to maintain this belief in relation to the biblical text.

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 149.

An additional influencing factor in the choice of literalism as an interpretative strategy<sup>29</sup> proved to be the doctrinal weight of the biblical material in question. The more significant an event to the central tenants of the Christian faith, the more it was understood to have 'actually happened.' This suggests an implicit doctrinal criterion when evaluating historicity within the Bible and suggests that interpretative practices differ depending on the nature and content of the text in question. This insight needs further exploration in order to reflect on what it reveals about beliefs in the Bible and how they relate to biblical interpretation.

Village also assesses his participants' use of biblical horizons in relation to a specific passage. He found that those with higher education levels held a strong preference for the author horizon in opposition to the reader horizon. Yet in general, and in keeping with the research above, relevance proved an essential feature of horizon separation and preference, with a tendency to avoid the author horizon for the sake of making meaning in the present. Village expresses concern regarding these findings that theological education brought the reader to the authorial horizon and 'left them there' but does not reflect on the doctrinal underpinnings of this horizon preference. Is it that theological education promotes particular hermeneutical activity, or does such hermeneutical activity arise as a result of different beliefs about the Bible? My research will seek to make a similar comparison between the hermeneutical activity of those who are theologically educated and those who are not, but specifically in relation to beliefs about the Bible.

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Village does not disregard literalism as a hermeneutic as Malley and Bielo do. Instead, he understands it as an issue within the historical-critical debate relating to an acceptance that biblical events 'really happened.'

## 1: 4.2. Mark Powell, Chasing the Eastern Star

Mark Powell approaches his study of the Gospel of Matthew, specifically the magi narrative, from a reader-response perspective.<sup>30</sup> Much of his discussion focuses on promoting the locus of meaning as residing with the reader, but his research involved a small-scale biblical interpretation experiment explicitly contrasting the biblical interpretation of clergy and laity. Taking 50 clergy and 50 laity (from corresponding churches), Powell conducted two experiments. In both experiments participants read a Gospel passage and had to give a written response, but the prompt provided for their response differed. In the first experiment, participants were asked ‘what does this story mean to you?’ and in the second experiment they were asked, ‘what does this mean?’ Reflecting on the results from the first experiment, Powell notes ‘most of the clergy responses indicate reader empathy with the character of Jesus, while most of the lay responses indicates reader empathy either with Jesus’ disciples or with his audience (the Scribes and Pharisees).’<sup>31</sup>

The findings from the second experiment are even more revealing. By removing the phrase ‘to you’, the types of responses varied. Powell found that a significant number of clergy referenced the author (Luke), whereas none of the laity did. This is in keeping with Village’s findings above that show the theologically educated tend towards the author horizon. Another point of distinction was that in both questions nearly all the laity made some form of self-reference, but for the clergy self-reference was significantly lower for the question ‘what does this story mean?’ This might indicate that the laity readily apply the bible to themselves, but clergy are less inclined to do so. As with Village, these hermeneutical differences are not linked to any doctrinal

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 38.



underpinnings, which my research will seek to address.

Powell identifies a variety of understandings of where meaning is located across the range of responses: historically (the setting for the story), redactionally (the discourse setting of the narrative) and existentially (the setting of the readers). He concludes that laity always evinced a reader-oriented hermeneutic so that the question of meaning was always understood in terms of the reader. Consequently, in the case of the narrative genre, Powell suggests that the author-oriented hermeneutic may be less natural and has to be taught. Yet Powell does approve that meaning is found in the author's intention when it comes to matters of doctrine, advocating that 'Christian dogma should be expressive of the message of Scripture, and that method is best determined with exegetical methods derived from an author-oriented hermeneutic.'<sup>32</sup> Powell therefore advocates a different hermeneutical approach dependent on the task at hand; interpretative method is therefore purpose driven. If hermeneutic activity is purpose driven, what determines the purpose of reading? The doctrine of Scripture has a role to play here but this is not considered by Powell who does not reflect on hermeneutic activity in light of or in relation to beliefs about Scripture.

## 1: 5. Empirical Research on Biblical Interpretation

The final research project overviewed in this chapter has neither a focus on Evangelicals nor a comparative element, but nonetheless has significant insight into the dynamics of biblical interpretation of ordinary readers.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 56.

## 1: 5.1. Todd, The Talk, Dynamics and Theological Practice of Bible-Study Groups

Andrew Todd's doctoral thesis focuses on the nature of interpretation within the dynamics of conversation in bible-study groups.<sup>33</sup> With a specific emphasis on linguistic ethnography rooted in discourse analysis, Todd looks at how interpretation evolves in conversation. His research is focused on three groups which he observed and recorded.

From his observations, Todd suggests that interpretation is a dynamic process centred around three poles. Biblical authority is one of these, but it is held in tension with close study of the text and individual personal experience. These three poles are brought together in the interest of the sought-after outcome: learning, not in the sense of necessarily gaining knowledge, but 'gaining insight'.<sup>34</sup> Approaches to biblical authority proved to be much more 'liberal' than the Evangelical research above, likely the result of his mixed denominational groups. As with the majority of the research overviewed so far, Todd does not consider the relationship between biblical authority and 'close study' and how personal experience affects this dynamic. Indeed, Todd's 'close study' encompasses a rather broad range of practices and does not nuance a variety of different hermeneutic activity. Additionally, Todd does not connect the sought after outcome of gaining 'insight' in relation to biblical authority or the doctrine of Scripture and thus where this expectation comes from.

Todd outlines the dynamics of voices that influence reading in two scales with opposing poles. The first is deference to the Bible as the voice of God on the one hand, and suspicion of the Bible as a human text on the other. The second is voices from the Bible opposed to voices from personal experience. Todd notes evidence of his participants' struggle to align these voices in their

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Todd, "The Talk, Dynamics and Theological Practice of Bible-Study Groups." (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2009), <https://orca.cf.ac.uk/54856/1/U585245.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 245.

perception of what the biblical text was saying and their interpretation of their own experience. Combined with the added 'voice of God' that evidenced a wider theology not drawn directly from the text, this demonstrates the competing ideologies that are involved in bible reading. It also is evidence of the competing doctrines that struggle for position as the interpretative lens through which to understand a passage. This struggle is mirrored in the research of Perrin, above, and goes some way towards situating the influence of doctrinal beliefs about the Bible in relation to other dominant influences, or voices. As the doctrine of Scripture is not the focus of Todd's research however, its particular role is not elaborated upon at length.

Todd adds into this picture the influence of social dynamics and suggests that one determining criterion for interpretation is a concern for people. Understandings of the text that might infringe on relational value are heard as the human voice of the author in question. This offers an interesting insight, specifically into the social and conversational understanding of biblical interpretation which Todd refers to as interpretative communities, drawing on the work of Stanley Fish and David Clines.<sup>35</sup> It is important to remember that the driving ideologies or perspectives which readers bring to the Bible are both social and theological. Warrants for interpretative moves are rooted both in the Bible's canonical authority and the contingency of members' experience.

## 1: 6. Key Emerging Insights from Empirical Research

From the literature reviewed so far, certain key themes emerge that both provide a foundation for my research and offer opportunities for further exploration.

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<sup>35</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*; David Clines, 'A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation' in *The New Literary Criticism and Hebrew Bible*, eds. David Clines and Cheryl Exum (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 79-90.

### 1: 6.1. Lack of Doctrinal Context

As has been seen, all the existing research on the dynamics of biblical interpretation lack explicit consideration of the context of the doctrine of Scripture. Hermeneutical activity is either treated as its own entity and unrelated to the nature of the Bible, or the connection is assumed but not explored. This is what my research will contribute to the field, an understanding of the role of the doctrine of Scripture in interpretation. I will seek to ask, how does the doctrine of Scripture actually 'function' in practice? To what extent does it drive hermeneutical activity? What other factors play a part in this dynamic?

### 1: 6.2. Meaning

In terms of the specifics of interpretation, the first emerging hermeneutical theme from the research concerns views on where exactly meaning lies and how it is found or created; is meaning located with the reader, or the author? Village provides some insight on how the role of education influences where one's understanding of meaning might be cast in terms of horizon preference, and Powell's research confirms this in demonstrating that clergy focus more on meaning in relation to the author.

But to what extent is a text's meaning established by the doctrine of Scripture? How are doctrinal beliefs about the Bible associated with the location of meaning? How does theological education affect this dynamic? Does theological education teach and advocate certain hermeneutical practise, or do these arise as a result of a different doctrine of Scripture?

### 1: 6.3. Genre and Content

The second hermeneutical theme to emerge, which complicates the issue of meaning further, is the genre and content of the text in question. Rogers noted that there was more interpretive variety and freedom for passages that didn't have a direct bearing on matters of salvation. This suggests that the content and genre of a biblical passage have a role in determining the location of meaning and thus the interpretive strategy used for understanding. Village too, found that events surrounding the life and death of Jesus were considered to be more historically true than those in the Old Testament,<sup>36</sup> confirming that readers approach Scripture with different rules or expectations depending upon the content in question. Issues that are central to the Christian faith are understood to have actually happened because the stakes are so much higher if it is conceded that this may not be the case. In other words, ordinary readers have a sense of doctrinal hierarchy that determines their understanding of historicity and meaning. This might indicate that the doctrine of Scripture is not the only controlling influence in the location of the biblical text's meaning, but that the contents of the text itself play a part.

### 1: 6.4. Purpose (Relevance)

The third hermeneutical theme to emerge, connected to meaning and genre, is the purpose behind interpretive activity. Powell, whilst an adamant advocate of reader-response theory, acknowledges that for establishing dogmatic and doctrinal matters, the author's intention holds more gravitas. This suggests that hermeneutical activity is connected to the purpose for which one reads, which also determines where the text's meaning is found.

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<sup>36</sup> Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 62-63.

In general, nearly all the researchers comment on the purpose of reading as relating to the search for relevance. This belief in and search for relevance is connected to the doctrinal belief that the Bible is God's Word and thus speaks to its readers. But what form does such 'relevance' take and how does it relate to the location of meaning? If the Bible is specifically relevant to the individual reading, then meaning is located with the reader. But many Evangelicals do not subscribe to this paradigm, claiming the meaning of the text is found with the author. In which case, how does the text function as relevant considering the differing contexts of author and reader? Belief in the relevancy of the text has roots in divine authorship, theories of inspiration, but is also likely to be text dependent, as above.

#### 1: 6.5. Theology and Scripture

An important dynamic that the studies above have highlighted at various points is the relationship between theology and Scripture. Malley posited that one's beliefs and interpretations can, and often do, have separate origins, rather than the former be based on the latter. This raises a host of questions concerning what theological frameworks are in place prior to the interpretive task and how these are formed. What is the relationship between pre-existing beliefs and the Bible? If beliefs were solely biblical then the Bible would never conflict with these beliefs, yet Perrin's research demonstrated how this wasn't the case when it came to the violence of God. Evangelicals profess that their beliefs and doctrine are biblically based, but what is the exact nature of this basis? Additionally, the doctrine of Scripture is one such belief framework that is brought to the text. How does this belief framework sit alongside other Christian belief frameworks? In other words, if a reader's belief about the nature of the Bible determines that a text is authoritative for theology, but a reader's doctrine of God cannot affirm a particular text's depiction of God, then

which belief framework concedes, and which remains? These questions all warrant further research.

#### 1: 6.6. Influences Upon Reading

This brings me to the final theme to emerge from the research explored above: contributing factors to interpretation. All of the fieldwork conducted for the research projects described above draw attention to the wide variety of factors that play a part in the way that an individual approaches and reads the Bible. Malley highlights the role of cognitive faculties, Bielo focuses on the influence of social dynamics and membership within social institutions, continued by Todd. Rogers identifies the congregational horizon and the role of church life, Village demonstrates the impact of education and personality type. All of this highlights that what motivates the way one reads cannot be reduced to a single factor, and that any attempt at making correlative suggestions should be wary of the variety of other influences. Into this mix I intend to try and understand the role of the doctrine of Scripture, but not at the expense of these dynamics. Whilst I am not able to give due weight to the multiple influences at work upon interpretation, the research already conducted suggests that the influence of the doctrine of Scripture will best be discernible by understanding it in relation to other influential factors at play rather than in isolation.

#### 1: 7. Conclusion

This chapter has established my interest in the research topic, its location within the field of 'empirical hermeneutics' and has provided a background overview to the emergence of this branch of research.

This chapter has also highlighted relevant recent empirical scholarship and noted some of the key findings these studies have provided and how I intend to build upon their insights. The unique angle my research will take is exploration of the role of the doctrine of Scripture within the dynamics of interpretation. This will provide nuance to the growing picture of Evangelical hermeneutical activity and on the nature of the doctrine of Scripture 'in practice'.

Consequently, I now turn to a discussion of the doctrine of Scripture within Evangelical Anglicanism, to establish what beliefs about the Bible an Evangelical Anglican is likely to bring to their reading of Scripture.



# CHAPTER TWO: EVANGELICAL ANGLICAN DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE AND HERMENEUTICS

## 2: 1. Introduction

In order to assess the role of the doctrine of Scripture and its relationship to the interpretive practices of ordinary Evangelical Anglican readers, it is important to establish first, what an Evangelical Anglican doctrine of Scripture is, and second, how it is proposed that this should affect reading and interpreting in practice.

To do this, I will begin with a discussion of what an Evangelical is, followed by a brief history of the doctrine of Scripture as it has developed within the Evangelical movement in the UK. I will then take a snapshot view of contemporary material to define the key components of an Evangelical doctrine of Scripture. This will be followed by a short history of the Evangelical movement within the Church of England, leading into a summary of what Anglicans believe about the Bible. These two perspectives are combined in a conclusion that presents the emerging landscape of what Evangelicals Anglicans would be expected to believe about the Bible.

The chapter then moves on to outline the doctrine of Scripture as it might typically be expressed by Evangelicals and review the range of hermeneutical practices might these beliefs give rise to.

## 2: 2. History of Evangelicalism

## 2: 2.1. Definition

Any history or account of Evangelicalism begins with some attempt of definition, and Bebbington's study of Evangelicals in Britain between 1730 and 1980 has become the springboard from which most definitions of Evangelicalism touch base.<sup>37</sup> Bebbington sought to identify core features of Evangelicalism that have been present from its origins and stayed the course throughout its history, and famously designates the Evangelical movement in terms of a 'quadrilateral of priorities': conversionism, Biblicism, activism and crucicentrism.<sup>38</sup>

Whilst varying corrections and amendments to this model have been made since its publication in 1989, it is significant that this schematisation still holds sway over 30 years later – Bebbington touches upon elements that are undoubtedly core to Evangelicalism.<sup>39</sup> More recently, Rob Warner has offered a more nuanced alternative that retained the integrity of the quadrilateral scheme yet could account for the scope and variety of Evangelical difference. He pictures the four orientations as two twin and rival axes: the conversionist-activist axis, the focus of the entrepreneurial pragmatists and the Biblicist-crucicentric axis, the focus of the theologically oriented. He explains,

Although all Evangelicals broadly adhere to the same symbolic boundaries, affirming all four Bebbingtonian emphases, their primary orientation aligns with one of these rival axes of Evangelical dialectic, and this explains the persistent mutual misunderstanding, and sometimes denunciation, of

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<sup>37</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993). It is worth noting that the political nature of Evangelicalism in the US does not exist in the UK.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Warner gives an overview of various scholars who have offered alternatives to Bebbington's scheme and concludes that three additions should be acknowledged: christocentrism, transformed life and revival aspirations, as well as two organizing principles: faith not works and transdenominationalism. In: Rob Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism 1966-2001: a theological and sociological study* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 17-19.

diverse Evangelical sub-traditions. Bebbington's quadrilateral therefore needs to be conceived not as a static commonality but rather as a confluence of priorities in tension, sometimes dynamic, sometimes conflictual.<sup>40</sup>

Warner rightly acknowledges the broad spectrum of positions that come under the umbrella 'Evangelical'. The 'confluence of priorities in tension' he refers to are not only *between* the four key features of Evangelicalism, but internal *within* the four priorities, and it is with such a dynamic in mind pertaining to Biblicism or the Biblicist-crucicentric axis<sup>41</sup> that this brief account of the development of the Evangelical doctrine of Scripture and hermeneutics aims at delineating a range or scale of views, all firmly Evangelical but nonetheless different from one another.

#### 2: 2.1.1. Fundamentalism

At this point, it is important to recognise debate regarding 'fundamentalists' and their relation to Evangelicals. Defining what exactly fundamentalism is and its relationship to Evangelicalism has proved notoriously difficult amongst scholars and lines have been drawn on psychological, cultural and theological grounds.<sup>42</sup> It is far beyond the scope of this work to delve into this debate, yet it should be noted that the tendency to define a fundamentalist as a subscriber to inerrancy is simplistic and reductionist. There are numerous other elements involved, both hermeneutical and

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<sup>40</sup> Rob Warner, 'Evangelical Bases of Faith,' in *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom in the Twentieth Century*, eds. David Bebbington and David Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 347.

<sup>41</sup> Albeit with due recognition this is not independent of the other areas.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Holmes, 'Evangelicals, Fundamentalism and Theology,' in *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom in the Twentieth Century*, eds., David Bebbington and David Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 348-65.

epistemological. For the purposes of this overview, I recognise fundamentalism as a connected part of Evangelicalism on the extreme conservative end of the spectrum but will focus on the slightly narrower (though still very broad) range of Evangelical views.

I will begin by tracing numerous interlinking strands of tradition that have laid the foundations for the multiple biblical practices and beliefs of contemporary Evangelicals.

## 2: 2.2. Reformation Roots

As a Protestant movement, Evangelicalism sees itself within the tradition of the Reformation. With their war cry of *sola scriptura*, Evangelicals are the inheritors of a faith built on Scripture as a sole authority, significantly over tradition.

In addition to Scripture as sole authority, the Reformers affirmed the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture. Scripture did not need to be mediated by the church in order to be understood, and whilst the church's teaching is helpful and constructive, Scripture contains all that is needed for salvation and Godly living – no further instruction is necessary. John Stott explicitly calls on these Reformation principles in his account of Scripture, firmly seeing Evangelicalism in line with the Reformers.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, Reformed theology has not reached Evangelicalism in its pure sixteenth century form but has been filtered through subsequent traditions within Protestantism, some of which feature below.

My overview follows that of Stanley Grenz who identifies and tracks two parallel but different (though not mutually exclusive) approaches to Scripture: viewing the Bible first as a source of spiritual sustenance, and second, as a source of doctrinal truth.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> John Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 68-69.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Grenz, 'Nurturing the Soul, Informing the Mind,' in *Evangelicals & Scripture: tradition, authority and hermeneutics*, eds. Vincent Bacote, Laura Miguélez and Dennis Okholm (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004): 21-41.

## 2: 2.3. Puritanism and Pietism (The Bible as Source of Spiritual Sustenance)

The quest of Puritanism of 16th-17th century England to ‘purify’ the Church and restore it to its Reformation roots laid the foundations for the emergence of Evangelicalism. Puritanism claimed that key to accessing the true significance of Scripture was a regenerate heart and mind, resulting in the need to ‘differentiate between two levels of meaning in the text: “the grammatical construction” and “the spiritual and divine sense.”’<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, German Lutheran Pietists responded to the intellectualism of orthodoxy with a call to spiritual experience and living faith. Propagated through John Wesley and integral to the English eighteenth-century awakening, Pietism’s ‘passion for a living personal spiritual experience gave it a popular appeal.’<sup>46</sup>

The Pietists developed the Puritan two levels of meaning in Scripture by arguing that the internal testimony of the Spirit was necessary to properly understand — in other words, that to interpret the Bible properly readers must be guided by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Pietists distinguished between theological knowledge attainable by anyone and the saving knowledge of faith only accessible through the Spirit.<sup>47</sup> Grenz summarises the influence of these two traditions for Evangelicalism: ‘As Puritan concerns and Pietist renewal converged in the eighteenth century, they gave birth to an Evangelicalism that looked to Scripture as the vehicle through which the Spirit accomplishes the miracles of salvation and sanctification.’<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 27.

Rather than focus on the *doctrine* of Scripture, stepping back from the Bible to assess its qualities as a whole, the Puritan and Pietist influence urged stepping into Scripture and being spiritually nourished by meeting God through its contents. Indeed, whilst biblical inspiration and authority were affirmed, Pietists such as Spener, Francke and Zinzendorf 'rejected a mechanical view of inspiration and held that it was the authors of Scripture who were inspired, not the words.'<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the contemporary conservative Evangelicalism advocating subscription to biblical inerrancy, the Pietists were content to maintain a more fluid and less restrictive understanding of inspiration, limiting inerrancy to biblical content concerning salvation.

#### 2: 2.4. Protestant Scholasticism (The Bible as Source of Doctrinal Truth)

Whilst the Puritan and Pietist influences developed the sense of Scripture as a source of spiritual sustenance, the emerging Protestant Scholasticism of the same time developed the sense of Scripture as a source of propositional truths. Grenz explains the converging of these influences;

The basic ethos of Pietism set the mood and course for all Evangelicalism; post-world war 2 post fundamentalist Evangelicalism is pietism's heir, even though it also looks back to Pietism's enemies among the Protestant scholastic theologians with great respect and reverence. This is the pathos of modern Evangelicalism: its dual heritage. It was born in Pietism, but it had always flirted with rationalistic, scholastic Protestant orthodoxy.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Roger Olson and Christian Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: retrieving an Evangelical tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2015), 78.

<sup>50</sup> Roger Olson, *The SCM Press A-Z of Evangelical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 14.

In the course of establishing itself against the authority of tradition and the Church in Roman Catholicism, Protestant Lutheran theology in the seventeenth century became concerned with the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Grenz notes that 'as a result, many came to treat Scripture as accurate in every detail and as a storehouse of revealed propositions.'<sup>51</sup> The doctrine of Scripture became the foundation of faith, the *prolegomena* for all other theological doctrines rather than one such doctrine amongst and dependent on others.

With Scripture in prime position as sole authority and the foundation for faith, there came a need for more careful delineating of its nature to warrant such a role. So it was that by the nineteenth century, views on the inspiration of Scripture began to become more stringent in certain quarters. It was Louis Gaussen in 1841 who first argued for the *plenary* inspiration of the whole Bible (the belief that every word of the Bible is God's specific choice) opting for a deductive approach to argue the case: 'beginning with the axiom that God in his perfect wisdom had inspired the writing of the Bible, [plenary inspirationists] went on to deduce its qualities and then tried to match the results of empirical examination of the text with their *a priori* assumptions.'<sup>52</sup> It is here that the origin of the hermeneutical circle lies; forming doctrine about Scripture, based on the content of Scripture.

Not only do more rigorous ideas about inspiration dictate the way doctrine is grounded but they also set a more rigid framework within which to read. Interpretation has to correspond to the nature of the text being divinely inspired. Any perceived mistakes, discrepancies or contradictions must be explained. Howard Marshall writes, 'Some scholars want to start from a position which rules out the possibility of what they would regard as error in Scripture. Therefore, any method

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<sup>51</sup> Grenz, 'Nurturing the Soul,' 28.

<sup>52</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 89.

which might find errors is ruled out as inappropriate in principle.<sup>53</sup> Doctrinal commitments dictate the trajectory in which hermeneutics will proceed so that the outcome of interpretative work is predetermined.

## 2: 2.5. Scientific Enquiry

Approaches to Scripture in this vein were additionally bolstered by the rise of scientific endeavour in the nineteenth century. The empirical nature of scientific enquiry led to theologians 'seeking an intellectually unassailable bedrock on which to construct their theological house.'<sup>54</sup> In America, the application of the scientific approach to Scripture dominated at Princeton University, notably with Charles Hodge. It was at Princeton that the fight for inerrancy gained popular ground, resulting in the production of the 'Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy' in 1978 at the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.<sup>55</sup> Whilst in America the 'battle for the Bible'<sup>56</sup> raged with subscription to 'inerrancy' becoming, for some, a hallmark of true Evangelicalism, the situation in the UK was somewhat different. Bebbington has noted that it is remarkable that assertions of inerrancy were minimal in England.<sup>57</sup> This is not to say that the UK was completely impervious to the discussion, as will be seen in the Churchman/Anvil split (described in 2:5.1), but rather that inerrancy didn't hold as much sway for Evangelical belief to be considered authentic.

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<sup>53</sup> Howard Marshall, 'Evangelicalism and Biblical Interpretation' in *The Futures of Evangelicalism*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry and Andrew West (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 106.

<sup>54</sup> Grenz, 'Nurturing the Soul,' 27.

<sup>54</sup> Olson and Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> 'Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy', The Chicago Statements, accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2019, <https://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements/>.

<sup>56</sup> Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976).

<sup>57</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 189.



It is worth noting at this juncture that this focus upon inerrancy is one of several significant differences between British and American Evangelicals. Whilst inerrancy is a theological difference, the majority of these differences are cultural, with 'evangelical' functioning as less of an identity 'label' in the UK. Imogen Ball outlines: 'the primary identification of British Evangelicals with "Christian" rather than "Evangelical" distinguishes them from Evangelicals in America. The "us and them" mentality, so prevalent in U.S. Evangelicalism and fuelling ongoing culture wars, is not present in Britain.'<sup>58</sup> To elaborate on these differences any further is beyond the scope of this outline, other than to note that due to these differences, the American research described in chapter one needs to be understood as contextually distinct.

## 2: 2.6. Critical Scholarship

The rise of biblical criticism in the early twentieth century pushed Evangelicalism further in delineating its doctrinal boundaries concerning Scripture. In 1860, seven Church of England ministers contributed to *Essays and Reviews*<sup>59</sup>, propounding higher criticism and sharing the conviction that the best modern learning on Scripture was being ignored in England because of a hidebound traditionalism.<sup>60</sup>

The majority did not share their view; engaging in German critical views that investigated the biblical text in an objective historical fashion was seen as an affront to the doctrine of Scripture. Yet despite initial disapproval, the influence of biblical scholars Brooke Westcott, Fenton Hort and Joseph Lightfoot demonstrated that engagement with higher criticism could be compatible with

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<sup>58</sup> Imogen Ball, 'Political and Religious Identities of British Evangelicals,' *Theos Thinktank*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2017/08/15/political-and-religious-identities-of-british-evangelicals>.

<sup>59</sup> John Parker, *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker, 1860).

<sup>60</sup> Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, scholarship and the Bible* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 64.

traditional views of Scripture. By showing that critical scholarship could be used for reinforcing traditional views, higher criticism began to gain popular ground. It was with such Christian proponents of higher criticism that Evangelicalism in Britain took more readily to critical scholarship than in the States.<sup>61</sup>

With new discoveries and theories arising through such scholarship regarding the authorship, dating and composition of the biblical texts, the doctrine of Scripture was overtly challenged. This was both in relation to the contents of Scripture but also in relation to traditional methods of scriptural affirmation. Can the Bible's claims about itself be trusted? For example, if Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was built upon Jesus' endorsement of it,<sup>62</sup> but higher criticism brought Mosaic authorship into question, what does this say about Jesus, his understanding of Scripture and therefore the doctrine of Scripture? A typical Evangelical response has been a form of harmonisation which seeks to justify traditional views and methods associated with Scripture, without having to reject outright the findings of criticism.<sup>63</sup>

Such efforts of harmonisation between the growing criticism and an Evangelical doctrine of Scripture meant that, in Nolls words, 'By 1900... while maintaining certain features of older views on the inspiration of Scripture, churchmen and dissenters of at least relatively conservative theology still had made their peace with the new criticism.'<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>62</sup> eg. Mark 12:26, John 5:46-7

<sup>63</sup> Noll points out Gore's response to Jesus' affirmation of Mosaic authorship. Gore called upon the doctrine of the incarnation and Christ's kenosis to both uphold the integrity of Jesus, his claims about the Scriptures and historical criticism - Jesus was limited in knowledge as a human. This rationalisation cleverly synthesises both the results of modern scholarship with Scripture's self-affirmation.

<sup>64</sup> Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 74.

## 2: 2.7. Liberal-Conservative Divide/Spectrum

The varying extents to which critical scholarship was embraced and put to use contributed to the growing disparity in the twentieth century between ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ Evangelicals.

Marked by schism, Evangelicalism’s trajectory has typically been one of disunity, with approaches to the Bible as a significant contributor to division. Bebbington provides one such instance recounting CICCUC (Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union) separating from the umbrella body of the SCM (Student Christian Movement) on the grounds of their belief that Scripture was inerrant and their disapproval of guest speakers who embraced higher criticism.<sup>65</sup>

Whilst critical scholarship is not such a divisive issue for contemporary Evangelicals, there remains a spectrum of thought with regards to the Bible, inclusive of conservative and liberal views. I will explore this range with regards to the doctrine of Scripture.

## 2: 3. Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture

### 2: 3.1. Statements of Faith

In order to chart some of the range of thought with regards to the Bible, Warner analysed ‘statements of faith’ various Evangelical bodies professed between 1966 and 2001, tracking how these have developed both internally and in relation to one another. Warner then established six types of Evangelical through assessment of these doctrinal statements (pertaining to both the Bible and the cross).<sup>66</sup> As this assessment is now 20 years old, I have similarly surveyed a variety of

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<sup>65</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 188.

<sup>66</sup> Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism*, 153-230.

current statements of faith from various Evangelical organisations and conferences<sup>67</sup> to gain an insight into beliefs about the Bible for contemporary Evangelicals.<sup>68</sup>

The Evangelical Alliance is an important starting place. With an extensive membership of churches and organisations, it is the largest Evangelical body in the UK and its statement of faith is therefore significant.<sup>69</sup> Their statement affirms the divine inspiration of the Bible and confirms it is the supreme authority, 'Word of God' and fully trustworthy in matters of faith and conduct. The Old and New Testaments are specified as consisting of the 'Word of God', a nod to the consistency and unity of the Bible, without making this explicit. As an ecumenically focused organisation, the Evangelical Alliance is aimed at inclusivity and its statement of faith represents this with regards to the Bible. It is therefore purposely broad and reluctant to use terminology that would be divisive. This becomes clear when contrasted with the UCCF statement of faith<sup>70</sup> which is the same in fundamentals except that the affirmation of the Bible as trustworthy is replaced with the term 'infallible' pertaining to the Scriptures as 'originally given'.

These two statements of faith were found to be replicated by various Evangelical conferences and represent a cluster of core values (authority, inspiration, 'Word of God' – implied unity and consistency in reference to both Testaments) whilst demonstrating a range of belief in relation to what might be called 'truthfulness', i.e. infallibility/without error/trustworthiness. These

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<sup>67</sup> New Horizon, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, New Wine, Spring Harvest, UCCF, Proclamation Trust, Keswick Ministries, Word Alive, Creation Fest, Evangelical Times, Elim Pentecostal, Evangelical Alliance, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

<sup>68</sup> This overview is much less comprehensive and analytical than Warner's, who takes into account the history and formation of such statements and how they developed in relation to one another. My overview simply takes the statements of faith as they stand and notes some of the general tendencies.

<sup>69</sup> 'We believe in... The divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God – fully trustworthy for faith and conduct.' 'Basis of Faith,' Evangelical Alliance, accessed 1 April, 2019, <https://www.eauk.org/about-us/how-we-work/basis-of-faith>.

<sup>70</sup> 'The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour.' 'Doctrinal Basis,' UCCF, accessed 1 April, 2019, <https://www.uccf.org.uk/about/doctrinal-basis>.

observations marry with the findings from the Evangelical Alliance survey data, which shows strong agreement amongst Evangelicals regarding the Bible's inspiration (87%) and authority (77%), but less consensus on the Bible's level of error (53%).<sup>71</sup>

Of all the statements I reviewed, 'inspiration' and 'authority' were the most common designations provided, followed by 'Word of God'. In general authority was specified for belief and behaviour or life and conduct, though this was not universally the case. Moreover, references to the Bible being infallible or without error tended to be accompanied by the qualification 'originally given'. No reference was found anywhere to the clarity of the Bible and minimal references were made to sufficiency and the work of the Holy Spirit in interpreting Scripture. One affirmation of inerrancy was found, though general preference appeared to be for the terminology 'infallible' and 'without error'.

In summary, key features of an Evangelical doctrine of Scripture are the inspiration, authority, divine authorship, unity/consistency and truthfulness of Scripture. What marks out more conservative doctrines of Scripture is an affirmation of infallibility or the Bible being 'without error' as 'originally given.' Only lack of such terms distinguishes more liberal approaches. Additionally, the Bible is understood to be sufficient and clear with regards to its central message.

## 2: 4. History of Evangelical Anglicanism

So far, I have briefly summarised the trajectory of Evangelical thought regarding the Bible, noting dominant historical influences and movements within Evangelicalism as a whole and the resultant

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen Holmes, 'Evangelical Theology and Identity,' in *21st Century Evangelicals*, ed. Greg Smith, (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2015), 31.

range of views about the Bible within contemporary Evangelicalism. I now turn to a similarly succinct overview of the development of Evangelicalism specifically within the Church of England.

## 2: 4.1. Transdenominational Evangelicalism and Anglican Sub-Groups

In order to discuss Evangelicalism within the Church of England, it is important to recognise that Evangelicalism is by nature transdenominational. As McGrath states, 'Evangelicalism is a worldwide transdenominational movement, which is able to co-exist within every major denomination in the Western church, including the Roman Catholic church.'<sup>72</sup> McGrath is working with a fairly broad understanding of Evangelicalism in order to make this claim, but the point still stands that to be Evangelical is not to commit oneself to a particular ecclesiology. Therefore, Evangelical Anglicans (hereon EAs), are one sub-group of the broader 'Evangelical' and 'Anglican' parties.

According to recent survey research conducted by the Evangelical Alliance, 32% of Evangelical respondents attended Anglican churches.<sup>73</sup> The extent to which this is representative is, of course, questionable, but gives an indication that a significant proportion of Evangelicals are Anglicans. The quantitative research conducted by Village utilising survey responses from Church Times readers recognises three dominant groups within the Church of England: Anglo-Catholic, Broad Church and Evangelical.<sup>74</sup> How the Church of England has reached this place of breadth, is what I shall discuss next.

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<sup>72</sup> Alister McGrath, 'Evangelical Anglicanism: A Contradiction in Terms?', in *Evangelical Anglicans*, eds. Richard France and Alister McGrath (London: SPCK, 1993), 13.

<sup>73</sup> Mandy Robbins and Greg Smith, 'Life in the Church,' in *21st Century Evangelicals*, ed. Smith, 41.

<sup>74</sup> Andrew Village, 'English Anglicanism: Construct Validity of a Scale of Anglo-Catholic versus Evangelical Self-Identification,' in *Religious Identity and National Heritage*, eds. Francis-Vincent Anthony and Hans-Georg Ziebertz, (Boston: Brill, 2012) 93-122.

## 2: 4.2. Historical Relationship between Evangelicalism and Anglicanism

The rise of Evangelicals within the Church of England to become the predominant 'party' within the Anglican Communion has not been a straightforward progression, with debates over the extent to which its trajectory has been a 'hostile takeover or friendly merger'.<sup>75</sup> The first half of the eighteenth century saw Evangelical revival stemming from within the Church of England with ordained leaders in the Wesley brothers and George Whitfield, but the revival spilled out beyond its Anglican roots. Historian Hervé Picton comments that it was the second half of the eighteenth century that 'provided more Protestant Anglicans with an opportunity to reassert their place within the established Church and constitute what was to become the Evangelical party whose influence would become preponderant in the following century.'<sup>76</sup>

In the last century, one of the most significant moments for the relationship between Evangelicalism and the Church of England was the 1966 confrontation between Martin Lloyd-Jones and John Stott at the Second National Assembly of Evangelicals in Westminster. Lloyd-Jones' call for Evangelical unity became a call for Evangelicals to effectively form a denomination of their own, independent of the mainstream churches. In response, Stott maintained that Evangelicals belonged in their denominations, demonstrating his own loyalty to the Church of England. As the statistic above indicates, Stott's vision is now not without reality, with many of the larger, thriving Anglican churches in the UK being Evangelical. Bebbington comments that in the years following this confrontation:

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<sup>75</sup> Sam Hailes, 'How Evangelicals took over the Church of England', *Premier Christianity*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/how-evangelicals-took-over-the-church-of-england/3081.article>.

<sup>76</sup> Hervé Picton, *A Short History of the Church of England: From the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2015), 83.

The Church of England was being institutionally Evangelicalised so that the word 'Evangelical' itself seemed to be becoming superfluous. Could it be dropped? To that suggestion the conference of 1978 gave a very firm no. Its members wanted to be Evangelicals as well as Anglicans still. One of the speakers who insisted on that principle was J. I. Packer, who had delivered addresses at Islington several times since 1960 and who was put up as a main spokesman in 1978. He insisted that there was such a thing as a distinctive Evangelical theology which it was their duty to maintain. Shortly afterwards he published *The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem* with the same thrust. Anglican Evangelicalism was to survive as a distinct entity.<sup>77</sup>

In addition, the rise of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) during the 1990s as an unapologetically Evangelical, but nonetheless Anglican powerhouse, further advanced the cause of Evangelical Anglicanism. With the emergence of the Alpha Course from HTB as a globally respected resource for evangelism and catechism, to be an Evangelical Anglican was not a contradiction in terms. Indeed, the appointment of Evangelical Justin Welby as the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2013 demonstrates the contemporary strength of Evangelicalism within the Church of England. In 2012, *The Economist* reported Peter Brierley's statistic that 40% of Anglicans are thought to attend

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<sup>77</sup> David Bebbington, 'The Islington Conference' in *Evangelicalism and the Church of England in the Twentieth Century: Reform, Resistance and Renewal*, eds. Andrew Atherstone and John Maiden (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 65.



Evangelical parishes,<sup>78</sup> and in 2016 The Guardian claimed that 70% of those selected for ordination in the Church of England were reported to be Evangelicals.<sup>79</sup>

## 2: 5. Anglican Doctrine of Scripture

Having outlined above key features of an Evangelical doctrine of Scripture, I now turn to an overview of an Anglican doctrine of Scripture by looking at key documents and moments from the Church of England's history. This will then be compared with the observations above regarding an Evangelical doctrine of Scripture to identify what might be 'expected' beliefs for EAs, mindful that this will encompass a range of thought. In many ways it is hard to distinguish between an EA doctrine of Scripture and a purely Evangelical doctrine of Scripture and indeed, much of what follows might reflect the beliefs and approaches of many Evangelicals who do not consider themselves Anglican.

### 2: 5.1. Historic Official and Semi-Official Documents

The Church of England's canons and articles stress the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, and the unity and extent of the canon.<sup>80</sup> This is unsurprising, given the Church of England's history establishing itself as distinct from Roman Catholicism. Moreover, the 1662 Ordinal for Common Worship and the Lambeth Conference Resolutions underscore the authority and sufficiency of

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<sup>78</sup> Anonymous, 'Hot and Bothered', *The Economist*, March 10, 2012, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2012/03/10/hot-and-bothered>.

<sup>79</sup> Harriet Sherwood, 'As traditional believers turn away, is this a new crisis of faith?', *The Guardian*, August 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/13/church-of-england-evangelical-drive>.

<sup>80</sup> Canons A.5 and C.15 and Articles 6, 7, 20 and 21.

Scripture.<sup>81</sup> The 1958 Resolution 1 asserts the relevancy of Scripture<sup>82</sup> and the Book of Common Prayer speaks of divine intention in relation to the Bible as well as Christian practice.<sup>83</sup>

Interestingly, the only affirmations of the Bible's inspiration found amongst official or semi-official documentation is through ecumenical statements made by other church bodies, endorsed by the Church of England. So, the Porvoo Common Statement<sup>84</sup> declares the Scriptures to be 'the sufficient, inspired and authoritative record and witness, prophetic and apostolic, to God's revelation in Jesus Christ'<sup>85</sup> and the Anglican Methodist Covenant declares the Bible to be 'inspired by God.'<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, Post-Reformation developments attest to 'the characteristic Anglican way of living with a constant dynamic interplay of Scripture, tradition and reason.'<sup>87</sup>

Based on an overview of this documentation, it is of note that inspiration does not feature in the church's traditional statements and that affirmations of inerrancy or infallibility are absent.

However, the history of para-EA organisations demonstrates how divisive the issue of infallibility and inerrancy could be. In 1922 the Church Mission Society (CMS) split over the doctrine of Scripture, causing the formation of the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society (BCMS, now Crosslinks). Furthermore, in the 1980's, the Church Society replaced its editorial board of the Churchman journal after James Dunn's polemic against inerrancy featured, leading to the creation

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<sup>81</sup> 1888 Resolution 11 and 1930 Resolution 3.

<sup>82</sup> 'the Bible discloses the truths about the relation of God and man which are key to the world's predicament and is therefore deeply relevant to the modern world', 1958 Resolution 1.

<sup>83</sup> 'Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent,' Book of Common Prayer, Church of England, accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 2020, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/collects-epistles-and-gospels-2>.

<sup>84</sup> A report issued by official representatives of four Anglican Churches and eight Nordic and Baltic Churches in 1989-1992: the Church of England and Ireland, the Church in Wales and the Episcopal Church of Scotland, the Churches of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and the Evangelical-Lutheran Churches of Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia and Lithuania.

<sup>85</sup> The Porvoo Common Statement (London: Council for Christian Unity, 1993).

<sup>86</sup> An Anglican Methodist Covenant (Peterborough and London: Methodist Publishing House/CHP, 2001), 34.

<sup>87</sup> The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998 (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 12-13.

of the Anvil Journal by CMS. The absence of this language might attest to an attempt to safeguard Anglican unity.

It might also be surprising that the phrasing 'the Word of God' is absent in this documentation, though it should be noted that the liturgical response to the reading of the Bible in the Anglican Church is the statement 'this is the word of the Lord'.

## 2: 5.2. Recent Developments

More recently the Anglican Consultative Council commissioned the Bible in the Life of the Church project (BITLOTC) to identify key features of what the Bible is and how it functions in Anglican faith.<sup>88</sup> Though focused on the Anglican Global Communion it presents a contemporary insight to the role of the Bible, taking into account the breadth and variety of historical documentation, statements and reports conducted by the church. The reported emerging themes do not reflect typical doctrine of Scripture language, which is unsurprising given that the project is about the Bible 'in the life of the church.'<sup>89</sup> It affirms: Scripture's authority and its centrality for faith; the value of biblical scholarship; the experience of the Bible through worship; the complexity of application which needs scholarly and spiritual insight; the diversity of views in interpretation; the importance of historical and contemporary context; the transformational act of being read 'by' Scripture; the commonality of Anglican views with ecumenical partners; the unique interplay of Scripture, reason and tradition; and the necessity to continually build on insights from the past in continuing engagement with Scripture. These themes demonstrate an Anglican appreciation for

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<sup>88</sup> Amos, ed., *The Bible in the Life of the Church*.

<sup>89</sup> 'What the Anglican Communion has said about the Bible 2: Themes and Principles emerging from official and semi-official Anglican Communion documents', *The Bible in the Life of the Church*, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/254164/2-Themes-Principles.pdf>.

nance and complexity, as well as the role of tradition and reason. The emerging principles built upon these themes propagate a Christological approach to reading and interpreting, including the unity of the Testaments in Christ; a responsibility to explore multiple meanings; appreciation of genre; reading according to and informed by scientific discovery; the importance of historical and contemporary context to discern God's will; and the engagement of the Holy Spirit. These will be explored further in Section 2:7.

The BITLOC project shows a definite movement towards engaging with the Bible's function and consequently hermeneutics, rather than its inherent qualities, which were the driving forces behind various splits in the twentieth century. Further evidence for such a movement can be seen in the emergence of GAFCON (the Global Anglican Future Conference) and consequently the FCA (Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans). Whereas the Churchman/Anvil schism of the 1980s was specifically about a particular quality of the Bible, GAFCON and FCA were reactions against the ordination of homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions. The Bible was still at the crux of the divide, but its qualities were not the source of debate, rather how such qualities function in practice. As Rodman notes of this particular controversy, 'It is not the subject matter of biblical texts that we must examine, but the agency of Scripture— the power that certain parties attribute to it and the things it is made to do.'<sup>90</sup> As Stephen Lyon writes, reflecting on the BITLOT project;

for those on the "conservative" wing of the church passages like Romans 1:18–32 are seen as offering clear teaching on the incompatibility of same-sex relationships with the Christian profession. On the other hand, those of

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<sup>90</sup> Rosamond Rodman, 'We Are Anglicans, They Are the Church of England: Uses of Scripture in the Anglican Crisis,' in *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspective on Biblicalism*, ed. James Bielo (London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 100-13.

a more “liberal” theological stance suggest that this passage is far less clear about today’s context, as it is rooted in a Hellenistic society that viewed homosexuality very differently. Both perspectives take Scripture seriously, so it seems clear that we are all engaging with, interpreting, and using the Bible in different ways in our desire to seek its wisdom on the way we should live and behave but, in the process, are coming to differing conclusions.<sup>91</sup>

This quote demonstrates that the current divide within the Church of England is not concerned with what the Bible is, but how it is to be used. All take the Bible to be authoritative, inspired, consistent and true, but what that means for the present is construed differently.

In summary, an Anglican Doctrine of Scripture is rooted in the authority and sufficiency of the Old and New Testament which are God’s Word. It affirms the inspiration of Scripture but remains silent on whether this indicates infallibility or inerrancy. The Bible is accorded a central place in the life of the Church, but Anglicans are concerned to interpret the texts responsibly in conjunction with insights from science, scholarship and the Holy Spirit. Anglicans also recognise the role of tradition and reason in biblical interpretation and whilst reserving authority solely for Scripture itself, identifies the role of tradition and reason in understanding the authority of the Bible. In general, contemporary Anglicans are becoming more concerned with how the Bible is used and functions, rather than descriptive terminology about its nature.

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<sup>91</sup> Stephen Lyon, ‘Mind the Gap!: Reflections on the “Bible in the Life of the Church” Project,’ *Anglican Theological Review* 93, no.3 (2011): 449.

## 2: 6. Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture

Having overviewed both the Evangelical doctrine of Scripture and an Anglican doctrine of Scripture, there are clear features of overlap but also areas of tension, another factor that gives rise to the range found within Evangelical Anglicanism. What are the resulting doctrinal commitments that would be expected of an EA with regards to the Bible? These will be explored with reference to the work of John Stott and James Packer, two of the most predominant British leaders of Evangelical Anglicanism over the past few decades who have both written on the doctrine of Scripture.

### 2: 6.1. Authoritative

The Bible's authority is a key feature of Protestantism, inclusive of Evangelicals and Anglicans. For the Bible to be authoritative means that it is the source of belief and guide for behaviour. Its authority is therefore corporate and individual; corporate concerning doctrine and ecclesial practice and individual concerning personal conduct, choice and behaviour.

As the history of Evangelicalism has shown, the Bible's authority has become absolute so that proof of its authority cannot be sought from an external source, which would then become a higher authority. Scripture's authority is thus established from Scripture, and it is founded upon the nature of the Bible as being 'God's Word' and 'God-breathed'.<sup>92</sup> Whilst Anglicans would not disagree with this latter notion, their respect held for tradition recognises that biblical authority is inextricably linked to the people of God, i.e. the church. It is not that biblical authority derives from the church but rather is recognised in and through the church. As McGrath explains,

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<sup>92</sup> Based on interpretation of 2 Timothy 3:16.

For in part, the authority of Scripture rests in the universal acceptance of that authority within the Christian church ... We trust the Bible partly because it is trusted by the church. In ascribing authority to Scripture, we are not merely recognising and honouring God's decision to reveal himself to us, nor only the specific form which this took in Jesus Christ; we are also honouring a living tradition, which has remained faithful to the modes of faith and life made known and made possible through Jesus Christ, and mediated through Scripture.<sup>93</sup>

This emphasis on the living tradition of the church is also paired with a slightly more Anglican emphasis upon authority as derived from belief in and commitment to Jesus. It is not only that Jesus himself demonstrated belief in the authority of the Old Testament but that through the Scriptures, one comes to know Jesus. Biblical authority is thus a corollary of Jesus' authority.<sup>94</sup> This is demonstrated by Stott who affirms that biblical authority is predicated on its 'bear[ing] the stamp of [Jesus'] authority.'<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Alister McGrath and David Wenham, 'Biblical Authority,' in *Evangelical Anglicans*, eds. France and McGrath, 30.

<sup>94</sup> The inerrancy movement (discussed below) has led to accusations of bibliolatry – that the authority of Scripture is not just derived from God but equal to God. This could be levied at Packer who claims, 'Scripture comes to us, as it were, from Jesus' hand, and its authority and his are so interlocked as to be one.' (James Packer, *Truth and Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1996), 39.) Whether an accusation of bibliolatry is valid is beyond the scope of my discussion, rather the point is to note that belief in authority can have different emphases for different thinkers.

<sup>95</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, 68.

## 2: 6.2. Inspired (Word of God)

Both Evangelicals and Anglicans believe in the inspiration of Scripture as a result of the Bible being the Word of God – the Bible is God’s Word because it is inspired, and it is inspired because it is God’s Word.

How exactly the process of inspiration is thought to work has tended to be more of a debate amongst Evangelicals; what does inspiration indicate about the level of human autonomy in the writing of the Bible? A rare view on the more extreme conservative end of the spectrum holds to a ‘verbal dictation’ theory of inspiration, which maintains that God ‘told’ the authors of the Bible what to write, reducing the role of the human author of Scripture. A much more common middle-ground espoused by the majority of Evangelicals and Anglicans is a ‘verbal plenary’ theory of inspiration which upholds both the autonomy and individuality of the human author whilst maintaining that the text is also entirely what God wanted to say. This belief has sometimes been described using an analogy to the incarnation of Jesus; in the same way that Jesus is both fully human and fully God, the Bible is also fully the work of human authors whilst being fully the words of God.<sup>96</sup> This is the stance of both Packer and Stott, who argue that human freedom and divine freedom are not mutually exclusive, and that God works through ‘concurative operation’ whereby God uses the skills, knowledge and personality of a fallible human to write what is infallible.<sup>97</sup> A final theory of inspiration located towards the more liberal end of the spectrum is ‘dynamic’ inspiration. This theory asserts that the thoughts or concepts of the human authors were divinely

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<sup>96</sup> At times, focus upon the resultant product of ‘God’s Words’ has led to accusations that ‘verbal plenary’ inspiration is not so dissimilar from ‘verbal dictation’. To discuss whether such an accusation is warranted is beyond what I have room for, but it does point out the careful balance this theory requires to approaching the text as both human and divine.

<sup>97</sup> Stott referencing Packer in: Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, 32.



inspired by God, but not the words used to articulate them, thus placing greater emphasis on the human authors. All these views are common amongst Anglican Evangelicals.

In addition to various ideas about how exactly inspiration 'works', is the debate about whether such views inevitably lead to affirmations of infallibility and inerrancy. For some, inerrancy is a necessary consequence of the Bible being God's Word on account of it being inspired but for others, such as Stott, the language of inerrancy is considered to be unhelpful and various grounds are offered as to why this is the case.<sup>98</sup> In fact, amongst scholarship there is no agreement as to what infallibility and inerrancy actually constitute and whether they even differ, though a popular understanding indicates that infallibility equates to reliable and trustworthy, whereas inerrancy is stricter and equates to 'without error'. Either way, the text's trustworthiness is a natural corollary of its being inspired and God's Word, which can be construed in a variety of ways with a variety of connotations.

## 2: 6.3. Sufficient

The sufficiency of the Bible has been shown to be typically a feature of an Anglican doctrine of Scripture given its history and disassociation from Rome. However, the Bible's sufficiency features as a prominent characteristic of Evangelical doctrine of Scriptures, even though not commonly found in Evangelical organisation's statements of faith. For the Bible to be sufficient means that no further teaching or resource is needed for an understanding of God's character, action and purposes. Sometimes this is framed with an emphasis upon authority and sometimes with an emphasis upon salvation.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 70-71.

The sufficiency of Scripture in relation to salvation is that all one needs to know for salvation is contained in the Bible. This emphasis understands the sufficiency of Scripture to be a consequence of 'the sufficiency of Christ to whom it witnesses.'<sup>99</sup> On the other hand, the sufficiency of Scripture as a corollary of its authority highlights that if other resources were needed for knowledge of God then Scripture would not be sole authority. This line of thinking is particularly shaped against Church tradition. For Packer, any tradition that contributes to an understanding of the Bible, must first be derived from the Bible, in order to maintain Scripture's sufficiency.<sup>100</sup>

Interestingly, both thinkers point to Article 6 of the Church of England to describe Scripture's sufficiency but refute the Anglican tradition of according also a significant place to the role of tradition and reason. This view is a distinctive of the EA stance. Stott is clear that biblical authority is absolute:

A popular Anglican answer is that Christ rules his church through the 'threefold cord' of Scripture, tradition and reason. In other words, authority is dispersed, not centralized ... But in practice the threefold cord is unworkable. For what happens if and when the three authorities are in conflict with one another? Then Scripture must take precedence.<sup>101</sup>

Both Stott and Packer minimise tradition in their accounts of the Bible's sufficiency. Whilst recognising its importance and utility, their concern to establish Scripture's supreme authority

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>100</sup> James Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016), 106-9.

<sup>101</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, 64-65.

means that tradition is given short shrift. A deeper appreciation of tradition is found in McGrath and Wenham who stress:

Evangelicals have always been prone to read Scripture as if they were the first to do so. The Anglican ethos provides an invaluable corrective to this tendency, by reminding us that others have been there before us, and have read it before us. This process of receiving the scriptural revelation is 'tradition' – not a source of revelation in addition to Scripture, but a particular way of understanding Scripture which the Christian church has recognised as responsible and reliable.<sup>102</sup>

The sufficiency of Scripture is therefore an affirmation of the Bible as sole authority and adequate for knowledge of salvation. The extent to which tradition and other sources of input are actually used in the way the Bible functions is a point of variance amongst Evangelicals and Anglicans.

#### 2: 6.4. Clear

As has been noted, the clarity of Scripture, like the sufficiency of Scripture, does not feature prominently in Evangelical statements of faith. A principle stemming from the Reformation but contested with the rise of biblical criticism, the Bible's clarity is asserted by both Anglicans and Evangelicals, but this clarity does not mean one can easily understand everything in the Bible. Whilst specialist training and education is needed in order to be able to understand certain aspects of the Bible, it is maintained that even the most basically educated can read the Bible and

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<sup>102</sup> McGrath and Wenham, 'Biblical Authority,' 28.

understand the core message of salvation in order to respond to it. The details of what this means are not explained, nor which passages specifically detail the core message of salvation. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy declares, 'We deny that all passages of Scripture are equally clear or have equal bearing on the message of redemption.'<sup>103</sup> But again, where exactly the clear passages are is not specified.

The clarity of Scripture is a much less contested issue amongst Evangelicals and Anglicans, though connected concerns about the role of higher criticism have called into question the ability of the lay reader to understand the Bible properly. However, it is still agreed that the central message of salvation is clear and accessible to all readers and this is ultimately a feature of the Bible being God's written revelation.

## 2: 6.5. Unit/Consistent

Both Evangelicals and Anglicans hold firmly to the belief that both testaments are essential to understanding God's salvific work and that they faithfully reflect the unchanging character of God throughout redemption history. However, Evangelicals and Anglicans also believe in progressive revelation – that God reveals different truths at different times in history, which explains the need for a New Testament to document the ultimate revelation of God in Jesus. Progressive revelation is affirmed in understanding the New Testament to be the culmination of all that was established in the Old Testament, but EAs reject the idea that the Old Testament represents Israel's evolving ideas about God that developed and thus overwrote one another as they were built. As Packer says:

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<sup>103</sup> 'Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy'

God was certainly amplifying people's knowledge about Himself throughout the revelatory process, but the idea that what was revealed later contradicts and cancels what was revealed earlier is wrong. So is the widespread neglect of the Old Testament to which this idea has led. The New Testament revelation rests at every point on the Old as its foundation, and to remove the foundation once the superstructure is in place is the surest way to dislodge the superstructure itself.<sup>104</sup>

The Old and New Testaments are thus both essential for a full of understanding of God's revelation of himself and his plan for salvation.

Additionally, the Bible's unity and consistency are not just affirmed on theological grounds according to their content but also on account of the entire Bible being 'God's Word'. The unity and consistency of Scripture are hence characteristics of God which must apply to Scripture as his word. Both the content and author of Scripture point to its consistency and unity.

## 2: 7. Hermeneutics

Having specified five key features of an EA doctrine of Scripture and suggested a range of positions and nuances within a commitment to these five features, they can be further illuminated by connection to their hermeneutic counterparts. That is to say, what it means for the Bible to be authoritative or inspired is seen in the practices and methods that one engages in interpretation.

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<sup>104</sup> Packer, *God has Spoken*, 81-2.

This is the postulated relationship between the doctrine of Scripture and hermeneutics for EAs. One must interpret the text within a commitment to the doctrine of Scripture. This means reading the text in light of its divine and human authors. For Packer, one of the tragedies of the rise in biblical criticism, is the presuppositions he saw often accompanying it which ‘viewed the Bible as a library of human documents, fallible and often fallacious, and defended this as the only “scientific” view.’<sup>105</sup> Whilst recognising that biblical criticism is an essential task of the interpreter, Packer believes it only to be so when ‘based on fully biblical presuppositions about that which we are studying.’<sup>106</sup> Equally, Stott recognises that the task of interpretation is not problem-free but that the proper response to difficulties that aren’t easily solved is to ‘retain our belief about Scripture on the ground that Jesus himself taught and exhibited it.’<sup>107</sup> An ordinary reader, therefore, should interpret the Bible according to their belief in its divine qualities. This naturally leads to the adoption of certain principles and the rejection of others, as will be seen in the following sections. The doctrine of Scripture is to be a controlling influence in the way the text is read. However, in connection with this idea is another that sits somewhat at odds with it. This is not something Packer addresses but is stressed by Stott and also Thiselton. Whilst approaching the text with a firm commitment to its inspired and authoritative nature is mandated, there is also a concern that the reader maintains an openness so that the text can be properly heard, and one does not end up reading their own agenda back into the text. As Stott puts it:

we come to the Bible with our agenda formulated by us alone, our expectations pre-set, our minds made up, laying down in advance what we

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>107</sup> John Stott, *The Bible: book for today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 30.

want God to say to us. Then, instead of hearing the thunderclap of his voice, all we receive are the soothing echoes of our own cultural prejudice.<sup>108</sup>

Stott couches this 'echo' primarily as a cultural concern, that the reader does not become so entrenched in their own culture that they can't hear anything outside of its voice. It would seem that for Stott, theological or doctrinal presuppositions are therefore important and necessary, but not cultural ones. However, there might be some EAs that would question this. Thiselton claims that the ability to be addressed by God and confronted with the truth through Scripture is muted when there is too rigid a framework in place that pigeonholes interpretation into a determined outcome. Scripture is alive and active but 'a word that must always be made to conform to pre-packaged theology has already been tamed and domesticated.'<sup>109</sup>

This doctrinal commitment, therefore, is something of a fine balancing act between reading within a belief in the divine and authoritative nature of Scripture but reading with an openness to the text's voice addressing the reader. This begs the question, what does this look like practically? How does a commitment to the five descriptors of the Bible's nature above determine hermeneutical approach and method, in theory? This is now explored with continuing reference to Evangelical thinkers Stott and Packer, as well as Thiselton, to build up a range of theoretical hermeneutical practices EA readers would be expected to have.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>109</sup> Anthony Thiselton, 'Understanding God's Word Today,' in *Obedying Christ in a Changing World: vol 1, The Lord Christ*, ed. John Stott (Glasgow: Fountain Books, 1977), 97.

## 2: 7.1. Historical

Evangelicals and Anglicans affirm the historicity at the heart of their faith; the person of Jesus, his teachings, miracles, death and resurrection are historically verifiable events, recorded in Scripture. The Bible thus make itself vulnerable to historical investigation as its claims and its stories occur within time and place, they are not abstract truths unattached to human history. Whilst Evangelicals and Anglicans are clear that Jesus was a historical figure, the historicity of the Old Testament in particular is often debated. Do affirmations of the Bible as inspired and God's Word commit one to read the events and stories recorded as historical, real events? For Packer, the only appropriate answer for an EA is – yes. His strong affirmation of divine authorship means trusting what the Bible says. This does not mean historical scholarship is unnecessary to better illuminate what the author was intending to convey (below, 2:7.2), but that holding to a view that the biblical text could attest something different to 'what really happened', 'overthrows the biblical idea of faith, which is essentially of honouring God by tenaciously trusting to what He has said.'<sup>110</sup> And what God has said, when it comes to the Old Testament, is exactly what the authors said:

The New Testament faith about the Old Testament was that the real narrator of Israel's history in the Law and Former Prophets (that is, the Pentateuch and historical books), and the real psalmist, poet, and wisdom-teacher in the Writings, as well as the real preacher of the prophets' sermons, was God Himself.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 74.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 92.



To believe in the Bible as God's Word, is therefore a commitment to read not just the Gospels historically, but the entire Bible. If scholarship were able to identify that a biblical author was not intending to convey a historical account (for example, Jesus' parables) then under such circumstances a historical reading would presumably not be required.

However, this is not necessarily the case for all EAs. Historical reading of the Bible for some is not always a uniform subscription across all the texts but varies according to their content and genre. This is another area in which there is a great variety of approaches.

## 2: 7.2. Exegesis

In connection with historical reading is the task of exegesis. This is the exercise of trying to understand what the original author meant, which is couched as ultimately discerning God's intention in communication. According to Packer:

Exegesis involves, on the one hand, setting each passage against its external background (historical, cultural, geographical, linguistic, literary), and, on the other hand, determining from its intrinsic characteristics its aim, scope, standpoint, presuppositions, and range and limit of interest.<sup>112</sup>

This is referred to as historical-grammatical exegesis and is understood to be necessary because of God's choice to speak through human beings throughout the course of history. The specific methods mentioned by Packer above involve both general and specific knowledge about the time,

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 98.

place, circumstances and context of a particular text, and EA readers would therefore be expected to read in the light of this type of information.

Stott frames this process of exegesis as 'distancing', borrowing from the work of Thiselton (who relies on Gadamer). This is a slightly more dynamic way of construing the historical exploration of the text. Rather than collecting and applying relevant knowledge, the process of 'distancing' places an emphasis on the personal involvement of the individual in respecting a text's historicity.

This means we have to acknowledge "the pastness of the past", disengage ourselves from the text, and allow it its own historical integrity. We must avoid letting ourselves intrude into it or deciding prematurely how it applies to us. Careful exegesis of the text necessitates studying it on its own cultural and linguistic terms.<sup>113</sup>

Putting these two perspectives of exegesis together paints a task that involves both acquiring and employing relevant knowledge to illuminate the world of the author and their purposes and intentions and remaining self-aware of one's own agenda and cultural conditionings in order to do justice and effectively engage with the historical knowledge acquired. This is done in service of answering the question 'what did the author mean?'

As has been mentioned, the task of exegesis is to be conducted within a commitment to the fundamental nature of Scripture. This does not necessitate a particular method or technique, but rather limits the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn. Packer would not have readers follow the mistakes of critical scholarship which 'committed itself to a method of study which

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<sup>113</sup> Stott, *The Bible*, 37-8.

assumed that Scripture might err anywhere. It told the Church that the Bible could never be rightly understood till belief in its inerrancy was given up.<sup>114</sup> The reader conducting exegesis cannot therefore conclude that the Bible is wrong about something it states or expresses, or is in contradiction with another part of the Bible, the hermeneutical practice I turn to next.

## 2: 7.3. Canonical Reading

Of particular concern for Packer, is reading a passage in the light of the whole Bible. He describes this hermeneutical task as 'synthesis', which follows exegesis:

Because the Bible is a divine book as well as a human one, and because the sixty-six separate documents that make it up, under all their human diversity, are products of a single divine mind setting forth a single message, it is necessary to proceed from exegesis to synthesis, and to seek to integrate the fruit of our study of the individual books and writers into a single coherent whole... The full significance of each passage only appears when it is set in the context of all the rest of Scripture – which its own author, of course, was never able to do.<sup>115</sup>

The task of synthesis thus goes beyond exegesis. In exegesis, the answer to the questions posed could be provided by an explanation from the author in question but synthesis goes beyond what the original author knows and places their writing in the context of the rest of the Bible. This

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<sup>114</sup> Packer, *God has Spoken*, 27.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

involves three principles according to Packer: first, recognising the central themes of the Bible; second, understanding the two testaments in light of one another; and third, awareness that the Bible does not contradict itself. This is a sub-point to which I will shortly turn as a separate but connected element of canonical reading.

First, it is important to note that the hermeneutical practice of synthesis is determined by the divine nature of the text and a belief in its sole author God and resultant unity and consistency. It is also worth recognising that this hermeneutic is not a specific method. It is not clear whether one is to generally understand a passage in the light of the Bible's overarching narrative and themes (and what exactly that looks like), or whether it should also be specifically compared with similar texts in theology, content or style.

Finally, canonical reading is not necessarily espoused by all EAs. Contra Stott and Packer, Thiselton explicitly calls for interpretation that does not read concerns or theological themes from other parts of the Bible back into particular texts, arguing, 'the distinctive message of each particular text should be accorded its proper rights.'<sup>116</sup> This is not to say that Thiselton pays no heed to the canon of Scripture and treats texts as purely isolated, but rather that synthesis need not always be involved in hermeneutics, and when it is, it need not be practiced too quickly without hearing the text on its own terms first.

Whilst some of the specifics of synthesis might be unclear in Packer's writing, one of the more detailed practices that is encouraged is harmonisation, to which I now turn.

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<sup>116</sup> Thiselton, 'Understanding God's Word,' 98.

### 2: 7.3.1. Harmonisation

As a consequence of God being the author of all Scripture, and particularly as a result of a commitment to inerrancy, the Bible is understood to be non-contradictory. If the task of synthesis brings texts into conversation with another, then hermeneutics therefore involves harmonisation, 'not setting text against text or supposing apparent contradictions to be real ones but seeking rather to let one passage throw light on another in the certainty that there is in Scripture a perfect agreement between part and part, which careful study will be able to bring out.'<sup>117</sup>

Stott is in agreement with this but demonstrates more tolerance for apparent contradictions in Scripture. He believes 'the most Christian response is neither to make a premature negative judgement, nor to resort to a contrived harmonisation, but rather to suspend judgement, waiting patiently for further illumination to be given to us.'<sup>118</sup> Whilst Stott is equally committed to canonical reading and the truth of Scripture, he is reluctant to insist on the principle of harmonisation if this results in manufactured interpretations and is happier to believe that there is an acceptable answer which might be currently beyond understanding.

EAs would therefore be expected to deny contradictions in the text or accept that discrepancies might not be easily explained, whilst understanding passages in the light of the canon, particularly its broader themes and insight gained from the unity of the testaments.

### 2: 7.4. Work of the Holy Spirit

Key to hermeneutics and the process of interpretation is the work of the Holy Spirit who ensures right understanding and enables fresh insight and revelation. This is both a prominent feature of

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<sup>117</sup> Packer, *God Has Spoken*, 98.

<sup>118</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, 71.

both Anglican and Evangelical interpretation. To underscore this biblically, texts such as John 14:26 and 16:13 are often cited, which is Jesus' speech to the disciples that the Holy Spirit will teach and guide in truth.

How exactly the Holy Spirit works is not dwelt on, but rather its effects both in terms of the historical text and contemporary reader. In relation to the former, the Holy Spirit enables the ability to make connection with the bible's authors: 'But the capacity to put oneself in the shoes of Isaiah, or Paul, or John, and see with his eyes and feel with his heart is the gift, not of academic training, but of the Holy Spirit through the new birth.'<sup>119</sup> For Thiselton, the work of the spirit in accessing the past is not independent of exegesis: 'Once again, the Spirit is not a short cut to bypass the need for reflection and study. The Spirit of God works *through* human means, and not normally independent of them.'<sup>120</sup>

On the other hand, the work of the Holy Spirit is also crucial in hearing God's voice through the text as a contemporary reader. As Stott puts it, 'Because Scripture is the Word of God, we should read it as we read no other book – on our knees, humbly, reverently, prayerfully, looking to the Holy Spirit for illumination.'<sup>121</sup> Packer goes further in asserting that the benefits of Scripture cannot be gained 'till the Spirit quickens our minds and consciences to measure and judge ourselves by Scripture, and to discern the issues of repentance, and faith, and obedience, and amending of our ways, which across the centuries Holy Scripture forces upon us.'<sup>122</sup> It is the work of the Holy Spirit that thus provides insight into the application of Scripture in terms of individual behaviour.

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<sup>119</sup> Packer, *God has Spoken*, 98.

<sup>120</sup> Thiselton, 'Understanding God's Word,' 119.

<sup>121</sup> Stott, *The Bible*, 20.

<sup>122</sup> Packer, *God has Spoken*, 101.

For the EA reader then, they must be prepared for the work of the Spirit when interpreting the text. What this looks like in terms of specific practices or how one would discern the work of the holy spirit in somebody else, is difficult to decipher.

## 2: 7.5. Application

For many EA thinkers, the goal of exegesis and synthesis is for the text to be able to have meaning and relevance for the present, and for many, this takes the form of application. Application understands the Bible's teaching to be authoritative today, confirming the Bible's eternal relevance. This is also then an affirmation of the Bible's sufficiency, what God *has said* in the Bible, is what he *continues to say* to believers today.

Application is not straightforward giving the alien culture of the text. How can the text have a meaningful impact upon modern readers? Stott promotes the method of cultural transposition, which distinguishes between a text's meaning (the revelation) and its medium (its communication). Cultural transposition involves recognising the eternal revelation amidst the cultural communication of the message. 'The procedure now is to identify the essential revelation in the text (what God is saying here), to separate this from the cultural form in which he chose to give it, and then to re-clothe it in appropriate modern cultural terms.'<sup>123</sup> This is deemed to be only necessary and appropriate when the text in question contains 'two levels of discourse' – doctrinal and ethical teaching on the one hand, and its cultural and social expression on the other. This is therefore an adept method for the new testament epistles and Jesus' teaching, but not for the majority of Old Testament narrative, poetry or prophecy.

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<sup>123</sup> Stott, *The Bible*, 47.

How is one to apply texts which are not ethical or doctrinal teachings? Stott draws a distinction between a text's meaning (what the author meant) which is fixed, and its significance (how it affects different people and has an impact in different contexts), which is variable. The process of application thus involves the work of exegesis to identify authorial intent and then assess what this means in today's contemporary culture. Quite how this leap is made is not specified, but this is 'fusion', the counterpart and next step after 'distancing'.

This view of application understands the Bible to be prescribing propositional truth either for knowledge or obedience. As Packer puts it, considering 'all Scripture is instruction in one way or another from the God of truth'<sup>124</sup> then application is obedience; 'the privilege of knowing God's truth with certainty and precision carries with it the responsibility of obeying that truth with equal precision.'<sup>125</sup>

However, an alternative understanding of application questions the idea that the Bible can be reduced to instruction and conceives of bible reading as a transformational process in and of itself, not just through the process of obeying instruction. Application is therefore something that happens in and through the process of reading, rather than afterwards. It focuses on the experiential quality of Bible reading rather than specific concrete calls to action. In addition, then, this view does not suppose that application involves reading the Bible for answers about specific life situations:

The Bible is not a textbook guide to modern situations, but is what makes  
the Christian the person he is. Because the Bible makes him into a person

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<sup>124</sup> Packer, *Truth and Power*, 53.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 29.



of Christian mind and Christian judgement, the Christian may reflect responsibly and rationally about God's will in and for the present. The Bible makes the Christian; the Christian responds to the situation.<sup>126</sup>

This view is not at odds with Packer and Stott but demonstrates different a emphasis with regards to the nature of application. In the first view, the Bible is understood as a book of propositional truth to be learnt and obeyed in specific choices and behaviours. In the second view, the Bible is understood as a transformational text that changes character through the virtue of reading, which then informs specific choices and behaviours.

## 2: 8. Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the historical underpinnings of Evangelical beliefs about the Bible both independently and in connection with the Church of England, which has provided the foundation for an assessment of the range of contemporary beliefs that would be expected to be held by EAs with regards to the doctrine of Scripture. These have then been reflected on in relation to their hermeneutic counterparts, providing a framework of beliefs, practices and attitudes that could be expected from a contemporary reader.

The emerging picture is therefore readers who believe in the authority and divine inspiration of Scripture as the Word of God and look to it for an understanding of who God is and how they should live in the present. The testaments should be taken together and understood to be

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<sup>126</sup> Thiselton, 'Understanding God's Word,' 118.

necessary to a full picture of redemptive history. With regards to salvation and knowledge, the Bible is both clear and sufficient and trustworthy.

Reading the Bible thus involves employing a variety of extrabiblical knowledge to try and understand as fully as possible what a text would have meant to its original author and recipient, in conjunction with a self-awareness of one's own cultural conditioning that can be a barrier to accessing the past. This requires balancing a view of the text as a historical document but also as divinely inspired and truthful. Texts should be understood in light of the Bible as a whole, with contradictions not to be accepted, with the ultimate goal of being able to apply the text in such a way that affects the everyday life, behaviour and choices of the reader. All of this is to be conducted within and through the work of the Holy Spirit who enables right understanding and insight into the text.

I now turn in the next chapter to an outline of my research methodology, designed to assess the beliefs and practices of EAs set out in this chapter.

# CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

## 3: 1. Introduction

This chapter outlines my proposed methodology and rationale for it. After an initial account of my hypothesis and design, this chapter explores specific aspects of the methodology, first, in terms of what was planned according to the ideals set out by methodological practitioners and then second, how these plans actually went in reality. This chapter therefore provides a comprehensive overview of the logistics of the research undertaken and an assessment of the design as a whole. The chapter concludes by introducing my focus groups and participants.

## 3: 2. Research Hypothesis

My research hypothesises first and primarily, that the doctrine of Scripture has an influential role in how EAs interpret the Bible; in other words, that the doctrine of Scripture and interpretation are in some form of affective relationship. Its second hypothesis is that theological education might impact this relationship. As such, my research is designed in order to answer the following questions:

What is the role of the Doctrine of Scripture in the reading and interpreting  
of biblical texts?

Does this role vary according to theological education?

I planned to explore these dynamics through gathering qualitative data of EAs reading and interpreting the Bible.

### 3: 3. Focus Groups

The decision to conduct focus groups rather than interviews or written reflections was made on a number of grounds. Though individual interviews would have provided rich data on the nature of people's beliefs about Scripture and has the advantage of the researcher being able to probe specifically in order to gather the exact information required, focus groups provide a much more suitable arena for the investigation of this topic.

First, they allow for a more natural context for study of the Bible to occur. It may be that some participants are used to reading and interpreting the Bible alone, but to then share and articulate this process with a researcher adds an unnatural element to the activity that could impact what was shared. By contrast, having a group read and discuss the Bible together provides a much more authentic environment for interpretations to be voiced. The practice of small group Bible studies is familiar to Evangelical Christians and replicates a common activity, which not only adds to the credibility of the research but also reflects the fact that small groups are the arena in which a large majority of bible interpretation takes place for ordinary readers.<sup>127</sup> As the aim of this research is to understand interpretative practices, creating an environment similar to that in which such

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<sup>127</sup> Peter Bunton, '300 Years of Small Groups – The European Church from Luther to Wesley,' *Christian Education Journal* 1 (2014): 88-106.

interpretative practices would normally take place will produce more authentic and reliable findings. Moreover, in order to ascertain authentic responses to the text, focus groups have the added benefit of allowing participants to explore their own ideas and ask the questions that naturally arise for them in their reading of the text. This allows reading priorities to be identified and the extent to which they are connected to doctrinal beliefs about the Bible. Though an individual could be asked to reflect on whatever they want after a solo reading of the text, this 'free-reign' is better suited to a group environment, where such processes are more familiar and also where thought is often clarified in relation to others.

This leads me to the second reason focus groups are an appropriate method for my research: the ability to analyse interaction. Focus groups allow people's ideas to sharpen and crystalize in conversation, present areas of agreement and conflict, and can record reaction and response. As Rasika Jayasekara notes, 'a foundational premise of the focus group is that the group dynamic can assist people in expressing and clarifying their views in ways that are less likely to occur in a one-to-one interview.'<sup>128</sup> Analysis focused at the level of interaction allows for the process behind conclusions to be transparent, not just the conclusions themselves. Considering the aim of identifying the controlling influence of the doctrine of Scripture upon interpretations, focus groups provide a forum in which not just interpretative conclusions are offered but the rationale and process behind such conclusions is likely to be made explicit in group interaction. This allows better connections to be made between doctrinal beliefs and interpretative conclusions.

Third and finally, there are theological warrants for researching this topic through focus groups. The first of these relates to dispositional accounts of belief which understand belief as '*action-*

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<sup>128</sup> Rasika Jayasekara, 'Focus Groups in Nursing Research: Methodological Perspectives,' *Nursing Outlook* 60 (2012): 412.

*oriented, situation-related*, and embedded in the *particularities and contingencies* of everyday living.<sup>129</sup> What this means is that the reality of lived belief, as opposed to professed belief, is best identified in practice, particularly in situations that challenge belief. In the view of H.H. Price, summarised by Thiselton, ‘the test of a “real” belief, in contrast to what we may merely claim to believe, lies not in whether such a belief lies consciously in the mind, but in the course of action, or in the habituated actions, which proceed from the belief.’<sup>130</sup> In other words, my perception of what Christians believe about the Bible will be more accurate in response to challenges they experience reading the text, than if they were interviewed about their beliefs directly. By presenting participants with a text that challenges biblical beliefs in an environment where they would naturally give voice to their thoughts (as opposed to a solo Bible study), their doctrine of Scripture can be adequately determined from a focus group setting.

A second theological warrant for the use of focus groups is the social nature of doctrine. McGrath has identified doctrine’s role in demarcating group-identity. He explains,

Doctrine thus defines communities of discourse. It does not merely structure the conceptual frameworks and specific modes of discourse of those communities; it identifies them as social entities, marking them off from other social groupings. It serves as a means of creating social identity, shaping the outlook of a community and justifying its original and

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<sup>129</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007), 21. (Emphasis author’s own)

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

continued existence in the face of rival communities with comparable claims.<sup>131</sup>

Given that 'Evangelical' is a broad term and encompasses a variety of theologies, the social nature of doctrine is as relevant now as it was when it was first formed. Doctrine is not merely an intellectual exercise but is symbolic of the social identity of a group of people; the social nature of focus groups is therefore adept to research doctrine as a social phenomenon. The doctrine of Scripture is a collective doctrine of the church, but its varying forms differentiate and identify certain sub-groups, particularly within Evangelicalism, such as 'conservatives' from 'liberals'. The social nature of focus groups provides a forum in which such identities will arise, most likely in conflict. One is more likely to assert their 'conservative' biblical beliefs when faced with the 'liberal' alternative, whereas an interview or solo reflection would be less likely to provoke doctrinal reflections connected with social demarcation.

### 3: 3.1. Focus Groups in Practice

As anticipated, focus groups proved to be a helpful arena in which to explore both doctrinal belief about the Bible and interpretive practices. Participants appeared to be familiar with the format and practice of reading and discussing collectively, and though some groups did include longer pauses or times of silence, these were always towards the start of the first discussion, suggesting they were a function of adjusting to the social environment, rather than because of unfamiliarity with reading and discussing texts.

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<sup>131</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A study in the foundations of doctrinal criticism* (Basil Blackwell Ltd: Oxford, 1990), 38.

Though the discussion did not prompt as many reflections on the nature of the Bible as might have occurred in individual or group interviews, a dispositional account of the doctrine of Scripture was clearly discernible through group interaction, as will be seen during analysis (chp 5).

Two of the focus groups were conducted online as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. This was towards the start of the pandemic and though many people were quickly adapting to conducting all their social interaction 'online', the online format did have an impact upon group interaction. Participants could see and hear one another, but due to internet connections, there were occasions where a participant claimed they hadn't been able to hear another participant correctly. These instances were minimal but naturally impeded clear communication between the participants and thus had an impact upon group dynamics.

Additionally, the most obvious difference in the online groups was that individuals tended to speak for much longer, as interruptions occur less naturally in the online environment. Though shorter bursts of back-and-forth dialogue did occur, these were rare and in general participants tended to speak for several minutes at once. However, though this reduced overall interaction, participants did still reference what other participants had said, demonstrating their involvement in a conversation, rather than just putting forth their individual opinion. This accords with comparative research on in-person and online focus groups which has found that though the format of the data may differ, the content is similar across both type of group.<sup>132</sup> Additionally, comparative research has shown that online groups may generate a lower quantity of data, but the same quality.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Catherine Finneran, Rob Stephenson, and Cory Woodyatt, 'In-Person Versus Online Focus Group Discussions: A Comparative Analysis of Data Quality,' *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no.6 (2016): 741–749.

<sup>133</sup> James Kite and Philayrath Phongsavan, 'Insights for conducting real-time focus groups online using a web conferencing service,' *F1000Research* 6 (2017): 1-6, 10.12688/f1000research.10427.1. This was evident in comparing the transcripts of my online and in-person groups. The transcript of the online groups was between 8,500 and 9,000



### 3: 4. Questionnaires

The intention was that participants' beliefs and interpretation might arise naturally in the focus groups, but I anticipated that a potential drawback of this was that the discussion would not yield adequate data relating to the doctrine of Scripture. To safeguard against this prospect, I planned to incorporate a questionnaire as a secondary mode of data gathering that would allow for specific opinions to be gathered. This safeguarding measure had the added benefit of taking the pressure off the moderator to direct the conversation as relevant opinions would be gathered from the participants through the questionnaires if they did not arise in the discussion.

The questionnaire would contain two sections. The first section would contain statements about the texts read in the group with a Likert-scale response indicating level of agreement or disagreement with the statements. This would also offer a further safeguarding measure against participant self-censorship or conformity as participants would be able to submit their true opinions privately. The second section of the questionnaire would contain statements relating to the doctrine of Scripture, also with a Likert-scale response, in order to capture participant's beliefs about the Bible.

Deciding when participants would complete the questionnaire was an important point to consider. Completing the questionnaire after the discussion would have the major advantage of not influencing the focus of the discussion. In order to gain the most authentic insight into Bible-reading practices as they occur in reality, participants would need to come to the Bible reading free of any priorities or concerns that would alter their usual approach. Having participants think

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words, whereas the in-person transcripts were between 10,000 and 11,200 words. However, the same topics and depth of data was gathered from both.

about the doctrine of Scripture in some depth before approaching the interpretive task might illicit responses during the discussion that they would not otherwise have done. It might also contribute to a mindset where the projected wishes and expectations of the researcher bear weight on what participants choose to say. Previous research has demonstrated that when combining individual interviews with focus groups, interviews that followed the group led to fewer discrepancies and similarity in accounts than those that preceded the groups.<sup>134</sup> Assuming that this would be the case for questionnaires as well as interviews, this led to the decision for the questionnaires to follow the group discussions.

### 3: 4.1. Questionnaires in Practice

Questionnaires were conducted after the discussion as anticipated and contained the two sections as proposed. The order of some of this material was changed after the pilot, described below (Section 3:9).

However, questionnaires largely proved redundant. The focus groups provided rich data warranting extensive analysis, and it quickly became apparent that the thesis would not have the space to consider the questionnaire responses to any level of detail. Though analysis of the questionnaires would have provided some specific reflections as to doctrinal beliefs and interpretative conclusions, the focus groups alone provided ample relevant data to analyse. Therefore, the questionnaire data has been left out of the analysis of this thesis to give appropriate priority to discussion of the focus group data.

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<sup>134</sup> David Morgan, 'Focus Groups,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 22 (1996): 138.

### 3: 5. Focus Group Design

The design for my focus groups was informed by similar research in the field, particularly Perrin's focus groups. Her research methodology involved groups reading three texts during a single focus group and demonstrated how text selection is crucial in eliciting the desired discussion content. I wanted to gather a breadth of interpretative responses which would require the reading of multiple texts and wanted these texts to implicitly challenge participants as to their beliefs about the Bible and their connection to interpretation. The process of text selection is discussed in Chapter 4.

Two hours seemed a maximum reasonable time to ask a participant to partake in the research that would allow for multiple texts to be covered but not run the risk of participants becoming overly bored, tired or unlikely to take part because of the time commitment.

Following Perrin's structure, I planned to cover three texts during the allotted two hours, allowing for around half an hour for each text discussion. The other half hour would include time for an introduction, break, conclusion as well as filling out the questionnaires after the discussion.

In order that participants didn't need to bring anything and to ensure everyone was reading the same version of the text, I planned to provide handouts with the passage printed out using the NRSV version. Copies of these can be found in Appendix 1.

#### 3: 5.1. Focus Group Design in Practice

One of the biggest advantages of following Perrin's focus group design was that as it had been tried and tested, no practical adjustments were needed after the Pilot Study allowing it to be included in the main body of data, discussed below (3:9).

30 minutes proved to be adequate time for participants to discuss each text. For some text discussions, some groups seemed to be able to talk for much longer and needed to be brought to a close, for other text discussions the group didn't have as much to say. On balance therefore, 30 minutes felt an appropriate amount of time for discussion and yielded significant transcripts for analysis. Additionally, none of the focus groups significantly overran.

Some participants did bring Bibles with them and chose to consult them during the discussion. This was noted at the time, but was also evident from the transcripts as participants explicitly referenced what they had looked up.

### 3: 6. Ethics

As the research involves people, ethical considerations need to be taken into account and approval granted by the University to complete the research. As such, I presented the University with a data management plan outlining how data would be secured and only accessible by myself. In addition, I submitted the documents that would go to potential participating institutions and individuals outlining the research and the extent of their involvement, as well as consent forms that would be signed by every participant as well as participating institutions. Participants would be informed via the introductory information sheets that their identities would be protected in the research, and they would remain anonymous in the final thesis and any related publications or papers. Participants would also be informed of their ability to withdraw from the research at any time.

### 3: 6.1. Ethics in Practice

All the proposed material was presented to the University's Ethical Advisory Board. The committee's response asked for a number of clarifications on certain points and additional details relating to potential withdrawals but did not recommend or request any significant changes to the overall methodology from an ethical perspective. These changes were submitted, and approval was granted to conduct the research. All participants signed a consent form before taking part.

### 3: 7. Sampling

#### 3: 7.1. Group and Participant Requirements

Practitioners of focus groups have discussed the ideal size of groups and generally agree that between 5 and 10 is ideal.<sup>135</sup> This affords a variety of opinions and facilitates debate and discussion but is not so large that some participants do not get to speak or that conversation gets lost amongst too many voices.

Ideally, focus groups include a balance of genders and ages. Focus Group practitioners have debated the strengths and drawbacks of using homogenous groups as opposed to heterogenous groups. Whilst most conclude that homogeneity counteracts self-censorship and encourages sharing, it can also lead to 'group-think' where participants conform to the group majority and restrict the variety of views and opinions to be gathered.<sup>136</sup> However, to include a variety of ages is to risk power dynamics that could lead to younger participants limiting their contributions as a consequence of the perceived naivety of their own voice in comparison to those with more

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<sup>135</sup> Jayasekara, 'Focus Groups in Nursing Research,' 413.

<sup>136</sup> Tim Freeman, "'Best practice" in focus group research: Making sense of different views,' *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 56, no. 5 (2006): 494.

experience and knowledge.<sup>137</sup> Yet, this is offset by the consideration that in this research participants share the same faith, and are potentially from the same church or educational institution. Not only does this increase homogeneity, but the Christian context particularly maintains a belief in the value of all in the light of God's saving love for humanity. As such, I anticipated that this would create an atmosphere of openness to share and willingness to learn from one another regardless of differentiating factors such as age, gender or race.

The research requires two types of participants relating to different levels of theological education, which I am calling formal and informal. Formal theological education refers to those who have undergone at least a year of recognised theological training and informal education refers to those who attend church and consider themselves to be a Christian but have no theological qualifications. The language of formal and informal is preferable to educated and non-educated, given that many of the informal participants are likely to be educated to degree level or higher, just not in the field of Theology. To refer to them as non-educated would thus mistakenly infer that they are not educated at all. Additionally, the term 'informal' also leaves room for the consideration that though not having a theological qualification, an informal participant might enjoy reading theology books or attending theology lectures and thus share in higher levels of knowledge that would contest the term 'non-educated.'

Ensuring that participants align with the conditions of their category would need to be ascertained during the recruitment process. Ideally and as far as possible, formal participants would have undergone similar courses at similar institutions, in terms of ethos and perspective. This homogeneity will allow for more specific insights about the effect of a particular type of

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<sup>137</sup> Martha Ann Carey, 'Focus Groups – What is the same, what is new, what is next?,' *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no. 6 (2016): 731.

theological education, such as undergraduate degrees at secular universities or postgraduate degrees at ministry training colleges (a confessional learning context).

Another issue of consideration is the advantages and disadvantages of using pre-existing groups or creating new groups specifically for the research.<sup>138</sup> The advantages of the former include less time spent forming groups and finding a suitable time and location that can work for all. Additionally, conversation and discussion are likely to flow as participants are familiar with one another.

Depending on the type of group this could either lead to increased dispensation to express alternative or unpopular views on account of the 'safe environment' or conversely, a tendency to agree and even for individuals to self-censor on account of social convention and interpersonal relationships. Equally, the ease of conversation amongst pre-existing groups might lead to increased tangents or procure results that reflect a groups' routine practices when it comes to the Bible rather than individual preference or insights. For example, individuals in a researcher-formed group might raise issues, thoughts or concerns that they wouldn't in a group they are familiar with because in the familiar context, 'it's not the type of thing we discuss' or 'not the reason we get together.' Furthermore, pre-existing groups have their own dynamics and interpersonal relationships that are alien to the researcher, requiring close attention to the level of interaction and increased discernment from the researcher regarding how this might affect the nature of discussion and its outcomes.

Given this, I planned to use focus groups that would consist of participants who were familiar with one another and may be members of larger social groupings but were not already members of a specific Bible reading group. This would afford the advantages of the familiarity of pre-existing

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<sup>138</sup> Tim Freeman, 'Best practice,' 493.

groups that encourages openness and willingness to share, but not suffer from the drawbacks of specific group dynamics or routine that might affect the level of discussion.

### 3: 7.1.1. Group and Participant Requirements in Practice

All of the focus groups except one contained between 5 and 10 participants, the postulated ideal size. The exception contained 3 participants which naturally meant that the diversity of voices was decreased. However, the smaller size appeared to be predominantly advantageous as the group contained two participants with differing points of view and the small size meant they were able to engage in depth with one another's perspective, which could have been overly dominating had the group contained more participants.

The overall sample consisted of 34 participants, 19 of whom were informally-educated participants and 15 formally. The difference in these numbers is taken into account regarding analysis below (Section 3:10.1).

12 participants were females and 22 males, with an imbalance occurring amongst formal participants: 2 females and 13 males. Informal participants were more equally balanced with 10 females and 9 males. These imbalances, though not ideal, do actually reflect something of the reality of the contexts they represent. There are more women in church than men, but more men are theologically educated than women at post-graduate level and in relation to clergy training.<sup>139</sup> These imbalances are therefore not problematic in terms of the data being representative.

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<sup>139</sup> The 1979, 1989 and 1998 census, as well as the 2005 English Church Census reports higher church attendance for women than men, in: Peter Brierley, *Pulling Out of the Nosedive* (Christian Research: London, 2006), 130. The British Academy found that more men studied Theology and Religion at post-graduate level, 'Theology and Religious Studies', British Academy, accessed May 31, 2020, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/288/theology-religious-studies.pdf>. Additionally, men account for 71% of a variety of ministerial offices across the Church of England which would involve some form of theological education. 'Ministry Statistics,' Church of England, accessed May 31, 2020, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Ministry%20Statistics%202016.pdf>.



The groups in general tended to consist of participants of a similar age, though there were some mixed age groups. There were no noticeable differences between the groups who were a similar age and those who were different. Some participants were noticeably more or less dominant, but this appeared to be personality-driven rather than because of age, with both younger and older participants exhibiting preferences to be more and less vocal.

All participants were correctly assigned to their categories, as this was made a clear stipulation to participants in the information provided for their participation. They knew they were part of a comparative study (this was even occasionally referenced) and which category they belonged to. In terms of the levels of familiarity in the groups, three groups were made up of participants that already knew one another, and two groups contained some pre-existing relationships, though not everyone knew each other. There was only one group (conducted online) where no one knew each other prior to the focus group. Though the groups that knew each other engaged in more banter and made more jokes, the general levels of interaction did not appear to be significantly different across all three groups.

### 3: 7.2. Recruitment

I anticipated that gaining access to the two categories of participants would require utilising extended network connections. I planned to find informal participants by contacting churches and formal participants by contacting theological educational institutions.

Suitable institutions would be identified based on prior knowledge and web-based research confirming Anglican and Evangelical affiliation. Church/education leaders would then be approached either via contact information offered online or through being put in touch by a mutual contact. The goals, method and expected outcomes of the research would be presented in

an initial contact email (found in Appendix 2), which included an attachment 'Participant Information Sheet' (found in Appendix 3) outlining the research, what it involves from participating bodies/individuals and how the research will be presented, including assurance of anonymity. I planned to follow this up with conversations giving the opportunity for questions to be asked. Consent would then be signed by a relevant member of the senior team to confirm the church's/institution's agreement to be involved.

Once access to these organisations had been established, I anticipated that the method of recruiting participants would be determined largely by the preference and expectation of what the organisations anticipated would be most successful: approaching people individually or advertising at large for participants to volunteer. Once prospective participants had read the participation information they would sign a consent form to confirm their willingness to participate.

### 3: 7.2.1. Recruitment in Practice

Recruitment proved to be one of the biggest challenges of the focus groups. Without an incentive to offer for participation, it was difficult to find participants willing to volunteer, especially amongst those currently in theological education who had lots of claims on their time. Despite gaining access to and permission from several theological colleges, participants were not forthcoming in volunteering and my contacts at the institutions did not want to approach individuals and ask them to take part, instead opting for a general advertisement.

These contacts at theological institutions, like those at churches, were made through my own networks, as well as the networks of my supervisor. Only one contact at a theological college, named Grace and Life College in this thesis, proved to be successful in gaining participants, though this was the smallest group described above.

The other theologically educated participants did not come from a single institution but were recruited online using social media and relying on the extended networks of myself and my supervisor. This was in part due to the difficulty of getting participants in education to commit to volunteer but was also largely the result of the covid-19 pandemic and having to conduct focus groups online. Two online focus groups of formal participants took place, named in this thesis as Wednesday Online and Thursday Online. The disadvantage of online recruitment meant that participants had a variety of experiences of theological education from different institutions. This means that insights about theological education are broad, rather than specific to a particular qualification or institutional context. The implications of this are discussed further in chapter 8. The informal participants came from three EA churches, one of which was the pilot study, named St. John's in this thesis, discussed below (3:12.1). The other two, named in this thesis as St. Catherine's and St. Helen's, were recruited through the researcher's networks.

### 3: 8. Moderator Role

I planned to be the sole moderator, facilitating the focus groups throughout and setting the tone of the sessions. This would involve beginning the session by reiterating the general purpose of the research and informing participants of the logistics of the session, giving the timings for the different discussions. The friendliness and tone of a moderator has proven to be incredibly important in focus group discussion and can hugely affect the tone of the sessions.<sup>140</sup> I planned to therefore encourage participation, assure that all opinions are valuable and valid, as well as request that people are given time to speak and that their contributions are respected. I also

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<sup>140</sup> Richard Krueger, *Moderating Focus Groups* (London: SAGE London, 1998), 21.

planned to reinforce that participants would be anonymous in the presentation of the findings and that they are free to withdraw at any point.

Throughout the session, I planned to give a 5-minute warning when approaching the end of a text discussion and then conclude that text before moving on to the next. I also planned to instigate a break after an hour and conclude the break. At the end of the final text, I intended to distribute the questionnaires and ask that participants will give this as much time and detail as they can.

After debriefing and thanking the participants, I planned to dismiss the group.

As focus groups offer insight into the thoughts, priorities and choices of participants, I wanted my influence to be minimal. 'Approaches to moderating should be linked to research goals'<sup>141</sup> and as such, the most authentic insight into interpretive practices would be self-led studies. This will highlight the points of interest and concern that ordinary readers bring to the text, as well as the methods they use to explore the text.

As has been mentioned, in both contexts participants should be familiar with group discussion focused on a text. In order to give the groups a 'jumping off' point that gave them a sense of focus without interfering with their interpretative priorities, each text handout contained the same two questions at the bottom: 'What do you think is interesting/of note in this text?' 'Do you have any questions/concerns about the text?' These two questions were intended to prompt both positive and critical thoughts from participants without steering them towards a particular topic. As a result, the groups could be self-led but with enough focus to facilitate the discussion.

The final question on the handout was different and specific for each text, and these are discussed in the next chapter. These more focused questions were deliberately placed after the two general questions to ensure participants discussed what was important to them first and foremost but as a

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<sup>141</sup> Morgan, 'Focus Groups,' 146.

way of prompting discussion in relation to my particular interests without interruption from the moderator.

### 3: 8.1. Moderator Role in Practice

The logistics of introducing and closing the sessions went as anticipated. No group opted to take a break despite being offered it on several occasions and no participant opted out midway through, though one online participant did leave before the end of the discussion due to another commitment and having warned me in advance.

The transition between texts was slightly trickier to manage as a moderator. I did not want to interrupt participants in the middle of speaking or if they were in the middle of a heated point of discussion. Instead, I tried to identify natural lulls in the conversation around the 30-minute mark in order to interject and close the discussion. As a result, different groups spoke for slightly different lengths of time for different texts. These differences were not extensive however and have been taken into account in the process of comparative analysis, described below (Section 3:10.1).

As per the design, I didn't need to be overly involved in the group discussion. However, the extent to which I was involved varied across the groups depending on their dynamics. My highest levels of involvement occurred at St. Helen's who were prone to exploring tangents unrelated to the text and therefore needed help focusing. The group appeared to quickly exhaust what they had to say about the text and were therefore asked the most specific questions of all the groups.

On two occasions (in two different groups) I asked specific participants if they had any thoughts as they were yet to contribute. This was difficult to manage however in the online setting and resulted in two participants from Thursday Online saying very little.

On one occasion during Grace and Life College's discussion I corrected a mistaken conjecture about the text. This was the only instance where I offered specific information relevant to the texts.

However, as a general tendency, the discussion was largely unled, particularly initially as participants responded to the general questions on the handout. In most groups, I drew their attention to the final question on the handout midway through the discussion. For the online groups, these questions were typed into the chat function on the online platform and were also reiterated verbally. The three questions therefore worked well in allowing space and time for participants to address their own points of interest or concern initially, but also discuss the text in relation to the issues I was particularly interested in.

### 3: 9. Pilot Study

Some features of my planned research design might need to be altered after having completed a pilot study. This would be a 'practice' run of the proposed method set out above, to assess which aspects may need changing or adapting to yield better discussion and more fruitful data. The key features I would pay attention to are as follows:

- Logistics – Does half an hour give adequate time to read and discuss the text, ensuring contributions from all? Do participants need more than one break?
- Group Dynamics – Are there any observable factors that affect an imbalance in contributions that could be controlled or countered?

- Moderator Involvement – Do the questions on the handout stimulate enough discussion and the right kind of discussion? How much moderator involvement is needed in order for all three questions to be dealt with equally? Did the moderator need to ask additional questions and was this a consequence of the first questions not yielding discussion of interest or because the first questions were covered quickly too?
- Discussion – Does the discussion focus on unanticipated aspects of the passages or draw out themes or issues that are not of relevance?
- Questionnaires – How much time do the questionnaires take to complete and do participants find this an easy task? Are all the questions answered in the expected way or do some questions lead to misinterpretation?
- Data Collection – Did the recording equipment accurately capture the discussion? Are there any parts of the audio that are trickier to hear? How helpful are the supplementary notes of the moderator?

In answering these questions, the research design could be effectively adapted so as to counter as many of the issues that arise ahead of the focus groups. The pilot study would also be an opportunity not only for my own observations as to the process but also for participant feedback. Through informal conversation, I would be able to hear from participants how they experienced the focus group and what they feel would make it better. Whilst the research design needs to be optimised in order to maximise the quality and quantity of data gathered, it is important that

participants have a positive experience of the focus groups and are satisfied that the focus group was structured adequately in order for them to express their opinions and feel heard.<sup>142</sup>

### 3: 9.1. Pilot Study in Practice

The pilot study was conducted in my home using participants from my church community at the time, it therefore reflected an 'informal' group. Though there may be some differences between the two categories of formal and informal participants, these were not enough to consider conducting a pilot study for both categories, as the logistics would be the same for both groups. Though I did know some of the participants involved in the pilot study, because of the large size of the church I was attending, I did not know all of them and they did not all know each other, which made for a balanced social environment. As everyone wasn't complete strangers the ambiance was not awkward, but as everyone was not familiar with one another, the group weren't overly jovial or unfocused and were aware of the reason for their being gathered. Recruitment occurred through contacting well-connected individuals in the church to ask them to forward to the information about the focus groups to those that they know.

The pilot study went extremely well, with participants discussing the relevant topics of each text and offering rich data. As has been noted, this is in part due to following Perrin's research methodology, which having proved fruitful for her research, was also likely to work for my own research.

Due to the success of the pilot study, no practical changes were made to the design methodology, apart from re-ordering the Likert-scale statements regarding the doctrine of Scripture on the

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<sup>142</sup> Rosanna Breen, 'A Practical Guide to Focus-Group Research,' *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 30, no.3 (2006): 471.



questionnaire. The order of these statements about the Bible had been randomised, but participants' feedback suggested they would be easier to follow if they were grouped and ordered in related topics. As this was the only change and it didn't affect the data gathered, the pilot study was included as one of the main focus groups and its data is presented in this thesis, under the name of St. John's.

### 3: 10. Data Collection and Analysis

I planned for data to be gathered through audio recordings of the group discussion as well as the questionnaires completed by participants at the end of the sessions. This would be supplemented by notes made by myself during the focus groups of anything significant such as gestures, significant expressions, or other aspects of the group interaction that might be missed by the audio recordings.

The audio recordings would be transcribed manually by myself and coded using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo. This will allow the identification of key themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. Analysis will take a deductive approach and attention will be paid to the extent of group agreement and consensus regarding interpretative conclusions, as well as the methods and approaches used. The aim of analysis will be to produce a theory that specifies the role of the doctrine of Scripture in interpretation.

#### 3: 10.1. Data Collection and Analysis in Practice

I transcribed the focus groups myself which was an important exercise in familiarising myself with the data. Following transcription, the data was uploaded to NVivo and coded in relation to two

main areas: the points that participants made about the texts and the ways in which they engaged with the texts. This latter category was extremely broad, including not just specific methods or interpretive techniques, but anything that participants did with, or to, the text. In total, participants evidenced 78 engagement practices, occurring 1102 times across all three texts and all six groups. Additionally, participants made 1444 points about the texts accounting for 279 unique interpretive points.

As my analysis continued, I also coded the transcripts for theological statements to get a sense of the theological paradigms that participants were working with. This provided a helpful background in understanding what beliefs and ideas participants were bringing to the text. Participants made a total of 108 unique theological assertions occurring 394 times.

This approach allowed me to identify key points of concern for the participants, as well as group the points of concern for my own research interests.

When conducting comparative analysis of the coding, to take into account that the two categories did not contain the same number of participants and that the timings of the groups weren't strict, coding stats were constructed as percentages relative to the totals of the two categories in order for a fair comparison.

### 3: 11. Design Assessment

Advocates for focus groups as a qualitative data method have argued that alternative methods of design assessment are needed in order to adequately capture what such data can offer.

Traditionally the categories of reliability, generalisability and validity have been used as measures of the effectiveness of a research design, but it has been noted that these are geared towards

quantitative data collection and don't reflect the aims and value of qualitative data. As such, the criteria of 'trustworthiness' has been suggested instead, comprised of four components: dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability.<sup>143</sup>

Dependability offers an alternative to reliability and assesses the consistency of interpretations made from the data. The measures used in this research design to ensure dependability is a detailed description of the research methods and analysis in this chapter.

Credibility refers to the believability of the results and how far they truly represent the thoughts of participants. The degree to which truth is captured can be affected by conformity or censoring as has been mentioned. My research attempted to foster credibility through careful moderation of groups that prompted open sharing. Persistent observation and peer debriefing have also been suggested as methods of enduring credibility. The former was conducted by myself as the moderator, but the latter is difficult to achieve as a solo researcher. An alternative would be to end each text discussion with 'member-checking', where the moderator summarises what they have heard from the group and checks to see this is what the group/individuals wanted to convey.<sup>144</sup> I practiced this on a couple of occasions, but not as a general rule, and only where I wanted to ensure that my interpretation of what participants were saying was correct by reiterating and summarising what they had said to them.

Transferability measures the extent to which the findings could be transferred to another context, group or setting. The nature of qualitative data renders the ability to make broader claims about people groups or communities at large difficult, as the results are based on the opinions of a few. This research design incorporates six focus groups across two contexts as a cross-measure of

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<sup>143</sup> Prudence Plummer, 'Focus Group Methodology Part 2: Consideration for analysis,' *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation* 24, no. 8 (2017): 345-51.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 346.

opinions. Whilst this does not mean claims can be made about all theologically educated Christians for example, it does go some way to indicating central themes that occur and are therefore likely to occur amongst other similar individuals. Transferability can also be controlled through rich descriptions of the characteristics and setting of the participants as well as dense descriptions of the sample. This gives a clear sense of how unique these individuals are and what contexts could be considered similar enough for the findings of the results to reflect on them also. I have reflected on the group demographics above and do so further in relation to their contexts below (3:12), in order to give more indication as to transferability.

Lastly, confirmability is the assurance that the findings are a true reflection of those involved and not the researcher's own biases. To counter the inevitability of bias, it is important to acknowledge and disclose my own background in terms of relevant experiences, training and education, thus 'giving readers the ability to judge how these factors might have influenced the researcher's interpretations.'<sup>145</sup>

### 3: 11.1. Researcher Background Disclosure

I am an Anglican who has grown up in and around various Anglican Evangelical churches of a charismatic persuasion. I am also theologically educated with a BA and MSt in Theology and am currently pursuing a PhD qualification, all of which have been undertaken within theological departments of secular universities in the UK. My father is also ordained in the Church of England and trained for ordination during my childhood. This means I am an inside researcher, sharing significant aspects of my identity and experience with both my formal and informal participants.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 347.

My closeness to the subject matter of this research naturally has advantages and disadvantages. Though investigating my own tradition, I am not blind to its faults, and in fact, my interest in the topic under discussion stems from an awareness of my tradition's limitations. Moreover, as will have become plain from this chapter, facilitating the research was actually possible largely through personal contacts, an advantage of being an insider researcher.

Though I knew some of my participants ahead of this study, I do not believe my relationships to them or the churches they are a part of has skewed the analysis of the data gathered. As all participants and churches are anonymous, I am not driven by a need to protect or enhance their presentation. Additionally, the subject-matter of the research is not of a nature that I would be inclined to see the participants I knew in a more or less sympathetic light than the participants I didn't know. Though objectivity is impossible, I sought to hear my participants on their own terms as much as I was able to and remain detached from their contributions and subsequent analysis such that I am seeing what is really there, rather than what I was inclined to see.

### 3: 12. Focus Groups

The following overview introduces the six focus groups in more detail including the group members by pseudonym, and provides some information as to the group background, dynamic of their discussion and demographic. A reference table is provided in Table 1.

### 3: 12.1. St. John's (Informal)

St. John's (hereafter St.J's) was the pilot group which ended up being used for the research on account of the methodology being unchanged. The group consisted of 7 participants: Anne, Emma, Frank, George, Harriet, Henry and Jane. They attended a large charismatic EA church in a small city in the south of England. All the participants were in their twenties and thirties except for Henry who was of retirement age. St.J's had a fairly relaxed atmosphere, though the conversation was initially peppered by long pauses, as participants thought through the text and warmed up to the reading environment. George was notably quieter, making fewer contributions and Henry was initially silent for the first half of the Genesis discussion before becoming an active participant throughout the rest of the focus group.

### 3: 12.2. St. Catherine's (Informal)

St. Catherine's (subsequently St.C's) consisted of 6 participants : Gavin, Michael, Neil, Pamela, Stacey and Vanessa, all in their twenties and thirties. I only knew Stacey beforehand, and she had been the organiser of the group and gathered participants. The group was hosted at Stacey's house and all the participants knew each other from their church, a vibrant charismatic EA church in the south of England, in a small town outside London. Though Anglican, St.C's is very contemporary, being a planted church, and this contemporary feel is reflected both in their service style and building.

St.C's was the most jovial of the groups with lots of fast talking and banter. They seemed to enjoy the conversation and weren't afraid of dealing with the text's challenges.

Neil was a dominant member of this group, whilst Michael and Gavin were much quieter. The three female participants were fairly well balanced in terms of contributions.

### 3: 12.3. St. Helen's (Informal)

St. Helen's (St.H's) consisted of 6 participants: Amy, Charles, Gina, Jake, Rose and Terry. The group were all in their fifties and above, with the majority being of retired age. This group met in the side chapel of their church, an average sized Anglican Evangelical church in a small town in the south of England. St. Helen's has a family feel with a more typical demographic of congregants expected for an Anglican church, i.e. less of the twenties and thirties demographic. I knew none of the participants, though they all knew each other and were aware that I knew their Vicar.

St.H's was the broadest ranging in their discussion and as such were the group I had to ask the most questions to and keep on track. They often diverted onto related topics that were of more interest to them. Charles in particular evidenced atypical views of an EA, which were also mirrored somewhat by Terry. Gina and Jake were the most vocal of the group, with Rose and Terry being somewhat quieter.

### 3: 12.4. Grace and Life College (Formal)

Grace and Life College (hereon GLC) is an Anglican ordination college associated with a British University describing itself as 'openly Evangelical'. It has a robust academic reputation and offers courses for ordained and lay ministry as well as interested learners. This group was the smallest of the focus groups, with only three participants who were all male: Adam, Johnny and Martin. Johnny and Adam had completed one year of their theological training, but Martin was in his second year and had also previously studied Theology. I knew Johnny prior to the focus group but

he had not been involved in organising the group and his attendance was incidental. All three participants knew each other and though the three men showed differences of opinion, the conversation had a relaxed tone and atmosphere with everyone having a lot to say.

### 3: 12.5. Wednesday Online (Formal)

Wednesday Online (hereon WO) was an online focus group made up of 5 participants: Celia, Jessica, Nick, Sam and Winston. I did not know any of these participants and they did not know each other. All the participants except Sam were involved in a form of ministry, whereas Sam was still in academia. WO was a mixed age group. This was the only formal group to contain two women, and unfortunately Jessica had to leave the group midway due to another commitment. Despite being online and not knowing each other, the group had a productive conversation engaging with one another's ideas. The online nature meant dialogue was less interactive, with participants speaking for several minutes at once, as has been noted.

### 3: 12.6. Thursday Online (Formal)

Thursday Online (hereon TO) consisted of 7 mixed age male participants: Christopher, Dean, Jesse, Logan, Luke, Richard and Taylor. Logan and Taylor were largely silent only making one contribution each. Some TO participants knew each other prior to the group but not everyone knew everyone, and I didn't know any of the participants prior to the group.

As with WO, the theological education of the group varied. Christopher and Richard were both in academia, whilst Luke, Dean and Jesse were in ministry. Logan and Taylor were in neither but had been theologically educated.



Though the group did have some pauses they conversed with one another and engaged with the questions of the text from a variety of perspectives. This group more than other, and as a result of the online environment, tended for individuals to speak for several minutes at once.

### 3: 13. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined my research methodology reflecting on my initial intentions and how these compared to reality. It has established that focus groups are best suited for gathering data about the doctrine of Scripture and described the structure of these groups centring around the reading of three texts. I have also introduced each group, its participants, their dynamic and background as helpful context for the analysis of the focus groups in chapters 5-8. Before turning to this analysis however, I need to introduce one final and crucial aspect of the research: the texts to be read by participants.

# CHAPTER FOUR: READING PASSAGES AND DISCUSSIONS

## 4: 1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the decision process behind the selection of the texts my participants read. It describes each text, the rationale for its selection and a very brief overview of the key issues found amongst scholarship in relation to the text. This gives a sense of what issues my participants may discuss. The chapter then offers brief descriptions of each focus groups' discussion of each text, highlighting key themes and topics mentioned.

## 4: 2. Text Challenges

I wanted the passages that my participants read to elicit reflections that would be insightful regarding their beliefs about the Bible. One way of doing this would be to choose texts that explicitly speak of Scripture (insofar as the Bible is able to be self-referential), such as 2 Timothy 3:16 or Psalm 119. However, this approach ran the risk of obscuring dispositional beliefs about the doctrine of Scripture (3:3). I wanted participants beliefs about the Bible to arise naturally and not as the result of an explicit prompt which itself might affect what participants claimed or insinuated about the Bible. I therefore decided to choose passages that would *indirectly* challenge participant's Bible beliefs.

The main Bible beliefs I wanted to challenge in all three texts were the authority, inspiration and divine authorship of the Bible, all of which are connected and related to one another. I wanted to see, first, what participants actually believed about these facets of the Bible, and second, the extent to which they drive interpretative activity and conclusions. I therefore chose three specific challenges that would prompt such reflections, one for each text participants would read.

The first challenge I chose was a historical or factually accurate challenge. Does the divine authorship of the Bible mean its contents must be historically valid, i.e. objectively true? If a biblical text is not historical or factual, in what sense is it authoritative or inspired? How is historicity discerned, and how much of a problem does it present for readers?

The second challenge I chose was a text that presents a theological challenge. How might participants respond to a text that makes theological claims about God that aren't in keeping with a contemporary accepted understanding of God? Is every single theological claim in the Bible authoritative in terms of what a Christian should believe? How might the Bible be inspired by God, but make claims that are understood to be theologically problematic?

The third and final challenge related to the relevance of the text. I assumed that the text would be seen as relevant on the basis of previous research (1:6.4), but to what extent is relevancy determined by beliefs about the Bible? How is the Bible authoritative in terms of Christians' actions, choices and behaviours, when the world of a contemporary reader is vastly different from the world of the text? Does the authority of the text lessen the wider the cultural and historical gap between text and reader? In what sense is the text deemed to be relevant and inspired for a different context than its own?

My three texts would each reflect one of these challenges: historicity, theological legitimacy and relevancy. Having established these were the three challenges I needed my texts to contain, I then had to choose three different genres to narrow down my text choice.

#### 4: 3. Genre Selection

I wanted to elicit a variety of interpretive responses from my participants and so decided that each passage would be of a different genre in order to produce such variety.

As narrative is the most common genre within the Bible, I wanted to include a narrative text, which would be contrasted with something more instructional, either Law or an Epistle. As the majority of narrative occurs in the Old Testament, and I wanted to have passages from both Testaments, I decided my 'instruction' genre would be an Epistle rather than Law. I wanted my third genre to be poetry, specifically a Psalm, because it provides a distinctive contrast to narrative and instruction.

In terms of matching these genres with the intended text challenges (historicity, theology legitimacy and relevancy), the Epistle lent itself most readily to the challenge of relevancy, as specific instruction written to individuals or groups of people about correct belief and behaviour. Whilst there are plenty of theologically problematic narratives in the Old Testament where God's actions are questionable, this would mean that a Psalm was left to address the issue of historicity. Historically problematic Psalms present a much subtler challenge than a passage of narrative could, which led to the decision to include a historically challenging narrative, a theologically challenging Psalm and a relevance challenging epistle.

The texts I selected were Genesis 7, Psalm 44 and Ephesians 5:21-6:9. What follows is a summary of each text and a more detailed overview of why each of these passages was chosen specifically. This is followed by a brief summary of relevant scholarship relating to each text. This scholarship includes the perspective of critical scholarship, Christian writings and commentaries from both Evangelical and non-Evangelical authors in scholarly and ecclesial contexts. A full overview of this scholarship can be found in Appendix 4, the findings of which are summarised below.

## 4: 4. Genesis 7

### 4: 4.1. Summary

Genesis 7 is the middle section of the account of Noah, the ark and the flood which begins in 6:9 and ends in 9:17.

Chapter 7 begins with the ark having been built and God instructing Noah to go inside with his family and seven pairs of clean animals and birds and a single pair of unclean animals, because in seven days God will send 40 days of continuous rain. Noah does what God asks and he enters into the ark with male and female pairs of animals and birds. After seven days the flood arrives. The story then recounts the specific time and age of Noah when he entered the ark and the floods came, and Noah enters the ark again, this time, shut in by God. The flood continues for forty days and the waters rise so that they cover the tops of the highest mountains. Everything that had life left on the earth is destroyed and the chapter ends with Noah and the animals left in the ark as the waters increase.

#### 4: 4.2. Rationale for Selection

Genesis 7 was chosen for focus group participants because of the historical challenge it poses for readers. To what extent does the doctrine of Scripture prescribe that Genesis must be historically accurate?

Perrin's empirical research on biblical narrative identified that her millennial readers tended to assume the historicity of the texts they read in 1 Samuel, 2 Kings and Acts.<sup>146</sup> I therefore wanted to choose a text likely to raise scepticism as to its historicity. The story of Noah is just such a text; one does not have to be highly educated to recognise the 'miracle' of a worldwide flood and the collection of all the world's species on a man-made vessel. Additionally, the story has gained some notoriety beyond Christian spheres with atheists, especially given the advancement of scientific knowledge and historical knowledge indicating a world-wide flood did not occur. Indeed, scientific advancement has meant that Genesis has been called into question as a text of history. Is this an event that is meant to be understood as factual history, something that actually happened to a person called Noah and his family? Or is it intended as a type of myth or legend? For Evangelicals, the designation of the Bible as the Word of God means that it must be truthful, which for many implies historically accurate, but how is this expectation dealt with when a story presents events that do not seem materially possible? Can the text be truthful but non-historical? What does this mean for the text's authority and inspired nature? Additionally, the actions of God in the text are not only seemingly impossible but also seemingly inconsistent with a creator God of love. Does what the text recounts of God's action affect readers' assessment of its historicity?

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<sup>146</sup> Perrin, *Bible Reading*, 59.

To read the entirety of the Noah narrative would take too long and give too much for participant's discuss in the allotted time. The central chapter was therefore chosen which includes the two most 'unbelievable' elements of the narrative: the animals boarding the ark and the worldwide flood.

In order to illicit discussion of the historicity of the narrative, the third question on participant's handout (following the two general questions outlined in 3:8) asked 'Do you think this text is historically accurate?'

I now turn to a very brief overview of key topics that have been discussed in the scholarship surrounding this text to provide an expectation of what participants might discuss in their reading of the text.

#### 4: 4.3. Scholarship Overview

There are 5 predominant issues that scholars, commentators and writers frequently address in relation to Genesis 7: 1) the genre of Genesis, 2) how to handle extrabiblical knowledge, 3) repetition and contradiction in the text, 4) the morality of God, and 5) how Noah is read in relation to the rest of the canon.

First, the genre of Genesis. What is the purpose of this book and what is it intending to do?

Answers to these questions are by no means monolithic, particularly within Evangelicalism, and are connected to broader issues relating to the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Some determine the text's genre according to what it claims or indicates about itself.<sup>147</sup> Others distinguish Genesis 1-11 as a 'primeval narrative' which is fundamentally different from the

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<sup>147</sup> For example: Vern Poythress, 'Dealing with the Genre of Genesis and its Opening Chapters,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no.2 (2016): 217-30.

narrative of Genesis 12 onwards.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, the category of 'history' has been questioned as to its appropriateness for texts of Genesis' cultural origins, leading some to see the text as primarily theological<sup>149</sup> or mythological<sup>150</sup> or both.

Second, evaluations of the historicity of Genesis 7 may be determined by approaches to extrabiblical information. Archaeological, geographical and scientific evidence suggests that the account of Noah and the flood did not take place. The existence of numerous other ancient near eastern (ANE) flood narratives suggests either a flood event of some sorts occurred, or that the whole narrative is mythical. There are a variety of ways readers and scholars might handle this: ignoring the evidence, appealing to miracles, accepting the evidence or harmonising evidence and the text.<sup>151</sup> The latter often takes the form of claiming the flood was local rather than universal, and/or the flood appeared to be universal to the writer based on their knowledge and experience of the world.

Third, scholars highlight the repetitions and contradictions of the narrative. Whilst many attribute this to multiple sources being edited together,<sup>152</sup> some opt for a chiasmic structure to explain this feature of the texts.<sup>153</sup> Others have gone further to claim the repetitions and contradictions of the text are purposeful as a literary technique.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> For example: Lloyd Bailey, *Noah: The Person and the Story in History and Tradition* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

<sup>149</sup> For example: Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982).

<sup>150</sup> For example: David Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened: classic and contemporary readings of Noah's flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17, Oxford Scholarship Online.

<sup>151</sup> For a summary of such approaches see: Paul Seely, 'Noah's Flood: It's date, extent, and divine accommodation,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 291-311.

<sup>152</sup> For example: Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: a continental commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).

<sup>153</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987).

<sup>154</sup> For example: Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990); Thomas Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: a literary, historical, & theological commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168, Oxford Scholarship Online.



Fourth, whilst Psalm 44, below, is the main measure of readers' response to the theological challenge of God's 'immorality', Genesis 7 also prompts reflections on the moral character of God. The majority of Christian scholars actually focus on the positive qualities of God the story highlights: God's intimate involvement in the world that cause him to grieve in chapter 6 and God's heart to save and rebuild.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, the narrative suggests God is both sovereign over the world yet intimate with it.<sup>156</sup> Finally, commentators note recurring references to Noah throughout the rest of the biblical canon, in the gospels and 1 Peter. They also highlight the flood's similarity with the creation narrative, with some scholars finding parallels in prophetic literature.<sup>157</sup>

## 4: 5. Psalm 44

### 4: 5.1. Summary

Psalm 44 is the first of eleven communal laments Psalms. It is attributed to the Korahites and described as a *maskil*. The Psalm alternates in voice throughout, transitioning between the first-person plural and the first-person singular, suggesting the context of a community 'gathered together in a sanctuary or in the Temple in Jerusalem to cry out to God about a situation of grave danger.'<sup>158</sup> This situation is one of military defeat with significant losses of both people and possessions.

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<sup>155</sup> For example: Terrence Fretheim, 'The God for the Flood Story and Natural Disasters,' *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2008): 21-34.

<sup>156</sup> David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11: the dawn of creation* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 136.

<sup>157</sup> For example: Robert Alter, *Genesis* (London: Norton, 1996), 32-3; Richard Belcher, *Genesis: the beginning of God's plan of salvation* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012), 95; Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 172; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 79; Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened*, 141.

<sup>158</sup> Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf Jacobson and Beth Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 408.

The first section of the Psalm recalls what God has done for his people in the past, and how it was only through God's power that their armies were successful and that they secured land. This recollection goes beyond the living memory of those in the community and recalls the events of their ancestors that have been passed down through the generations.

A striking turn occurs in the Psalm at verse nine introducing an accusation that brings the situation of the present day into sharp contrast with that of the past – 'yet you have rejected and abased us.' This sentence begins a string of accusations that all start with an emphatic 'you', building up the sense and weight of the current injustice. God has not done what he did in the past and secured success in battle for the present community. God is the reason that people are being killed, exploited and shamed by those around them.

The Psalmist then goes on to protest that this is unjustified, that the community has been faithful in following God's ways and has not committed idolatry or failed its covenantal obligations. God is acknowledged as knowing all and his omniscience is appealed to as validation of the community's innocence – the cry is that God knows they have done all that is required of them and yet still, he has rejected them.

The final section of the Psalm turns to appeal and implores God to wake up and come to their aid in action. As they 'sink down' God is called upon to 'rise up', to not forget his people and to bring redemption 'for the sake of your steadfast love.'

#### 4: 5.2. Rationale for Selection

Psalm 44 was chosen for discussion and interpretation by focus groups predominantly because of the theological dilemma it poses regarding God. To what extent does the doctrine of Scripture prescribe that the Psalm must be theologically accurate?

Whilst there are several theologically challenging psalms, Psalm 44 provides an adept challenge because not only are claims made about God that Christians would usually reject (God abandons people), but these claims are justified on the grounds of the community's innocence. Readers can't therefore understand God's actions as warranted as a result of the people's disobedience or sin, as could be claimed in the case of Noah. In the Psalm, it appears that completely unwarrantedly, God has abandoned his people. Will readers accept what the psalm claims about God because of the authoritative and inspired nature of the Bible? If they do, how will readers understand the problem of theodicy, the suffering of the innocent? For the Evangelical, and any other Christian for that matter, the doctrine of God as loving, faithful and loyal to his people is challenged in Psalm 44.

Moreover, genre plays into this central challenge. The Psalms are a form of poetry or creative expression which offers a certain degree of flexibility when it comes to interpretation. The unique nature of the Psalms for believers who hold to an Evangelical doctrine of Scripture is found in their dual nature of being human utterances to God, i.e. prayers, that due to their incorporation into Scripture, are equally considered to be God's utterances to humanity. This creates an interesting dynamic for application and interpretation – are all psalmic utterances to be taken as truth and fact given they're in God's Word? Or can and should some be dismissed on the grounds that they represent the view of the psalter and do not represent reality?

Psalm 44 offers a particularly interesting test case on another front: the first half of the Psalm declares typically accepted truths about God before turning to more questionable claims. If readers are inclined to dismiss the theological claims of the Psalm about God, will they also dismiss the more orthodox claims at the start of the Psalm?

To prompt participants to discuss these issues, the third question on the handout under the two general questions was ‘Does this text provide an accurate depiction of God?’ The use of the term ‘accurate’ is consistent with the Genesis question and as was the case there, indicates that I am referring to the text’s relation to the reality of the nature and character of God.

#### 4: 5.3. Scholarship Overview

The key issues discussed by scholarship in relation to Psalm 44 are: 1) genre and structure, 2) theodicy, 3) historical context, and 4) Psalm 44 in relation to the rest of the Bible.

First, whilst the psalmic genre is taken as a given, scholars note the distinctive turn in the psalm at verse 9<sup>159</sup> and reflect on whether the first section is best understood as praise or invocation.<sup>160</sup> This determines how the psalm fits together as a whole.

Second, the issue of innocent suffering in the psalm is pointed out in relation to covenantal expectation.<sup>161</sup> Commentators highlight the paradox of the Psalm affirming God’s loyalty and faithfulness in the act of addressing and calling upon Him, whilst discrediting God’s loyalty and faithfulness in content.<sup>162</sup> This leads some Christian commentators to centre on the issue of

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<sup>159</sup> For example: William Bellinger and Walter Brueggemann, *Psalms* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 209; Loren Crow, ‘The Rhetoric of Psalm 44,’ *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103, no.3 (1992).

<sup>160</sup> For ‘praise’ see: Dalit Rom-Shiloni, ‘Psalm 44: The Powers of Protest,’ *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2008): 686. For ‘invocation’ see: James Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 177.

<sup>161</sup> For example: Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2004), 333.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 335.

petitionary prayer.<sup>163</sup> Others, however, make Christological comparisons, making sense of the Psalm's tension in light of the suffering of Christ.<sup>164</sup>

A third issue that scholars address is the lack of historical moorings that anchor the psalm to a specific event in the life of Israel.<sup>165</sup> Most commentators agree that there is not enough evidence to historically locate the psalm. Contextual suggestions that have been made include the Babylonian captivity<sup>166</sup> (though this is unlikely given the psalm's claims to innocence), the persecution of Greek Emperor Antiochus IV Euphron in 163-4BCE or the capturing of the ark by the Philistines recounted in 1 Samuel 4.<sup>167</sup> Such suggestions are in the minority with most concluding that the psalm cannot be historically located.

Finally, as with Genesis, this Psalm is discussed in relation to the rest of the Bible. Specifically, scholars have noted thematic similarities with the book of Job<sup>168</sup> and textual similarities with Psalm 37.<sup>169</sup> The psalm is also quoted in Romans, where a subtle change is made from being *made* sheep for slaughter *by God*, to having *chosen* to be sheep for slaughter *for God*. This usage of the psalm further opens up Christological readings for some commentators, described above.

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<sup>163</sup> For example: Nancy deClaissé-Walford, 'Psalm 44; O God, Why Do You Hide Your Face?,' *Review and Expositor* 104, (2007): 757; Eric Lane, *Psalms 1-89* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2006), 204.

<sup>164</sup> Lane, *Psalms 1-89*, 204.

<sup>165</sup> Robert Alter, *The book of Psalms: a translation with commentary* (New York, NY: Norton, 2007), 156.

<sup>166</sup> For example: Lane, *Psalms 1-89*, 201.

<sup>167</sup> Rabbinic tradition placed the Psalm under Greek persecution and the Catholic Lectionary connects the Psalm with the capturing of the ark, described by Nancy deClaissé-Walford, 'Psalm 44,' 755-6.

<sup>168</sup> For example: deClaissé-Walford et al, *The Book of Psalms*, 408.

<sup>169</sup> For example: Rom-Shiloni, 'Psalm 44,' 694.

## 4: 6. Ephesians 5:21-6:9

### 4: 6.1. Summary

Ephesians 5:21-6:9, given the subtitle 'The Christian Household' in many modern Bible translations, sets out the nature and conduct of three different relationships: wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters. This comes in the context of a larger discussion about the new life 'in Christ' and what that means for everyday behaviour and living.

The first relationship, wives and husbands, begins the household instructions and is given more explication than the other relationships. Wives are told to submit to their husbands on the grounds that the husband is head of the wife, analogous to Christ being head of the church. Husbands are then told to love their wives analogous to Christ's love for the church, which is described as having a sanctifying quality. Christ loves the church as his own body and so husbands should do the same to their wives. Genesis 2:24 is drawn upon to validate that a husband and wife are one flesh, and therefore to love one's wife is to love oneself.

Children are addressed next and told to obey their parents according to the commandments in order to receive the promise of inheriting the earth. Fathers are then instructed not to provoke their children but to raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Finally, slaves are told to obey their masters as they would obey Christ and to do this with integrity and willingness as if to God, because good will be rewarded regardless of position. The masters are then addressed and told to do the same, to refrain from threats and are reminded that all serve the same God who is impartial.

#### 4: 6.2. Rationale for Selection

I chose this passage to be discussed in focus groups predominantly because it makes an apt test case for relevancy. This challenge is twofold: first, how the text is understood to be relevant,<sup>170</sup> and second, to what extent relevancy is related to the doctrine of Scripture.

There are several instructional sections of epistles that I could have chosen for my participants, but the text has clear overlaps with contemporary life in speaking of family relationships yet areas of difference in speaking of slaves. Moreover, the topic of relationships not only is something Christians care about and seek to live in accordance with God's will, but is also culturally bound, making it a fruitful issue for exploring relevance.

As EAs are concerned to follow the Bible's ordinances considering they are from God, the question becomes how to do this given the cultural distance between the time of writing and the reader. In the case of Ephesians, how is relevance navigated across three different relationships, one of which (slaves and masters) simply does not apply to modern day readers? The key point to observe is not that the text is deemed relevant but both *how* it's understood as relevant across the 'gap' and also how *consistent* approaches to relevancy are.

A specific component of this challenge will be the text's acceptance and upholding of the institution of slavery. Considering Christian leaders were a significant driving force behind the abolition of the slave trade it is troubling for some readers that the Ephesians passage condones slavery and does not question its practice. If slavery is inherently wrong and against the principles of Christian faith, then how can support for it be in God's own Word?

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<sup>170</sup> It is assumed the text will be understood as relevant based on previous research, see 1:6.4.

In order to prompt participants to discuss issues of relevance, the third question on the handout asked, 'Do you think this text has any relevance for life today?' It was anticipated that participant's would likely discuss these issues without the need for a prompt question, but the inclusion of the question would sharpen these reflections as to what specifically is relevant and why.

#### 4: 6.3. Scholarship Overview

The main topics discussed by commentators in relation to Ephesians 5:21-6:9 are: 1) the cultural gap between the time of the writer and modern reader, 2) understanding the concepts of submission and headship, 3) the practice of slavery, 4) the author and audience of Ephesians, and 5) the text in relation to the rest of the Bible.

Interpreters of Ephesians tend to fall into two categories regarding the cultural gap between the text and reader: direct application<sup>171</sup> or application of underlying principles.<sup>172</sup> The latter has a tendency to consider more aspects of the text's culture and context to ascertain what the key 'principle' is that can be enacted today.<sup>173</sup> The former tends to focus on the text and take it as it stands for contemporary life. This approach provides various rationale for the consistency of direct application, with claims being made as to how to draw the lines between what is directly applicable (marriage and family advice) and what is cultural (owning slaves).<sup>174</sup>

A topic of discussion amongst scholarship concerns how to understand submission and headship.

Whilst many commentators acknowledge the dignity of submission and differentiate it from

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<sup>171</sup> For example: Robert Sproul, *Ephesians* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1994).

<sup>172</sup> For example: Lisa Baumert, 'Biblical Interpretation and the Epistle to the Ephesians,' *Priscilla Papers* 31, no.4 (2017): 28-32.

<sup>173</sup> For example: Gordon D. Fee, 'The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18-6:9,' *Priscilla Papers* 31, no. 4 (2017): 4-8.

<sup>174</sup> For example: John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's new society* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 220-1.



‘obedience’, others conflate the two terms.<sup>175</sup> Much debate also occurs around verse 21 inciting all to submit to one another, and how central this comment is in understanding wifely submission.<sup>176</sup> Approaches to headship tend to form two camps with one side arguing the term is authoritative and reflects hierarchy<sup>177</sup> and the other claiming the term means ‘source’ or origin.<sup>178</sup> Slavery is also given much attention and Christian scholars in particular are keen to stress that slavery was such a part of life at the time of Ephesians that it’s unreasonable to expect the author to condemn it. Given this, the passage therefore does not condone slavery as an institution. Commentators also stress that slaves are treated as equal members of the Christian community by being addressed in the letter and the instructions promote fair treatment .<sup>179</sup> Moving away from the cultural issues surrounding the Ephesians text is the issue of the authorship and audience of Ephesians. Whether the text was written by Paul or not becomes an issue of immense importance when apostolic authorship is connected to biblical authority.<sup>180</sup> Arguments for and against Pauline authorship are complex and no general view emerges. Some scholars choose to believe the text was written by Paul because this is what the text claims for itself,<sup>181</sup> but others reflect that pseudepigraphy is common and does not have imply the text was intended to be deceptive.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> For example: Ralph Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1991), 70; Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 232-3.

<sup>176</sup> Both sides of this debate are summarised by Benjamin L. Merkle, ‘The Start of Instruction to Wives and Husbands - Ephesians 5:21 or 5:22?’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174 (2017): 179-92.

<sup>177</sup> For example: David M. Park, ‘The Structure of Authority in Marriage: An Examination of Hupotasso and Kephale in Ephesians 5:21-33,’ *Evangelical Quarterly* 59, no.2 (1987): 117-124.

<sup>178</sup> For example: Baumert, ‘Biblical Interpretation,’ 31.

<sup>179</sup> For example: Benjamin L. Merkle, *Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016); Stott, *Ephesians*, 252.

<sup>180</sup> Fowl, *Ephesians*, 10.

<sup>181</sup> For example: Stott, *Ephesians*, 21-1.

<sup>182</sup> Fowl, *Ephesians*, 10.

The final topics discussed by commentators is how Ephesians compares with other passages such as Galatians 3:28 which declares the eradication of gender and position in light of Christ.<sup>183</sup>

Scholars also point out Ephesians's similarity with Colossians,<sup>184</sup> as well as the references it makes to Genesis and the commandments.

Having outlined the texts that were selected for participants, I now turn to brief descriptions of each group's discussion of each text.

#### 4: 7. Genesis 7 Discussion Summaries

The subjects discussed by participants in relation to Genesis can be categorised under six different topics: 1) historicity, 2) narrative form, 3) moral challenge, 4) correct interpretation and/or implications/challenges, 5) story detail, and 6) meaning. The following focus group descriptions highlight which topics each group discussed and what was mentioned as part of these discussions. As historicity is the main focus, this will be covered in much more depth in the analysis of the following chapter (5:2).

##### 4: 7.1. St. John's

Conversation at St.J's began in relation to the story detail. Participants questioned aspects they found to be unusual including Noah's age, the two different numbers of animals given and God's choice to destroy humankind by method of drowning. They also engaged in an extensive

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<sup>183</sup> For example: Sproul, *Ephesians*, 137-8; Stott, *Ephesians*, 216.

<sup>184</sup> Frederick Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) 401.

discussion about the possibility that other individuals beyond Noah's family could have been saved.

The group briefly touched upon the morality of God's actions in the narrative. This was dominated by one participant, Emma, who shared her previous struggle with this story but her choice to focus on the salvation aspect of it.

Several comments were made in relation to the text's form. The repetition of the text was accounted for as being cultural and participants recognised an oral tradition behind the story that may have influenced the way in which it has been recorded.

The second half and majority of the conversation related to historicity. Two participants shared the view that the text was 'true myth' which was both partially historical and partly fictional. Amongst other participants different evidence for and against was offered, both scientific and archaeological. An alternative approach to historicity came to light towards the end of the conversation with the suggestion that ultimately historicity yielded to the reader's purpose which was applying the text to life. The consistency of this approach with regards to the historicity of other biblical events was raised.

#### 4: 7.2. St. Catherine's

The conversation at St.C's covered a range of topics, but with few real conclusions drawn.

A significant theme at St.C's was the action of God in relation to sin. Concern was expressed that that God's method of destroying sin wasn't effective and this was discussed from the perspective of salvation history, culminating in Jesus' death on the cross.

Whilst participants explored these theological dynamics from within the world of the text, they also showed awareness of the text's form and author in discussion of the anachronism of Genesis

referencing clean and unclean animals, possible authorial embellishments and the oral tradition behind the story. Noah's age was discussed as a possible authorial exaggeration, as well as some of the dramatic descriptions of the flood. This became a point of contention in discussions of historicity, acknowledging that authorial creative license creates questions about whether the narrative is an accurate account. The oral tradition behind the text was called upon to account for these features of the text.

A significant portion of the conversation concerned historicity, with various reflections on scientific theories that would account for the events of the narrative and suggestions that the flood was ultimately local, accounting for archaeological evidence to show a flood happened, but also the physical impossibility of the account. The discussion about historicity centred around points of tension relating to the author's creative license, scientific theories and the character of God. Attempts to dissolve the tensions and dichotomies that were being put forward included the suggestion that the binary of fact and fiction does not apply to the text and that the cultural gap between the reader and the author means that historicity is not clear-cut.

#### 4: 7.3. St. Helen's

The discussion at St.H's was notable for the majority of the conversation taking place in relation to the reader, with participants stressing their personal application and learning from the text. The group also demonstrated the highest levels of resistant or atypical readings of the text, put forward predominantly by one individual, Charles, who did not appear to hold to standard Evangelical views.

The group noted various textual practices including repetitions in the narrative and the symbolism of numbers, leading to reflections about these being a feature of the oral tradition and culture behind the text, as well as the intention of God.

The historicity of the narrative was discussed somewhat, with the flood understood to be local by some, with others claiming they were happy to believe it happened. The group spent little to no time on the scientific plausibility of the event, and the general consensus of the group was that the issue of historicity is not as important as finding meaning in the text. These meanings were either contemporary life application or revelation about God. A concern about this approach regarding historical writings of the New Testament was raised. The group put forward a variety of underlying meanings they took from the passage: humans are sinful, God punishes sin, obedience to God is required, God is powerful, God judges but cares.

The group discussion ended with a recognition of the importance of Bible study to understand how to read the text properly. In response to this a criticism of the Bible's clarity was made comparing the New Testament accounts of Jesus with a modern biography.

#### 4: 7.4. Grace and Life College

The conversation at GLC centred around three general themes: features of the text that struck the participants as interesting, whether the flood was historical and the morality of God.

The discussion began with participants noting features of the text they found to be interesting and exploring these in the context of the surrounding chapters of the Pentateuch.

After these preliminary insights, the historicity of the text was discussed. Participants questioned whether the text was local or global and how other ANE flood narratives played into this dynamic.

Two participants differed over the description of the narrative as myth, leading to a broader discussion about the inspired nature of the Bible.

During the discussion about the historicity of the narrative, the conversation focused for a time on the meaning of the narrative according to New Testament interpretations that draw parallels between the flood and baptism. Another meaning of the narrative that was offered was monotheism, stressing the unity and oneness of God in contrast to other ancient polytheists.

The final point of conversation related to the morality of God's actions. The extremity of the sin that was rampant was stressed and this was mirrored with the extremity of God's promise not to flood the earth again. God's actions were understood in light of God's character and a theological struggle between good and evil, or light and darkness, in which humans were proffered as the vehicles for evil and darkness. As such, they needed to be destroyed.

#### 4: 7.5. Wednesday Online

Three central themes were discussed during the WO group: the character of God, the purpose of the story and its historicity. Though the issue of historicity was discussed of the participants' own volition, the second half of the conversation focused on this in more detail after questioning from the moderator.

In relation to the character of God, one participant felt that the story was inconsistent with the rest of the biblical story which he claimed showed a God who does not give up on humanity. In response, it was suggested that throughout the Old Testament God is looking for a 'remnant' of his faithful people he can save thus showing the consistency of God's character and purposes.

Further comments made about the character of God related to his role as judge in the narrative,

which prompted reflections on the extremity of sin which justifies God's action, as well as the pain and regret this caused God to feel.

The idea of God as a judge led to broader suggestions on the purpose or meaning of the narrative. Participants discussed the 'success' of the flood and concluded that due to the continuing existence of sin, the story wasn't about 'solving' sin but about the world that continues to exist. Some implicit applications were made about the reality of living with choice to sin. Some claims about meaning were contextual including a suggestion the story was a conclusion to the creation and fall and marked the beginning of a new time period and that by contrasting the narrative with ANE flood narratives the focus of the story was on the faithfulness of Noah and God's faithfulness to creation.

The group were split on the historicity of the story, with some opting for a 'literal' reading and others for a non-historical reading, with the suggestion the narrative was 'poetic story'.

#### 4: 7.6. Thursday Online

Discussion at TO had many unique aspects to it, distinct from the other focus groups. Most comments however came under three broad topics: theological readings of the text with a focus upon the character of God, reflections on the text's reception in different contexts and the historicity of the narrative.

Several suggestions about the theological meaning of the text were offered, such as the contrast of divine judgement and saving action in the narrative reflecting the judgement and grace of God, and the story being about 'how God works' by drawing upon its usage by Jesus in Matthew 24.

Additionally, some participants focused on the redemptive aspect of the passage as the key overall point.

A very different line of comments upon the text however, considered how the text has been and continues to be received in different cultural contexts. These reflections tended to emphasise the problematic aspects of the text, which contrasted with the redemptive theological readings of the text. The group questioned why the text was popular for children, its depiction in the 2014 'Noah' film,<sup>185</sup> its usage in rapture theology and its significance during a global pandemic.

The rest of the points made by the group related to historicity, though not always directly. The first comment of the discussion designated the text as 'myth' and other comments reflected on the difficulties of taking the narrative literally in relation to the practicalities of the story.

#### 4: 8. Psalm 44 Discussion Summaries

Discussion of Psalm 44 tended to focus around five main topics: 1) author and events, 2) God's character, 3) the form of address, 4) human suffering, and 5) purpose or meaning. The following overviews highlight which of these topics were discussed and what reflections were included in each of them. Participant's response to the text's theological portrayal of God as the central challenge is discussed in more depth in the following chapter (5:3).

##### 4: 8.1. St. John's

The conversation at St.J's began with participants feeling uncertain and affected by the dramatic nature of the Psalm. The Psalm was taken as an example of prayer and relationship with God, and was understood and discussed exclusively as a response to a difficult situation, with no reflection

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<sup>185</sup> *Noah*, directed by Darren Aronofsky (Paramount Pictures, 2014) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/primevideo>.



on the situation presented in the Psalm itself. The text's circumstantial claims were only focused upon after direct questioning from myself.

The absence of God was discussed in the form of a contemporary reflection recognising that Christian culture places responsibility for feeling abandoned or distant from God on the believer, rather than understanding this to be the responsibility of God. Christian culture and the church in general were common points of reflection throughout the Psalm discussion, in contrast to Genesis, with participants exclaiming that the text would never be read aloud at church and that churches struggle to deal with the type of allegations the Psalm is making, preferring a happy or positive 'vibe'.

The underlying tone of the discussion was that the psalmist's accusations reflected their experience and not the reality of events. Context was drawn upon to make this claim citing the psalmist's theology and culture.

Whilst the majority of conversation focused on Christian responses to suffering, without questioning the existence of suffering, a suggestion was made in various forms for justifying human suffering: that it is an opportunity to grow in closer relationship with God. This seemed to be a form of solution to the problem of suffering when a situational one can't be found.

#### 4: 8.2. St. Catherine's

The majority of discussion at St.C's focused on the text in a similar vein to their Genesis discussion. Little to no contemporary applications were made with focus on wider theological issues that the Psalm prompted and how to understand these.

Participants initially discussed the Psalm as a form of response to a difficult situation. However, in contrast to St.J's, the majority of St.C's discussion focused on the events of the Psalm and not the

Psalm as a response to events. Concern was expressed about the character of God depicted in this Psalm and the tension this caused with their own understanding of God. To make sense of this tension, it was asserted that the psalmist lacks understanding and perspective and presents an emotional response that reflects a misunderstanding of the truth of the situation. The group maintained an understanding that these claims about God's actions were incorrect and reflected how people attribute causation of events to God when they're in a difficult situation.

Interestingly however, another tactic for understanding the events of the psalm was also evident amongst participants that implicitly contradicted this line of interpretation. Participants understood the psalmist's attribution of causation to God as a natural human impulse but also suggested that the psalmist's professed innocence is highly unlikely. Denying the psalmist's claim to innocence implies that God's actions could be justified; the community had not been righteous and therefore God's support in battle was not warranted. This implication, however, was not discussed.

A further point of concern was God's partiality. In addition to questions about God as the cause of suffering, the group drew links to their previous reading of the Noah narrative to question how God can side with one group of people over another given that he created both and neither are perfect. One solution was the suggestion that God's sovereignty means He has the ability to hold both perspective of the individual and nations at the same time. Another solution was the suggestion that some nations were so evil their destruction could be justified.

#### 4: 8.3. St. Helen's

Discussion of Psalm 44 at St.H's tended to stray away from the text with focus on wider theological concerns. Participants seemed to have quickly exhausted everything they had to say

about the text with the majority agreeing that the psalms were written for the purpose of identification and comfort and that this psalm was helpful to anyone who also feels abandoned by God. With this dominant theme, participants tended to focus on reader application and were concerned with what the text could mean for them personally.

The group's initial insight was that the Psalm served as an exemplar for prayer or communication/relationship with God. The Psalm was taken as evidence of Christians being able to be angry with God in prayer and the group recognised that this is not something all believers necessarily realise is permissible in their relationship with God.

Participants also discussed the issue of suffering, where it comes from and why God allows it to happen.

Using examples and analogies, participants also explored the tendency to attribute both good and bad actions to God, with a recognition that this was 'simple-minded' and that situations were largely more complex.

The discussion ended with general reflections on the nature of the psalms and their purpose in providing a point of identification and comfort for believers. The psalms were designated as being about 'people's feelings' which was the reason they were read for identification, rather than truth claims. It was explicitly stated that the genre of the Psalm affects how it should be read, with the same case being made for other books of the Bible.

#### 4: 8.4. Grace and Life College

The conversation about Psalm 44 at GLC focused largely on the author, reflecting on their identity, context, perspective or attitude. GLC were somewhat different to the other groups' discussion as they did not focus on the broader issue of suffering or the morality of God in the text. The Psalm

did not seem to present an interpretive challenge to the participants in the way that had been anticipated.

The first comments about the Psalm and one of the central themes of the conversation was the form of address being made – open, honest and angry. The form of address was linked to an aspect of the author’s spiritual life; they were able to express themselves to God in such a way because they had a deep and close relationship with God, but the cultural context of the psalmist was also noted as a reason for this.

The only attention that the participant’s paid to specific detail in the Psalm came in the form of reflections on the attitude and perspective of the author. The biggest topic discussed was the Psalmist’s claim to innocence, which was dismissed as untrue. The psalm was also contextualised against the Exodus narrative to claim the psalmist evidenced a more mature faith in the life of Israel.

The final thread of discussion related to the identity of the author and the context of the Psalm. One participant maintained the unusual view that all the Psalms were written in the time of David. This was challenged in relation to the psalm’s given author ‘the sons of Korah’.

#### 4: 8.5. Wednesday Online

Participants at WO discussed a variety of points in relation to the passage. The moral challenge of the Psalm was discussed, but additionally participants offered their own interpretations of the Psalm which were frequently focused on the person of Jesus. The events that had led to the creation of the Psalm were not a dominant point of conversation, but the Psalm was spoken of as an approach to dealing with difficult circumstances, with some participants noting the honesty of the Psalm and stressing it should be emulated.

In relation to the psalm's depiction of God, one participant claimed that as God's Word, the text has to have an accurate portrayal of God. Others, however, took issue with the depiction of God, particularly the first half of the Psalm which recalls God's victories for Israel over other armies, implying that God condones or is responsible for violence. Two participants shared their understanding of such material in relation to a progressive understanding of the Bible and the people of Israel growing in theological maturity.

The third dominant theme of the discussion was to make Christological or Jesus-focused readings of the Psalm. These Christological readings were made in order to understand how the psalm can be prayed or understood today. They were therefore related to meaning and application. The historical circumstances and the identity of the author were not reflected upon at all.

#### 4: 8.6. Thursday Online

Initial comments at TO sought to get a grasp of what the Psalm is about. Suggestions were made that the psalm is a complaint against God's justice and an attempt to make God feel guilty for not having acted rightly or according to the covenant, and thus do the right thing. The psalm was classified as a lament and its emotion was noted.

Rather than take the moral challenge at the heart of the Psalm as one of suffering, the participants discussed the 'silence' of God in depth. It was reflected that God's silence gives humans an opportunity about how to respond and that the psalm addresses the challenge of how to handle not having answers.

The final point discussed, which offered the most variety of perspectives, was the depiction of God in the Psalm. Participants reflecting on how understanding God's sovereignty in both the good times and bad times is difficult and can lead to expectations of what God's control looks like.

Further, Christians can have expectations of God's behaviour and prescribe how God should act, which was noted as negative. It was questioned whether one's current view of God is accurate given that humans tend to project onto God their view of what they think he's like despite not having a 'full picture' and so need to be willing to surrender their understanding. These reflections made a contemporary application from the Psalm about having a right understanding of God, prompted by the interpretation that the Psalmist does not have the right view of God.

Rather than think about the challenge of the depiction of God from the reader context, one participant approached the issue from the author context, understanding the psalm in the context of a culture where shame was almost worse than death. A further contextualised response to the depiction of God was articulated by the suggestion that the Bible witnesses to a developmental understanding of who God is. As such, the Psalm can be seen as an accurate depiction of God according to the thinking predominant at that time. In other words, the Psalm is not an accurate depiction of God for readers today but was at the time.

#### 4: 9. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 Summaries

Discussion of Ephesians centred around five central topics: 1) culture, 2) meaning, 3) dynamics of interpretation, 4) relevance, and 5) irrelevance. The following overviews reflect on which of these were discussed and what was said in relation to them. Analysis of the key issue of relevance will be discussed in the next chapter (5:4).

#### 4: 9.1. St. John's

The discussion of the Ephesians passage at St.J's focused predominantly on the reader context and prompted the most personal reflections from readers of all three texts. Participants also demonstrated the most self-awareness in response to Ephesians with a mindfulness of their intrinsic bias and perspective.

The first few reflections related to participants' status as married, single or engaged. The two married participants acted as semi-authorities throughout the discussion, providing personal experience and insight and speaking more confidently about the meaning of the passage than the single participants.

No one in the group found the text to be misogynistic or hierarchical. The group understood love and submission to be natural responses to each other and pertinent challenges for those genders. The controversial nature of submission and headship was a given, but participants took a stance that saw the text as promoting gender equality.

Participants showed awareness of the cultural difference between themselves and the text, often using this as the basis on which to make a point. In this line of thinking, it was suggested that it is not particularly accurate to say in western contemporary society that no one hates their own body, or that a man leaves their family to join the woman's family. There was also a concern to establish the general cultural context of the recipients of the letter to establish how the relationships set out might have been conducted prior to the instructions given.

Slavery was the second relationship discussed the most after husbands and wives, though not much time was given to this. After an initial confident suggestion that the contemporary application should be to employment, as previously noted, participants briefly cast around for cultural knowledge to emphasise the 'revolutionary' nature of these teachings.

A large part of the conversation was taken up with exploring some of the application possibilities of the text, addressing areas where the text was not explicit. The two main points raised were the extent to which the instructions to either party were contractually based, i.e. binding only when both parties are actively following them, and whether challenge could be brought to the other party to keep their relational obligations.

At my prompting, the group finished their discussion with a reflection on the relevance of the text and their ability to understand it given the cultural distance. It was noted the Bible is God's resource that He has provided to teach humanity how to live, a corollary of which was that it must be able to be understood. However, some reservations about the ability to understand and relate to the text were expressed in relation to the cultural distance and participant's education context.

#### 4: 9.2. St. Catherine's

Like St.J's, participants at St.C's demonstrated an awareness of the controversy of the text relating to 'submission' which was evidenced in their conversation as the text was revealed and being passed around. Unlike St.J's, however, no one made any reference to their own gender or relationship status, despite the fact that the group contained a married couple.

The first of two prominent points at St.C's was the Christocentric nature of their readings. Several participants at various points of the discussion focused on the centrality of Christ in the reading, understanding the text to ultimately be about following Jesus in the context of particular relationships. Rather than see the text as instructions for how to be in relationship as a follower of Christ, the group saw the text as instructions for how to be a follower of Christ when in relationship.



The second prominent theme, which was a continuation from Psalm 44, was the extent of God's partiality. The text's claim that God is not partial to either master or slave led participants to confirm their previously held conclusions that the instructions promote equality and are not hierarchical. Set in contrast with the previous texts they had read in the focus group, which they felt did demonstrate God's partiality, it was suggested that God is more concerned with his glory than with humans and therefore partial to his glory.

As with St.J's, participants did not see the passage as being hierarchical but promoting equality. The main thrust of this interpretation was on the basis of the culture of the text's time, which was understood to be negative in being hierarchical. The dominant assumption was that the author was offering something new, positive and different in the instructions, contrasting the contemporary culture.

Participants also drew upon the authorship of Paul in their discussion. It was noted that he was a practical man trying to engage in the society of his time but also unmarried, childless and not a slave or master (this was presumed). This was further evidence for the group that the text was Christocentric. As the main focus was on Jesus, Paul was qualified to comment on relationships which he hadn't experienced. Moreover, Paul's apostolic authority was implied when the group were asked about the relevance of the text. Participants went on to affirm the relevancy of the text's content by adopting an approach that applied underlying principles. Using the text as 'an instruction manual' was considered to be inappropriate, given the cultural distance between the reader and the text.

#### 4: 9.3. St. Helen's

As with their previous discussion of Ps.44, St.H's demonstrated a confident understanding of the text, with the passage becoming a jumping off point for discussion of other topics of interest.

The conversation began with personal responses and difficulties with the text and this was returned to throughout the discussion.

The group agreed that the text promoted mutual respect. As with St.C's and St.J's, the historical societal context was drawn upon to underscore that the instructions given by the author are positive in being countercultural.

Awareness of context and the importance of it in application was made explicit at various points throughout the conversation with arguments against a literal interpretation. Overall, the text was understood to have principles to apply but should not be taken literally. Towards the end of the discussion as conversation moved on to topics beyond the scope of the passage, this method was seen in action on a broader scale. After discussing the place of divorcees, homosexuals and transgender people in the church, the group continually reaffirmed that the main principle was to love and accept other people.

Participants on the whole seemed to have a fully formed understanding of the text, with their interpretations stemming from previous encounters with the text. This also accounts for the various strands of discussion which did not stem directly from the text, including how to treat outsiders in the church, mentioned already, the challenge of people living longer, the Queen as the Head of State and of the Church of England and the different roles individuals play within the church.

With regards to slavery, St.H's took a similar line of interpretation to St.J's recognising that Paul understood it to be a part of society and was offering the best way to deal with an unavoidable

aspect of life, which can be applied in an organisational context. St.H's also spoke the most about the parent/child instructions, though still marginally in comparison to the other relationships.

Further examples of the difficulty of a literal reading were suggested: parents who are irresponsible and relationships with children who are adults, which requires a different dynamic.

#### 4: 9.4. Grace and Life College

The conversation at GLC had a personal tone to it with participants sharing their experiences of and suggestions for application; they saw the text through the lens of their own lives.

The conversation began in relation to how the participants apply the text as either married or single. This elicited a variety of responses, both specific lifestyle choices as well as more broad underlying principles. A further application was made in the context of the group being ordinands by relating the master/slave relationship to the episcopal authority within the church and their position under the Bishops of the Church of England requiring obedience and respect.

In all the personal experiences and applications of the text, the relevancy of the text to contemporary life was assumed. This was further propagated by more general applicatory reflections on the text. It was pointed out that psychological studies have shown how men respond more to affirmations of respect, whereas women respond to affirmations of love and noted how this was reflected in the text even from such a long time ago. One participant understood the text to be a confirmation against homosexual marriages, understanding part of the 'mystery' of marriage mentioned in the text to be referring to the fact that it is for heterosexual couples only.

Participants interspersed their personal reflections on the text with a few comments on how the text stands against the backdrop of the culture it came from, as well as contemporary culture. It

was claimed the text wasn't advocating slavery but recognised that it was a significant part of society and that hierarchy between individuals was a much more ingrained concept in ancient culture, with mention to the Roman 'head of the household'. Into such a context, the text was seen as radically subversive.

#### 4: 9.5. Wednesday Online

Discussion about Ephesians at WO centred entirely around the relevance of the text but with different related issues highlighted: what contemporary application is, how application can be discerned given the cultural context and the authority of the text to mandate life and behaviour in the present.

A number of reflections during the discussion related to the dynamic of the three relationships in the text in relation to one another and how similar they were, with different views expressed.

Connected to this conversation were some suggested applications from the text, including the suggestion that Paul was telling his recipients how to be a Christian in relationship and was demonstrating that all relationships are relative to the ultimate relationship which is with Christ. A similarly theoretical application stressed that the themes of submission and love are not culturally bound but transcend time, as such, they provide Christians with an etiquette guide for relationships. Though these applications were broad, they were practically focused.

One participant was against a pragmatic or close application of the text and framed his concern in terms of the authority of Paul. He suggested that as Christians are committed to the authority of Paul, they have a prior belief that whatever he says is right, which means Christians end up maintaining unjust practices simply on account of Paul's authority. In response, it was argued that there is no higher authority than the Bible which means one cannot claim that Paul was 'wrong.'

#### 4: 9.4. Thursday Online

Discussion at TO focused predominantly on the author context, with twice as many reflections focusing on contextualisation as on contemporary application.

The first type of contextualisation that participants engaged in the most was providing general cultural background and understanding the text against this setting. Often such comments also included contemporary contextualisation that placed the text simultaneously against a modern milieu. For example, it was commented that the instructions to subjection go against an instinctive modern egalitarianism but that hierarchical societies have historically been part of the fabric of social life, and this was the norm for the time of the text.

Another form of contextualising was placing the text in the context of the wider structure and themes of the letter as a whole. Picking up on the broader theme that the church's purpose is to witness to God's reunification of all things, it was claimed that Paul was deliberately wanting to navigate away from chaos and the instructions were therefore given within the context of Paul's concern for the church to have order and unity in order to be an effective witness. A similar type of contextualisation occurred when participants placed the text in dialogue with other Pauline writings or understood the text in light of what they knew of Paul.

A fourth type of contextualisation occurred within the content of the passage. Participants stressed that certain parts of the passage needed to be emphasised or remembered in order to contextualise other parts. Verse 21 was highlighted as being key to the text, so that wifely submission was seen in the context of mutual submission.

These varying forms of contextualising were the basis upon which participants made applications from the text. The group's agreement about the radical nature of the text led to wondering if

future generations will look back at the way the text has been applied in contemporary society and question if it's as radical as Paul was being in his day.

#### 4: 10. Conclusion

This chapter has described the texts that participants read and the reasons these texts were chosen. It then briefly described scholarly responses to the text and the topics covered by each group in discussion of each text. Having outlined the basic contents of participant's discussions, a more detailed analysis is needed of the central challenges these passages pose for participants and what their handling of these indicates about the doctrine of Scripture.

# CHAPTER FIVE: PARTICIPANTS' DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE: A READING LENS

## 5: 1. Introduction

This chapter presents participants' doctrine of Scripture and the way in which it functioned in the course of the discussion. This is gleaned firstly, from their responses to the challenge of each biblical passage, secondly, from their explicit comments about the Bible and thirdly, from their interpretative activity.

This chapter will begin with an overview of how participants responded to the central challenge of each text. These are separated into informal and formal participants to aid future analysis of some of the key distinctions between these two groups. Such distinctions may be briefly mentioned at this stage but will be elaborated on in chapter eight. The chapter will then consider what participants said about the Bible, and how they handled the Bible, and will conclude with the emerging sense of participants' doctrine of Scripture and its role in interpretation.

## 5: 2.1. Historicity (Genesis Informal)

How participants understood and handled the question of historicity was the main interpretive challenge of Genesis 7. Does the doctrine of Scripture determine that participants accept the historicity of the narrative?

In discussion of Genesis, the third question on the passage handout asked participants, 'do you think this text is historically accurate?' Before summarising the conclusions that participants came

to it is important to recognise what participants understood by ‘historically accurate’ and how it relates to an understanding of truth.

#### 5: 2.1.1. History and Truth

I assumed when writing the handout question that most individuals would understand ‘historically accurate’ to equate to events that actually happened, as opposed to fictional events that did not happen. In this sense, ‘historically accurate’ equates to ‘factual’.<sup>186</sup> The conversations that took place reflected this understanding of history, such that participants could have equally been discussing the question ‘did the events in this text happen in reality?’

However, it was not always the case that ‘historically accurate’ was synonymous with ‘truthful’ for participants; the text’s truthfulness was not measured solely on the basis of whether the events of the text took place. Instead, all three informal groups seemed to be working with two understandings of truth. First, truth in the sense of factual and accurate information. Second, truth which was something more like ‘revelation’, akin to spiritual insight.<sup>187</sup>

For example, at St.J.’s, several members referred to the Noah narrative as ‘true myth’, which was initially Henry’s designation, quoting C. S. Lewis.<sup>188</sup> This designation was used by Henry to suggest

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<sup>186</sup> Debates about the existence of ‘objective history’ given the subjectivity of any human record, though valid, are not of concern here, but rather how participants understand history in relation to the question and the text.

<sup>187</sup> This is my interpretation of this second usage of ‘truth’ and it should be noted that no participants used these terms to describe truth in this way. This description stems from my understanding of what participants meant in their usage of ‘truth’ when the context implied that they were not referring simply to the text’s factuality.

<sup>188</sup> The usage of the term by Henry does not actually fit C. S. Lewis’ use of the term which he applied to the Gospel and used to indicate that the events of Christ had actually happened. In his letters to his friend Arthur Greeves, he explained ‘Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn’t mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself . . . I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho’ I could not say in cold prose ‘what it meant’. Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened.’ (C.S Lewis, Arthur Greeves, Walter Hooper, *They Stand Together: The Letter of C.S.Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)* (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1979), 427-8.)



that whilst the details of the text might not be completely historically accurate, the text was not devoid of historical content. In other words, the narrative was partially true in a factual sense.

Henry also asserted that, 'when I don't know the answer to these things, my response is – this is a mystery, so I'm not going to understand, but it's true.' Here, he evidences a baseline belief in the truth of the text which, if using 'true' in the factual sense would contradict his earlier declaration that the narrative was true myth. This therefore suggests that Henry is using 'true' in the second understanding described above – a truth of a deeper kind which is compatible with details of the story being inaccurate.

This view also seemed to be affirmed by St.C's , such as Stacey's comment when presented by another group member with the options of Genesis 7 being either a metaphor or historical:

But they're not the only two options is what I mean. So, you can have stories that are, that have truths in them that are not, they're not completely metaphorical but they're also not... it's also about the language...

This was an unfinished thought as Stacey then went on to discuss the difficulties of language and reading from another culture, but her assertion that stories can have 'truths in them' seems to affirm Henry's view that the Genesis account contains truth in a deeper sense than historical reality.

A similar distinction could also be found at St.H's where truth was also a contested issue. After a lengthy speech raising some of the difficulties of defining what is historical and what is not, Jake finished with the statement, 'it's alright as long as you don't want to interpret every single detail

as being literally true.’ The term ‘literally true’ would seem to correspond to a factual, historical view of truth. This seemed to be the ‘truth’ in Amy’s mind when she stated, ‘even if I don’t really understand whether it’s true or what... it’s in the Bible because God wanted it there, that’s what I think.’ Amy affirms the divine purpose of the text, despite uncertainty about its factual truth. Gina made a similar statement but explicitly differentiated between the two truths, saying, ‘but I think it is truth but it’s a different truth’. This statement was in conversation with Charles who was concerned that the literal reading of the creation narrative does not give a factual account of the creation of the world. Gina, in response, affirms the Bible’s truth but relegates it to the second type of ‘truth’ described above, which is compatible with details not being factual.

These varied uses of ‘truth’ demonstrate the influence of a commitment to Scripture’s truthfulness that leaves room to question the historical accuracy or factuality of the texts. But in what sense can the text be understood to be ‘true’ on a deeper level? No one addressed this explicitly but Amy’s quote above suggests that for her, the truth of Scripture is the divine intention behind it. This was explicated more fully in the comment, ‘But I think to myself that it’s in there because God wanted it in there and I might not understand, but I try and draw from it what God is wanting me to learn from that.’ The deeper truth for Amy was about learning and communication; God has something to say to her through the narrative. Similarly, Gina also stressed learning as a crucial aspect of the narrative: ‘Actually that’s the most important thing, whether we individually believe bits of it and not other bits is irrelevant if we’re taking on board the reflection of God.’ In other words, the question of historicity is not important in light of the theological lessons that can be learnt from the text. This view was shared by various other participants, for example Jane (St.J’s) commented that her main concern with the narrative was to understand ‘how can I apply it to my life and live now?’ Taken together, this focus upon theological learning and application for

contemporary life suggests that the sense in which participants understood the text to be non-historically true was in the text's portrayal of God and its ability to be a vehicle to receive communication from God. This is how participants who opted for a non-historical reading (5:2.1.2.4, below) continued to uphold the truth of the text as God's Word.

#### 5: 2.1.1.1. The Bible's Function

These statements reveal something important about participants' conception of the Bible. Though they are different, they all articulate that the Bible is a resource through which the reader learns both about God and how to live in the light of God. In other words, the text is perceived as containing *teaching*, which prescribes that the reader reads for the purpose of *learning*.

What this suggests is that participants' doctrine of Scripture was conceived less in terms of the Bible's inherent characteristics and more in terms of how the Bible functions in the life of the believer. What the Bible *is*, is construed in terms of what the Bible *does*, and what the Bible does is teach the reader what God wants them to know, believe and do.

#### 5: 2.1.2. Partial Historicity

Having established that participants distinguished between the two understandings of truth, it is unsurprising that none of the groups asserted a purely historical or fictional understanding of the story. This was the conclusion from the general thrust of the conversation, so it should be noted that this does not mean that some participants personally held to a fictional or historical rendering. However, based on the discussion, all three groups proposed and vocalised a hybrid understanding of the text that took the narrative to have historical components but also metaphorical, fictional or embellished elements.

#### 5: 2.1.2.1. Historical Reading on the Basis of the Doctrine of Scripture

Though implicit at points at St.J's and St.H's, St.C's was the only group where it was explicitly stated that the nature of Scripture was a reason to take the text as historically accurate. Neil articulated that his understanding of Scripture sets the expectation that the story should be historical:

Because I think with Scripture, if we believe Scripture is God-breathed, that's the word, the phrase in the New Testament: God-breathed. In some translations it says 'God-inspired' but the most accurate is God-breathed. That is, we as Christians believe this is the Word of God, so how do we reconcile that with potential hyperbole or embellishment or whatever?

Neil's statement implies that the text as 'the Word of God' or 'God-breathed' (which he uses synonymously) is at odds with hyperbole or embellishment. He does not expressly state that the nature of the Bible as God's Word indicates it must be read historically, but this is a fairly safe assumption based on his point that the nature of Scripture as God's speech or God's utterance sits in tension with literary conventions that obscure a plain reading. In other words, the doctrine of Scripture (the Bible as God's Word) sets an expectation that the text is truthful in a literal, objective sense which is incompatible with hyperbole/embellishment. This demonstrates that the doctrine of Scripture certainly has a role to play in participants' determination of the historicity of the narrative. Interestingly however, this was the only time a participant referenced the doctrine of Scripture as motivation to read the text historically. On the whole, other reasons were offered

including extrabiblical evidence and the omnipotence of God. This latter point is worth exploring more fully.

#### 5: 2.1.2.2. Historical Reading on the Basis of the Doctrine of God

On several occasions, participants' concern for the historicity of the text did not stem from the doctrine of Scripture but the nature of God. This was articulated by Neil from St.C's:

if you say it's a metaphor, the subtext is you're belittling what God could do and God is by nature, omnipotent. Like, you have to... he is otherwise he's not God. But then, if you say it is not a metaphor, you're left with all these conundrums.

Neil's concern was not that the text might be unhistorical and therefore questionably the 'Word of God' or truthful, but that suggestions of 'metaphor' were being made on the grounds that the account of Noah was physically impossible which was to question the nature of God.

Similarly, in response to group reflections on the scientific plausibility of the Genesis narrative, Jane from St.J's was concerned to protect the character of God when discussing the historicity of the account:

...I believe God can do whatever he wants to do. So, he could have done it, I'm not gonna say he can't have done it because of the way we understand science or whatever now, but also, maybe he didn't and maybe it's just a story for us to learn from.

As with Neil, Jane's concern about the scientific plausibility of the account wasn't in relation to the accuracy or reliability of the Bible but what this says about the capacity of God to orchestrate a world-wide flood. This was also reflected at St.H's where Gina makes the same connection but positively:

I don't have a problem with thinking that this happened. I know that there's evidence that seashells and things have been found right on the top of mountains and stuff... that would show there is a flood. But it's like [Jake] said, what is the point of it? And the point of it to me is that God is all powerful, and that he does... even though you can think about everybody being wiped out bar this family and these particular creatures, he does care.

Gina affirms that she does not have difficulty believing the account really happened because of her understanding that God is powerful, a view she both brings to the text and reads from the text (this dynamic is explored further in 6:2). Again, this assertion of historical accuracy is not motivated by the doctrine of Scripture or the reliability of the Bible, but a concern that God is understood to be powerful and able to do anything. It is significant that concern to protect the character of God was more frequently articulated than concern for the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> This reflects Perrin's participants who also believed in the supernatural events in the texts they read on account of God's ability to do anything. See: Perrin, *Bible Reading*, 193.

### 5: 2.1.2.3. Historical Reading in the Context of a Secular Scientific World

Though participants certainly did seem to prioritise the doctrine of God in their assessment of the text's historicity, it is difficult to discern whether this and other grounds offered for the text's historicity are given in the context of a commitment to Scripture's truthfulness. In other words, did participants believe the narrative to be historical solely on the grounds of evidence or the nature of God, or were these factors simply bolstering a precommitment to a historical reading set by the doctrine of Scripture? If the latter, why was the nature of the Bible only mentioned once as the grounds for belief in a historical reading, if this was indeed an influential factor?

The broader context of participants' comments could provide an answer. Participants approached the narrative as those belonging to a secular scientific world. At St.C's, despite appreciating that God is omnipotent and can do anything, participants were not content with this as an explanation of the story, instead wanting to understand pragmatically how the events could occur, leading to a lengthy discussion of the science behind the story. This concern for a rational explanation stemmed from an anticipated backlash from atheists, as Neil later stated, 'cynically, sceptically, this is what atheists will come to you and say, "how is that possible?" And frankly, I don't have the answer.' This statement suggests Neil is perhaps imagining either an antagonistic or evangelistic exchange whereby he would be required to offer a rational or convincing explanation for how a worldwide flood could occur to someone who believed religion was delusional.

Additionally, Henry from St.J's mirrored Neil's consideration of how 'non-Christians' would receive the text:

Henry: What do you do when non-Christians ask you "do you believe in  
x,y and z?"

Anne: I never had somebody question me about a passage like this actually. I mean, I'm sure other people have, but I've never had someone actually ask me that.

Henry: It's probably because I grew up when a lot of people went to Sunday school and heard all these stories and as they got older, they thought 'that was a load of rubbish' and started to challenge the Christians about it, you see. Maybe people don't do that so much these days, I don't know.

Henry was considerably older than the other members of his group, who were in their twenties and thirties, hence his reference to having grown up in a context where Sunday School attendance was much more common. His reading of the text was affected by his experience of his peers losing their faith and coming to question the narratives they had been taught, including Noah, concluding that the whole thing was made up. Considerations of the text's historicity therefore seemed to incorporate an 'atheist' mindset which meant that recourse to the inherent truth of the Bible won't be a sufficient explanation. In other words, claiming the text is historical (at least in part) 'because it's in the Bible' could have been understood as being an inappropriate response, which might be why participants offered other reasons for their historical reading. This reflects Todd's findings, couched in reference to dominant 'voices', that his participants 'hold received notions of the text's authority in tension with aspects of their experience of contemporary culture, which questions that authority. The 'canonical' voice co-exists and interacts with contemporary more contingent ones.'<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Todd, 'The Talk,' 238.



#### 5: 2.1.2.4. Non-Historical Readings

In the case of non-historical readings, the grounds on which this was argued differed amongst the groups, with various factors holding more weight for particular individuals. Whilst at St John's, the historicity of the passage was denied purely on the grounds of science, St.C's denied historicity because of scientific plausibility and the author's creative license in writing the account, the latter of which was the only concern stated against the historicity of the text at St.H's, with perhaps an element of concern for the morality of God's actions.

Participants' discussion and ultimate conclusion lived in the tension of these factors, seen most starkly at St.C's. The participants struggled to hold together these different pieces in their understanding of the text: their scientific understanding of the world demanded a rationalistic explanation of events which undermined the ability of God to do anything; their understanding that God can do anything left them vulnerable to accusations of ignoring science; their belief in the truth of Scripture made them want to accept the events reported, but their respect for scientific plausibility made them believe that the author exaggerated Noah's age from 60 to 600 etc. The weight placed on these factors differed across the groups and individuals.

The resultant emerging partial historicity (designated 'true myth' and 'origin story' at St John's and St.C's respectively) understood that the flood was probably local, rather than global. Only one explicit affirmation of 'accommodation' was suggested by Henry, who claimed that to the author, it would have seemed like the whole earth was flooded and they therefore were not being deceptive in claiming that the waters covered the earth. Other participants did not indicate whether they understood the author to have been deliberately exaggerating, using a turn of phrase and therefore never intending to suggest the flood was global, or simply writing from an uninformed point of view and genuinely believing the flood to be global.

## 5: 2.2 Historicity (Genesis Formal)

Formal participants responded very differently than informal participants to the challenge of historicity that the text posed. In contrast to the informal participants, more disagreement took place and opposing views were expressed more clearly, with no group coming to a clear consensus about the historicity of the narrative. Indeed, the historicity of the text was less of a challenge for formal participants in that they seemed to already have fixed views on the subject and concern tended to be directed towards the morality of God.

### 5: 2.2.1. History and Truth

Like informal participants, formal participants seemed to be working with two definitions of 'truth'. The first, was the traditional sense of objective fact and the second and more frequently used was something potentially more spiritual. An example of the latter was Christopher from TO, who asserted his belief that the narrative was true but clarified that 'I don't know if that means it's not mythology.' In other words, he felt committed to the truth of the narrative, but this wasn't necessarily connected with the historical reality of the text; that the story was 'true' didn't mean that it was factual. Equally, Nick from WO made a more assertive statement in the same vein; 'I can't take these stories literally. And that doesn't mean I don't think they're true. It means that I don't think they're meant literally.' Whilst Christopher wasn't sure if the narrative was mythology, Nick was confident that the stories weren't intended to be literal but that they were true, presumably in a deeper spiritual sense.

However, Nick also used truth in the objective sense when discussing the inadequate historical evidence for a flood. He stated that ‘all truth is God’s truth’ and that scientific evidence shouldn’t be set up as a rival to ‘biblical truth’. This statement indicates that any ‘truths’, in the sense of objective facts discovered about the reality of life, are not to be dismissed on the grounds that they might disagree with what the Bible appears to say. Instead, they should be accepted and incorporated into an understanding of the Bible where both are understood to be true. It could be fairly safely conjectured that Nick is demonstrating that in the face of objective fact that seems to contradict the Bible, the Bible is to be understood as true in a deeper sense. This was the only instance of ‘truth’ being used in the traditional sense. Proponents of the text’s historical reliability didn’t use the language of ‘truth’ but employed other terms such as ‘literal’ to speak of the truth of the narrative in this stricter sense, expounded below.

How did participants understand the text’s non-historical ‘truth’? No explicit explanation was offered. However, one trend in the approach to historicity, largely adopted at TO, was to stress that the issue of historicity was not central to reading and interpreting the narrative. The direction in which participants chose to focus their attention instead might suggest how the text is understood to be non-historically true. For example, Dean chose to sidestep the historicity question saying, ‘I suppose as a preacher and pastor, I would try to stay away from the academics of the question and see how this can be pastorally presented to my flock... I would look at it as a story, a warning, but a story of redemption.’ Equally Jesse stated, ‘God has a plan and a purpose, there is a rainbow, there is a promise... whether it was a worldwide flood or not, I’ve never really invested a massive amount of time into... I just kind of focus in on some of the key aspects of the narrative.’ Johnny made the same point at GLC: ‘I guess like theologically, regardless you know, of whether global or local... I would look at the theology of it being... God having a fresh start in

creation.’ Similarly, Nick’s indirect application about whether the reader is like Noah or everyone else when the final judgement occurs, reflects his understanding of non-literal truth:

I think that’s a really powerful lean in to the story; when you’re reading the story, and some of us take this as a literal history, some of us take it as a kind of poetic parable maybe, or something similar, some of us take it as a reinterpretation of pagan stories to tell us something about the real God, but it’s also telling us about the world we live in.

These quotes suggest that any deeper ‘truth’ relates to a theological reading which would seem to be largely unattached from whether the event actually happened. This reflects Todd’s findings from his participants who ‘at more than one point... discussed the secondary nature of the historical perspective.’<sup>191</sup> The text was taken to be true theologically, in that what it reveals about the nature of God or humanity is a factually true insight, regardless of whether the text was taken to be factually true. Two participants with opposing views on historicity demonstrate this. Martin (GLC) spoke of the text as a myth which he defined as ‘a foundational principle surrounded by a narrative.’ The foundational principle he identified in Genesis was ‘the sovereignty of God in all creation.’ Conversely, Jessica (WO) stated her belief that the text was ‘literal’, but like Martin, highlighted that a key point of the text was that ‘God is sovereign.’ Whilst not all participants believed in the factual truth of the text then, they did believe in the non-historical truth of the text and this related to the its theological insight.

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<sup>191</sup> Todd, ‘The Talk,’ 240.

#### 5: 2.2.1.1. The Bible's Function

Like informal participants then, this conception of the Bible's non-historical truth as theological insight reveals a perception of the Bible as a source of teaching. This can be seen more explicitly in Johnny's (GLC) comment about historicity: 'I wonder if sometimes whether questions about historical accuracy, do you think they... distract us from what... God's saying through the text?' Johnny evidences a view of the Bible as being a source of divine communication and elsewhere in the discussion, as noted above, focused on the text as 'God's fresh start.' His job as the reader therefore, was to seek divine communication in the text, which took the form of teaching, and what was taught was theological insight. Similarly, Dean's comment that the Noah narrative is a warning story also reveals a view of the text as a source of teaching.

Participants' focus on the non-historical truth of the text thus reveals a belief in the text's teaching capacity and thus a conception of the doctrine of Scripture that relates to its function in the life of the reader.

#### 5: 2.2.2. Historical, Partially Historical, Mythical

What did formal participants ultimately conclude about the text's historicity, given their focus on its theological teaching? Unlike informal participants whose conversation tended to ere towards a view of partial historicity, formal participants demonstrated a range of views within each individual group, openly disagreeing with one another about the historicity of the text.

##### 5: 2.2.2.1. Historicity on the Basis of the Doctrine of God

Adam from GLC and Jessica and Winston from WO were the most outspoken participants who defended the historicity of the narrative. Unlike the more widespread approach of the informal participants, Jessica was the only formal participant whose doctrine of God explicitly determined

her stance on the historicity of the narrative. She stated, first, that she believed God was capable of the seemingly impossible events of the narrative and second, that God's faithfulness in keeping his promises meant that the flood had to be universal. If it had been local, then God has not kept his promise that such a flood would not occur again. Jessica's belief in God's power and faithfulness were reasons for her to take the narrative as historical.

This was the only explicit link a participant made between the character of God and the historicity of the narrative. A further implicit connection could be identified, though this is speculative. Sam (WO) stated that he believed Genesis 1-11 to be 'poetic story' and later stated his concern that God's behaviour does not seem to be consistent with the rest of the Bible. He also affirmed that his understanding of the text's genre meant he therefore didn't need to engage with moral questions about God's actions: 'I think it's a poetic story, so I'm happy to kind of, almost ignore it in the sense of the problematic questions of "did God actually do this? Do I have to try and justify God in this?"' Though Sam did not explicitly state that his concern about God's behaviour in the text led him to conclude the text was not historical, it could be safely assumed that it was a connected factor in his determination of the historicity of the narrative. In addition to the reasons he later stated (Jewish interpretation and archaeological evidence), it's likely that the depiction of the character of God in the story also prompted Sam towards a non-historical reading. Interestingly therefore, the doctrine of God was a basis upon which both the historicity and non-historicity of the text was based.

#### 5: 2.2.2.2. Historical Readings on the Basis of the Doctrine of Scripture

In contrast however, for Adam (GLC), the historicity of the narrative and his belief in the Bible were directly related. Though willing to accept the flood may have been local, he expressed concern at the idea that the narrative was one particular interpretation amongst many of a large

flood which occurred naturally. Instead, he wanted the thrust of the story to be historically reliable, i.e. God caused the flood to occur. Adam's belief in the narrative hinged upon the events having taken place:

The second you do remove all of the history, you're basically detaching it from reality, as such, and you're like saying, "well the guy who wrote this... why should I believe him? Why should I believe this interpretation of reality rather than the Gilgamesh epic?"

Why should I believe Scripture if it's not attached to this world which I can test?

Belief in the Bible was therefore connected with a degree of historical veracity. This is particularly interesting given that many formal participants demonstrated a belief in the Bible despite a lack of historical underpinnings, as has been noted in usages of the term 'truth'. For Adam, the text's historicity was an important facet of its being *Scripture*.

#### 5: 2.2.2.3. Historical Readings on the Basis of the Text

Some formal participants read the text historically because they believed the text indicated that it was historical. Winston (WO) suggested that the narrative itself gives the reader clues that it is to be read literally because of the phrase 'as it were in the days of Noah.' Claiming that parables or symbolic stories were clearly differentiated from history in the oral tradition, Winston gave the example of the story of Lazarus which he contrasted with the other parables and noted 'how it is written, how it is referred to, and how it is referenced...they are different.' Believing there to be

no internal suggestion within the Noah narrative that the story is not historical, Winston assumed it was.

Adam (GLC) also pointed to the detail within the text to argue that the story was historical: 'It seems to me that there is a real retelling of something that... there's details that are just... you don't need them!' In opposition to Martin's claim that the story was monotheistic propaganda, Adam pointed to the detail of the narrative as evidence that there was more to the story than this agenda – why include details superfluous to the main point?

With the exception of Adam, what is interesting to note about all these affirmations of the historicity of the narrative is that like informal participants, the doctrine of Scripture is not offered as a reason to believe the story actually happened.

Additionally, as with informal participants, it could be fairly safely conjectured that commitment to the doctrine of Scripture did play a part in these participants' understanding that the narrative was historical, but crucially, this was not what was suggested. It would seem, as with informal participants, that belief in historicity was therefore more nuanced than simply asserting 'it's in the Bible, so it happened.' Even in Adam's case, though he demonstrated significant concern that the Bible have a historical component to it, he was open to the flood being local and did not simply take the story exactly as it is written on account of it being 'in the Bible'.

However, in contrast to informal participants, formal participants did not seem to be under the influence of secular scientific approaches to the text, which was one possible explanation of informal participants recourse to historical evidence as validation for a historical reading rather than a reiteration of the Bible's nature. On the contrary, formal participants' discussion demonstrated that they weren't as concerned about scientific evidence and instead were led by



the text itself to form their conclusion as to its historicity. This suggests that the determination of historicity, whilst not unconnected from the doctrine of Scripture, might be text-based, rather than Bible-based.

#### 5: 2.2.2.4. Non-Historical Readings

On the other hand, some participants opted for a mythical or non-historical reading of the text. Denials of historicity did not necessarily imply an understanding of the text that was completely fictional. The strongest proponent against the historicity of the text was Sam's designation of Genesis 1-11 as 'poetic story.' He believed this to be the case because he didn't think the historical evidence was strong enough to confirm the validity of the narrative and also because:

Even the Jewish readers ... a lot of them are not reading it as a literal story and I kind of think, it's their story, it's their Scripture, if they don't have to read it literally and the historical evidence is not there, then I also don't have to either.

The Jewish interpretive tradition played a significant role in Sam's understanding and interpretation of the story. He trusted their interpretation of the narrative and didn't feel that any particular Christian commitments either to the doctrine of Scripture or any other beliefs required him to read historically. Tradition therefore appears to have a role in interpretation, which will be explored in Section 6:4.1.1.

One of the most common reasons offered for a mythical or non-historical reading of the text was the influence of the Gilgamesh epic and other ancient flood stories. This was mentioned in all three groups and played a significant role in many formal participants' understanding of the story.

The existence of a very similar narrative led participants to conclude that the Genesis account had a particular agenda in the face of other similar stories promoting different worldviews. For some, all such stories did refer to a largescale flood that took place, and represented different understandings of this phenomenon. For others, the Genesis text was reactionary in response to other accounts of the flood. Nick took the latter view, whilst Martin took the former:

It makes more sense to say we're hearing these stories from the Babylonians or whatever and saying, "well that's a story about what gods are like, I'm going to rewrite it to say what the real God is like" (Nick)

The closeness of the narrative seems to suggest to me that there was something that occurred within the geographical area which was of such great significance that it was written and accounted for in many different cultures and many different religious interpretations of that event.

(Martin)

However, Martin also went on to concede that the narrative could have also been reactionary to other narratives:

Unless he's doing here what some interpreters say is happening in Genesis 1, which is he's creating a monotheistic interpretation of something which is known broadly and well ... there is one God who is responsible for the flood rather than many.

Luke also referenced extrabiblical writings but didn't indicate either way how he interpreted the relationship between them and Genesis, but his designation that the passage is 'in the language of myth' indicates that the existence of other stories contributes to this understanding.

In conclusion, formal participants did not demonstrate a strong consensus as to the historicity of the narrative. This diversity of opinion demonstrates that a commitment to the truthfulness of Scripture does not prescribe a stance on the historicity of the text. Though a commitment to the historical truth of the text does not preclude the 'deeper' truth of the text, for some participants such 'deeper' truth was the only way in which the text could be understood to be truthful. In this they demonstrated a commitment to the truth of the text where 'truth' meant theological insight.

## 5: 2.3. Historicity and the Doctrine of Scripture

### 5: 2.3.1. Doctrine of Scripture ≠ Historical

Taking informal and formal participants together, it is clear from the discussions that participants were committed to the truth of the narrative, but that this did not necessarily mean that the narrative was to be taken as historical. The doctrine of Scripture was only given as a reason to read historically on two occasions (once in each category), and though it cannot be dismissed as an influential factor, it is of note that such articulations were rare. This suggests that whilst the nature of the Bible indicates participants read historically, their decision to do so is also informed by other considerations both internal and external to the text. Though Perrin's research found that her participants accepted textual authority unless there was anxiety surrounding the text's

theological or ethical message,<sup>192</sup> the discussion of Genesis demonstrated that textual authority (in terms of facticity) was questioned on broader grounds, including scientific and authorial, explored in the next chapter. The doctrine of Scripture alone did not govern participants' determination of the factual truth of the text.

However, as has been noted, the doctrine of Scripture cannot be dismissed as unrelated to the choice to read historically. Few participants advocated for a purely fictional understanding of the text, demonstrating a concern that the text have some elements of historical veracity.

This concern could relate to another issue that some participants raised, which was the implications of a non-historical reading for the rest of the Bible. Underscoring a belief in the unity of the text, some participants questioned what a non-historical reading would imply for other biblical content, or how one might make clear distinctions between which elements of the Bible are historical and which aren't. Two participants explicitly linked this concern with the New Testament, recognising that the stakes are much higher concerning the historicity of the life of Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection, than the existence of Noah and the flood. This demonstrates two points of note.

First, participants prioritise biblical texts with regards to historicity; it is more important that some are historical than others. This prioritisation of historicity related to the content of the text rather than the doctrine of Scripture. The concern wasn't whether the *text* was reliable, but whether the central elements of their *faith* (the life of Jesus) were reliable. This point is supported by Village's research; his participants' belief in the historical factuality of texts was based more on the doctrinal weight of the text than the feasibility of the events. Significantly, Village found 'there was a distinction between events associated with the life of Jesus and those from the Old

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<sup>192</sup> Perrin, *Bible Reading*, 237.

Testament.<sup>193</sup> This underscores what was noted above, that participants' determination of the text's historicity was not based on beliefs about the nature of the text, but other factors.

Second, such comments may also reveal that despite text prioritisation and differing genres, participants' conception of Scripture as a unit led them to want to have a consistent approach across the entirety of the Bible which didn't leave room for shifting concepts of truth according to the text at hand. Participants' comments about historical consistency could therefore be reflective of the struggle inherent in handling texts differently according to genre despite them being designated as the same according to doctrine.

#### 5: 2.3.2. Doctrine of Scripture and Reading Agenda

If the doctrine of Scripture didn't primarily have an impact on how participants read the text, how did it appear to influence interpretation?

Both advocates and sceptics of the text's historicity ultimately placed greater emphasis on the text's non-historical truth, which took the form of theological insight (predominantly for formal participants) and guidance on behaviour (more prevalent amongst informal participants). This non-historical truth might be more fruitfully referred to as the text's ultimate meaning.

Rather than the doctrine of Scripture dictate that participants read in a particular way, it appeared to dictate where the ultimate meaning of the text was found. This is demonstrated by the way in which participants spoke of the Bible as God's resource for communication and teaching. More than traditional doctrinal articulations about Scripture (some of which have been mentioned and others of which are discussed below, 5:5) participants conception of the text seemed to related to

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<sup>193</sup> Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 66.

its teaching function. What the Bible *is*, is construed in terms of what the Bible *does*, and what the Bible does is teach the reader what God wants them to know, believe and do. As a result of this conception of the Bible, participants sought the ultimate meaning of the Genesis text in its non-historical truth: theological insight and life guidance.

It wasn't therefore that participants' belief in the Bible as the Word of God meant Genesis had to be *read in a particular way* (historical), but rather that participant's belief in the function of the Bible as God's resource meant Genesis had to be *read for this particular purpose*. The doctrine of Scripture thus set the reading agenda by locating the text's meaning in its teaching.

This suggests that the role of the doctrine of Scripture in the process of interpretation is related to reading purpose rather than method: beliefs about the Bible (in this case the belief that the Bible teaches) determine the overall **agenda** for reading (to learn and be taught) and thus establishes where the ultimate meaning of the text is to be found (information about God and how to live accordingly).

## 5: 2.4. Conclusion: Historicity

In summary, participants' handling of the question of historicity demonstrated that a commitment to the truth of the text does not always equate to a purely historical reading, though it most likely includes a historical component. Ultimately, participants were more concerned about the purpose of the text as a source of teaching for right belief and behaviour, which existed regardless of the text's historicity. This suggests that a dominant view of the Bible was that of a teaching resource, which characterises the role of the doctrine of Scripture as setting the agenda of reading which determines where the text's meaning is to be found – in its teachings. Participants came to the

text looking for teaching, and this was determined by their beliefs about the nature of Scripture as a teaching resource. The authority of the text was therefore its 'deeper meaning' and the form this took varied amongst participants.

Additionally, participants' handling of Genesis highlights the role of the doctrine of God in reading, as well as complications surrounding the reality of the doctrine of Scripture in relation to different biblical texts. These issues will be explored more in the next chapter.

### 5: 3.1. Theology (Psalm Informal)

Psalm 44 was chosen for participants primarily because of the theological challenge that it poses concerning the character of God. Does the doctrine of Scripture determine that participants accept God is culpable for the suffering of the psalmist, as the psalmist claims?

The consistent approach adopted by all three informal groups in response to this challenge was to either explicitly or implicitly deny the claims of the psalmist that God has caused them to suffer and abandoned them. Though the psalmist claims that God is not present and has caused the defeat of their armies, participants believed this to be an expression of the psalmist's incorrect perspective, rather than reflecting the reality of events. Key factors in this conclusion regarding God's culpability are participants' understanding of the character of God, alternative causes of suffering and the genre of the text, each of which I will expand on.

#### 5: 3.1.1. Character of God

Participants demonstrated a fundamental belief in, and commitment to, God as loving and good, though this was expressed using a variety of language. This preconceived understanding of the

nature and character of God as good was a significant factor in participants' assessment of the truth of the psalmist's claims. They understood the text in light of their previously held understanding of God which led to their denial of the psalmist's claims. For example, Emma's (St.J's) comment about the repeated accusatory refrain 'you have...':

And I think that the statements 'you have made us', I think they're the psalmist's felt sense, not necessarily an inerrant fact. Because they don't necessarily fit, if that like, you could make them fit, but I think they are a statement of that crying out and hurt.

Emma does not clarify what the statements don't 'fit' with, but it could be fairly safely conjectured that she denies the truth of these claims because they don't fit her understanding of the character and actions of God. Similarly, at St.C's, Neil expressly stated his understanding of God to be different to that of the text:

But it seems to imply that God is, in this case, lazy or lethargic or unresponsive. And although, there's perhaps... I don't think he is but that's certainly what the text or the writer seems to imply in that moment.

Neil claims that he does not believe God to be lazy or unresponsive despite the text indicating that he is. In other words, his understanding of God was a dominating factor in how he interpreted the text.



The character of God was not the only reason that participants denied the psalmist's claims however, as participants' understanding of alternative causes of evil and suffering also played a part.

#### 5: 3.1.2. Causes of Suffering

A corollary of participants' belief that God is good was their understanding that God is not responsible for evil and suffering. As such, various participants put forward alternative explanations for what has caused the suffering of the psalmist (or suffering in general) as further proof that the psalmist's claims about what God has caused are unfounded. The examples below also highlight the role of the reader's Christian context and tradition which underscores the importance of individual context in reading, explored further in 6:4.

Gina (St.H's) was the only participant to attribute evil and suffering to Satan. As a result of being in a fallen world she understood that 'Satan is allowed power here as well'. When pushed by Charles as to why God would create Satan, Gina explained that Satan was a fallen angel who fell because of free will. She ultimately therefore attributes evil and suffering to the consequences of free will, thus absolving God. That God is not the cause of suffering was seen most clearly in Amy's amendment of Charles' comment that 'you're believing that God is doing it' to which she responded, 'no he's allowing it.'

Vanessa and Pamela from St.C's both reflected on human nature and the tendency to blame or attribute causation incorrectly to God. Pamela reflected on this in terms of the Psalm:

Was God associated with those things happening or was that just part of what was happening, and God was lumped in... just because the psalmist

was writing to the leader saying 'this is what God did' – is it? Or is that just life? And God's getting the blame for it?

This is a further articulation of the argument that evil and suffering are a product of a fallen world, but with the focus instead on how humans can believe God to be the cause of their suffering by associating their experience of a fallen world with the action of God. This view was shared by Jane from St. J's who couched it in theological terms, claiming that the psalmist's perspective is a consequence of their theological understanding of God's sovereignty:

I think they're also acknowledging God's sovereignty and especially for them... everything is related to what God was doing, it was very much like 'he's in control of everything so if this is what's happening to us, this is what he's doing to us'... God was their world, when they were succeeding it was because of God, when they were failing, it was because of God... so in a sense I think it just speaks of their understanding of his sovereignty over every situation.

Jane understands that the theological understanding prevalent at the time of the psalmist is to attribute everything to God. Rather than this being a human tendency, as suggested by Vanessa and Pamela, it's actually a theological stance; everything that happens is an act of God's sovereignty. This understanding further underscores the interpretation that the psalmist's claims are not to be taken literally.

It must be noted however, that Jake did show some uncertainty about God's causation in relation to natural disasters and that Jane was more open to the idea that God might sometimes act or cause things to happen that result in suffering. However, she does not go as far as claiming God causes evil and modifies her claim:

Unless God tells me, there's no way I can know whether something bad has happened because he willed it or it's just happened because we live in a fallen world, or it was something we did that caused it, but I do know that there are all those possibilities, that sometimes, he's actually willing something quite, that we would perceive as negative, to happen to us. Sometimes it's something we've done ourselves, sometimes it's just like, life. So, you know, sometimes it his him. Sometimes it is his fault.

An openness to God willing something bad to happen was not expressed by any other participant and is therefore something of an anomaly, but Jane does modify her claim to say that God causes what we might 'perceive as negative'. Suffering is therefore relative to perspective, which bolstered the interpretation that the psalmist is blaming God who has not caused their suffering.

### 5: 3.1.3. Genre

Though St.H's were the only group to explicitly state that the Psalm was a form of poetry, both St.J's and St.C's understood the Psalm as a form of worship or prayer. This understanding of the genre of the Psalm meant that participants treated the text in a particular way. The Psalms were seen as an expression of feeling and emotion and not to be read for information or instruction.

The clearest articulation of this came from Neil at St.C's addressing the third question on the handout sheet:

“Does this text provide an accurate depiction of God?” I think the answer to that is probably no. But I think it provides an accurate depiction of how people perceive God when they are in distress...

The Psalm was understood to not speak truthfully of God because of the emotional state and nature of the psalmist's address. Whereas the narrator or author of the Noah narrative is understood to be recounting an episode in the life of God and God's people, the psalmist was understood to be emotionally charged and reflecting on and responding to their current experience; as Henry (St.J's) said, 'There's real pain in there.' As such, what was significant for many participants was not the claims made but how the psalmist addresses God and responds to their experience. For example, using language adopted from Myers-Briggs personality types, St.C's had the following exchange:

Vanessa: I think its feelings, isn't it?

Neil: He is very much an 'F'.

Vanessa: yes, it's very much an emotional response.

This psychometric contrasts feelers (F) with thinkers (T), the former of whom operate predominantly according to their emotions and the latter of whom operate predominantly

according to facts. Vanessa and Neil therefore couch the tone of the Psalm as the result of the psalmist's personality.

Additionally, participants were sceptical about the psalmist's claims to innocence on the basis of their understanding of human nature and the tendencies of the Israelite people. As Stacey (St.C's) says, 'Like, I dunno, that's unbelievable ... I mean nobody lives that way.' It was deemed to be highly unlikely that the psalmist and the community as a whole were entirely righteous, which perhaps played into participants' distrust of the psalmist's claims about God.

In summary, participants' understanding of the genre of the text, their previously held notions about the character of God and their understanding of other causes of evil, led them to deny the claims of the psalmist that God is responsible for their situation. The doctrine of Scripture was never called upon as reason to accept the theology of the psalmist, but rather the doctrine of God drove the interpretive conclusions that participants made, bolstered by the genre within which such claims were being made.

### 5: 3.2. Theology (Psalm Formal)

As with informal participants, formal participants understood God to not be at fault for the psalmist's suffering. Nick (WO) was the only participant who affirmed that the text did give an accurate depiction of God on account of it being the Word of God:

I take Celia and Jessica's point that this is the honest outpouring of someone's thoughts and feelings to God, but it's also God's Word to us. In

the end of Luke, it says that Jesus explained to his disciples what was said about him in the Psalms... so as Christians I think we have to take this as the Word of God, as much as any Scripture.

Nick does not state explicitly that he understands God to be culpable for the psalmist's situation, but his understanding that the Psalm gives an accurate depiction of God indicates that he believes the Psalmist is right in what they're asserting, on account of the fact that the Psalms are the Word of God. This was an anomaly, however. All other participants believed the Psalm wasn't giving an accurate picture of God and this was justified on the basis of the genre of the text, beliefs about human perspective and on the basis of the character of God.

#### 5: 3.2.1. Genre

Like informal participants, many formal participants noted that the Psalmist is expressing their emotions and experience. Though Dean (TO) was the only participant to put forward a genre, categorising the Psalm as 'lament', participants recognised the personal nature of the text and assumed the author to be experiencing what the text expressed.<sup>194</sup> The subjectivity involved in this kind of expression and the heightened emotion led participants to understand that the Psalmist may not be speaking objectively and factually. So, Logan (TO) stated, 'I don't think we can make an overriding claim to say that God does abandon people like that but it's obviously what he was feeling at that moment.' Similarly, Jesse (TO) commented, 'for me, it isn't a reflection of God but it's certainly an image of this interaction... it's almost "poor me" in some senses and I think that's a

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<sup>194</sup> The exception to this was Martin, who believed the psalm to have been written 'as if' from the perspective of the Korahites written about in Exodus.

bad way to kind of express who God is as a result.’ For these participants, the psalmist was truthfully expressing how they felt about God, but because they were so ‘caught up’ in their situation and the emotion it triggered, this did not reflect who God actually is.

As a result of the personal nature of the Psalm, like informal participants, formal participants saw the form and address of the Psalm as a paradigm for personal prayer. At GLC, the first comment of the discussion by Johnny centred on this: ‘I just I have real admiration for this as a way of prayer.’ Similarly at WO, Celia commented, ‘I think it’s a wonderful example of somebody being totally honest before God and just opening up their heart and pouring out what they’re actually feeling with no pretence.’ The genre of the text as personal expression thus led participants to dismiss the psalmist’s claims but not to dismiss the Psalm, which was seen as a valuable example of prayer.<sup>195</sup>

### 5: 3.2.2. Human Perspective

In addition to the emotional nature of the psalm, participants also reflected on the limited perspective of the psalmist as a human, in contrast to God. Taylor (TO) framed this as ‘tunnel vision’ and commented how humans often want God to work according to their timescale when in Taylor’s words, ‘God can see far more.’ Adam (GLC) also made a very similar comment:

in the Psalmist’s point of view, he’s right, because in his limited lifespan, that’s what it seems like. In God’s point of view when you’ve got eternity, well actually salvation is just around the corner but you’re not going to see it. So, I think there is that tension of our view versus the grand narrative.

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<sup>195</sup> Rogers refers to instances where readers take something in the text as a behaviour/belief to be emulated as an ‘exemplar hermeneutic’ which renders the text and congregational horizon as proximate. He notes the presence of this hermeneutical practice both in public and small group settings. See: Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, 104.

Here, Adam contrasts the limited perspective of humans and the eternal perspective of God, highlighting that humanity's temporality can lead to incorrect depictions of the character of God. Richard (TO) also reflected on the limited human understanding of God but specifically in relation to a progressive view of the Bible, stating 'as far as the perception of God is concerned of the people in the time when the Psalm was written, it does represent how they thought about God and the world.' Richard didn't elaborate on his understanding of the biblical development of perceptions of God, but he is making a similar point about the limited understanding of the Psalmist.

In these types of reflections, the psalmist's limited understanding was not a characteristic particular to them but a condition of the human experience. As such, participants drew upon their own experiences to see themselves in the psalmist, fostering greater connection with the psalmist's experience, as they too are humans with limited perspective. The role of experience was thus important in their engagement with the text, explored more in the next chapter (6:4).

### 5: 3.2.3. Character of God

In addition to the influence of the genre, participants' determination of the truth of the psalmist's claims was based on their understanding of the character of God. The emotional state of the psalmist was certainly a factor in participant's consideration of whether the text spoke rightfully of God, but this was largely only considered *because* of participant's pre-existing understanding of God. If participants had been presented with an exultant praising Psalm declaring God's goodness and love, it is highly unlikely they would have questioned whether the psalmist was too 'excited' or 'passionate' to be taken seriously. Or conversely, if participants had been presented with an



equally melancholy psalm written from a similar place of despair but which spoke of God as faithful and sovereign, it is doubtful that the psalmist's desperate situation and emotional state would have led to them questioning the truth claims about God. What actually led to participants' consideration of the psalmist's emotional state and situation was that the psalmist professed beliefs about God that were not in keeping with participants' own doctrine of God. For example, Jesse's comment above that the psalmist's emotions leads to 'a bad way to... express who God is as a result' relies on a preconceived understanding of the nature of God, which Jesse believes the psalmist to not be doing justice to.

Conversely, participants treated the final verse, which speaks of God's steadfast love, differently and did not dismiss this claim like they did for the others, such as Martin (GLC) who said, 'what they're saying is "this is happening but we know you're good, we know you're loving" hence "rise up, come to our help, redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love".' In this statement, Martin acknowledges that the psalmist does know who God is and speaks rightfully of him.

Johnny (GLC) provides a further example of interpreting the text in light of his understanding of the nature of God. Bringing to the text his belief that God is faithful to the covenant meant that the Psalmist can't be correct in what they assert:

If you accept God's covenant promise, you know, God is definitely holding up his side of the bargain as it were, so if there's going to be a fault somewhere it's going to be on the human side with us, with the author.

Johnny's prior understanding of the character of God as faithful thus shaped his understanding of the truthfulness of the psalmist's claims about God. Though the psalmist presents God as not

upholding his covenant promise, Johnny believes that God does uphold his covenant promise and therefore the psalmist's perception/account of the events they have experienced must be incorrect. Rather than place emphasis on human fallibility in terms of perspective, as the participants did above, Johnny placed emphasis on what he knows to be true about God's character and thus determined the reliability of the psalmist's claims according to this knowledge.

### 5: 3.3. Theology and the Doctrine of Scripture

The theological challenge in relation to the character of God in the Psalm was met by participants' doctrine of God driving their interpretation, rather than the doctrine of Scripture. As a result, participants nearly unanimously claimed that the Psalm did not provide theological truths about God. What does this reveal about the doctrine of Scripture?

#### 5: 3.3.1. Doctrine of God > Doctrine of Scripture

One of the first things this indicates about participants' doctrine of Scripture is how central and clear it is as a belief in readers' mind. When contrasting the way participants interpreted in light of their beliefs about God and their beliefs about Scripture, it appears that the doctrine of Scripture is not a clear and unyielding commitment in the minds of participants. Whereas the majority of participants were extremely clear about God's actions and character, and these were actively employed to guide interpretation, the doctrine of Scripture was not clearly articulated or considered as a reason to believe the psalmist to be speaking rightly of God, (with the exception of Nick). The doctrine of God therefore has a significant role in interpretation and this will be explored further in the next chapter (6:2).

### 5: 3.3.2. Doctrine of Scripture and Reading Agenda

The second thing the Psalm discussion highlights about participant's doctrine of Scripture builds on what was established in the Genesis discussion: the text was conceived in terms of its purpose to teach. Participants thus read for the purpose of learning. This is illustrated by the fact that participants' dismissal of the psalmist's claims did not lead them to the conclusion that the Psalm was a bad example of how to speak to/about God, or had no relevance to them. Participants' conception of Scripture's teaching function meant the text had a pedagogical purpose, but unlike Genesis, the Psalm didn't teach theological truths (as a result of their doctrine of God, above) but instead taught readers how to pray through the text's format, rather than content.

What this says about the doctrine of Scripture accords with what was found in Genesis – participant's doctrine of Scripture located the meaning of the text in its teaching, and thus set the reading agenda: participants read for the purpose of learning and saw the Psalm as a paradigm for prayer.

### 5: 3.3.3. Genre and the Doctrine of Scripture

The third and final insight the Psalm discussion highlights about the doctrine of Scripture, is that beliefs about the Bible are manifested differently according to genre. On account of the 'personal' and 'emotional' genre and the Psalm's claims about God, the Psalm was not authoritative as a source of factual information or of theological insight but as an example of how to pray and live; its authority was thus limited. By contrast, Genesis was authoritative in relation to its theological insight about God. This shows that participant's beliefs about the Bible manifest themselves differently, according to the content and nature of the text at hand. The potential inconsistency of

this was not raised by participants as it was for Genesis where participants were concerned what a non-historical reading of Genesis would indicate about the New Testament. This could be because Genesis as a narrative drew out interpretive parallels with the Gospel narratives, whereas the Psalms are predominantly contained to one book. The role of genre is thus an important factor in considering the role of the doctrine of Scripture, and this will be explored in the next chapter (6:3).

### 5: 3.4. Conclusion: Theology

In summary, participants' dismissal of the text's theological claims demonstrated that interpretative conclusions were largely the result of the text's genre and content, and the reader's beliefs about God. In particular, pre-existing beliefs about God appeared to be a dominant and decisive framework from which to understand the text's meaning, such that only one participant raised a concern that belief in the Bible as God's Word means accepting its theological claims. That participants found meaning instead in the text's format and saw it as a paradigm for prayer demonstrates their belief in the Bible's value and purpose to teach the reader. However the content of this teaching was qualified by their doctrine of God and the text's genre. The doctrine of Scripture therefore, as with Genesis, set the reading agenda of learning, but the contents of what was learnt was determined by other factors.

## 5: 4.1. Relevancy (Ephesians Informal)

Ephesians 5:21-6:9 was selected in order to explore participants' approaches to the relevancy of the Bible. How is the text understood as relevant and how does this relate to the doctrine of Scripture?

Participants demonstrated their belief in the relevancy of the text by seeking application from the text, which also demonstrates belief in the text's authority for life and behaviour.<sup>196</sup> This section will overview first, how participants applied the text, and second their rationale for doing so.

### 5: 4.1.1. Application

On the whole, participants wanted to take the underlying principles of the text and apply them to their own lives, rather than take the instructions straight off the page. Jake (St.H's) articulated this most clearly:

Once you've understood the historical context, you don't I think in my view, you don't map across from that to the present day literally in every respect, you would look for the underlying principles and you see which ones you would apply to the present day.

Jake articulates the need to understand historical context and specifies that this allows for an understanding of the underlying principles of the text. At St.C's and St.H's, where this view was

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<sup>196</sup> For further empirical research that highlights how readers 'understand the nature of Scripture as a text that makes claims upon their lives', see: Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: theology for a worldly church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 6. <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/2027/heb.30685>. EPUB.

most strongly espoused, the resultant applications were fairly broad and general. Both discussions concluded that the instruction for them as modern individuals is to love, accept and serve whoever they come into contact with. This application goes far beyond the content of the text which only addresses three specific relationships. This is not to say that participants at St.C's and St.H's didn't believe the text to have an applicatory force for the specific relationships mentioned but rather that the underlying principles could be more broadly applied.

Such broad applications were closely connected with considerations of the historical societal context of the text. This allowed participants to reflect on how the first recipients would have heard the letter's instructions and the extent to which they would have been surprising or subversive, establishing the revolutionary nature of the instructions. The link between historical context and modern-day application was therefore something akin to the 'spirit' of the instructions. The author was proposing something radical and progressive for the time. This knowledge was then utilised not only to emphasise that the instructions are positive and not oppressive, but also to underscore that modern application should encapsulate the same 'spirit' of the original instructions, leading to applications focusing on the instruction's 'underlying principles' which took the form of a general attitude or ethic, rather than specific behaviours and actions. An example of this comes from Vanessa (St.C's):

I think because it addresses quite specific relational situations, sometimes we look at this kind of passage like an instruction manual. And try and then cookie-cutter apply it to our own lives but I think that there is a huge amount of relevance in the principles behind it, the principles that, where you have power, you have it to serve the person that you have power over,

the principle that we should submit to one another, that we should prefer one another, the principle that we should serve those who are in power over us as if they were Christ. Those kind of principles are really applicable in any relationship, in any walk of life, you know any one of us will have power dynamics in a lot of our relationships and this speaks quite heavily into how we handle those power dynamics.

Vanessa offers broad applicatory lessons to relationships of power and rejects that the text should function as an 'instruction manual' but rather offers principles to follow. This comment was made towards the end of the group's discussion which was largely focused on the historical societal context of the text.

However, in addition to such broader applications related to attitude and ethics it should be noted that specific applications were also considered, particularly at St.J's, where the conversation was slightly more personal than the other two groups. St.J's extensive discussion concerning the contractual nature of the instructions demonstrates a close reading of the text and a tendency to apply the instructions directly, seen in Frank's question:

Do you think it's ok, if you're in one of these scenarios, to say 'this is what I'm doing, this is how you're making me feel?' is that allowed in this passage, to confront, not confront, to challenge or to explain how one's feeling or if you know what I mean? Is that allowed?

Frank is looking to the passage to understand specifically what actions and behaviours are 'allowed'. This reading takes the passage as instructional, determining what can and can't be said to the other relational party. Applications in this specific sense were discussed more at St.J's. They therefore demonstrated the converse of the other two groups' positive correlation between historical context and general applications - they reflected on the context of the text much less and therefore focused on more specific behavioural applications. As participants at St.J's didn't explore the historical context with regards to marriage they did not reflect upon the 'spirit' of the instructions and therefore didn't apply the text through the identification of underlying principles.

#### 5: 4.1.2. Reasons for Relevance

Though participants clearly subscribed to the text's relevance in seeking to apply it to their lives, this was rarely articulated as a consequence of the doctrine of Scripture. Just because this was not articulated does not mean it was not a considerable factor, but it is worth considering what reasons participants did provide for their belief in the text's relevancy.

In general, relevancy was simply assumed. For example, Amy began the discussion at St.H's exclaiming that she'd always found the passage difficult because her husband wasn't a Christian, so she didn't know how to apply it. This reveals that Amy believes in the text's relevancy as she sought to apply it, but she gave no discernible reason as to why she would seek to apply it.

The majority of rationales provided for the text's relevancy related to the content of the text itself – it was relevant because of its subject matter which still made sense for contemporary society.

For example, Neil from St.C's commented on the similarity between the text's context and his own, 'I think ancient Rome, we are like a modern Rome in the sense of immorality, inequality, infidelity, you know, all those things make it startlingly relevant.' The text was relevant on account



of it addressing a similar context. Similarly, Henry (St.J's) articulated that the instructions to husbands and wives reflect contemporary gender differences:

It is actually, natural in a sense for a woman to love a man, much more so for a man to love a woman, and a man that's been married often has to work how he can make that real and how it can actually demonstrate that and he can reflect that so that the wife can actually feel like that. But the woman, as I say, loving is so natural that women will support their husbands even if they're murderers and everything else or rapists and all that sort of stuff, because that's part of how women are. But what a man needs is not that his wife should love him but that the wife should respect him, value him, affirm him, bless him, encourage him.

Henry believes the instructions given to reflect how men and women function in relationships today, which affirms their relevancy. In both these examples, the context of the reader plays a part in establishing the text's relevance. This is discussed further in 6:4.

There was only one occasion upon which relevancy was predicated on the author of the text. In response to the third question on the handout asking whether the text was relevant, Neil (St.C's) stated:

Course it has relevance. I think Paul, you know, Paul's work, his letters work, God-breathed, look at the book of Romans, look at Corinthians... he clearly had the Holy Spirit in him and anyone who says otherwise does not

know what they're talking about so, and we have to apply, we have to assume it's the same in Ephesians.

For Neil, the relevance of the text was a corollary of the spirit-filled nature of the author that produced 'God-breathed' works. This is also an indirect affirmation of the doctrine of Scripture but couched in terms of the author's sensibilities rather than the text's nature as a whole. Implied in Neil's comment is the idea that as the text is 'God-breathed' it is also divine communication, which is understood to be intrinsically relevant.

A more specific articulation of the relevancy of the text based on its being *biblical* came from Jane (St.J's) who, addressing the issue of a modern reader's ability to understand, said,

I take the stance that we should be able to understand it because it's what we have to understand how God wants us to live our lives and He knows that and also we have the Holy Spirit who guides us in all the truth and hopefully helps us to interpret what's going on, and then we also have people who know loads of stuff and can give us context but if we can't understand this text because it's not culturally relevant then how can we use the Bible to live our lives?

Jane understands that in addition to the work of the Holy Spirit and contextual information, the text was relevant by virtue of the fact that it's a biblical text, given by God who is concerned to communicate through the Bible how contemporary life should be lived. This was the only articulation of the relevancy of the text that reflected on the nature of the Bible as a whole.

It should be noted however, that various participants did articulate points at which they felt the text was not relevant or didn't relate to contemporary society. However, this did not detract from an overall thrust that understood the text to be relevant to life.

## 5: 4.2. Relevancy (Ephesians Formal)

The issue of relevancy was handled similarly by formal participants, as will be seen.

### 5: 4.2.1. Application

All three formal groups, like the informal groups, made contemporary applications from the text and these were diverse, even within one group. Applications were more equally split than informal participants between the two forms: specific behaviours or actions, or broader attitudes or ethics, and these weren't always mutually exclusive. For example, Martin from GLC offered his specific application that when he and his wife can't reach a mutual decision, he has the final say as the head of the household. This was a specific outworking of their understanding of the text.

However, Adam, also from GLC and who was unmarried, offered an application that encapsulated a general attitude, which was that you love and serve others. The specifics of what this actually means in terms of behaviour or action was not explored but is an example of taking the 'underling principle' or 'meaning' of the text.

Some participants recognised that the application of the 'underlying principle' or 'meaning' of the text would look different depending upon context, such as Luke (TO) who said

It might look different in the way that we work it out and we apply it but  
you know, it's a question of, wherever you are in life, whatever our station

is, so to speak, if we can talk in those terms, if we're serving Christ then we're serving other people and we do that to the best of our ability in the midst of our circumstances and the Kingdom of God transcends our current culture, it calls us to a different culture, the culture of the Kingdom, the culture of heaven, whatever you want to call it. And that might look different to different cultural contexts in different times and societies in the world, but I think that point still stands.

Luke explicitly states that the 'principle' of the text, which for him is serving Christ by serving others and living according to the Kingdom of God, manifests itself differently according to context.

As with informal participants, on the whole, identification of the text's principle or underlying meaning was closely connected with a consideration of historical context. The more the cultural context of the text was explored, the more likely participants were to make general applications that focused on the 'spirit' of the instructions, rather than taking them at face value and offering specific applications. For example, TO reflected the most of the three groups on the cultural context and several participants made the point that the instructions were 'ground-breaking' and 'radical' for their time. This led Luke to make the following reflection:

I just wonder when people look back on the postmodern turn, how they're going to look at what we did with the Gospel and what we did with Paul's teaching and how we applied it today - how much of it would seem really

weird to them? Anyway, just reckoning with that point of: are we as radical as Paul is being, in our day?

Recognition that the text was radical for its historical context led Luke to reflect on whether contemporary application was as equally radical.

In contrast however, at GLC where the cultural context was not explored in much depth, participants focused on the specifics of the text's application in terms of marriage dynamics, demonstrating specific applications related to particular life situations. When the group did explore the cultural context and determine that the text was radical for its time, broader application principles were alluded to, such as Johnny's comment:

This also was actually really counter-cultural at the time as well. Because as you know in the Roman idea of the family, the man was the absolute head of the household and whatever he said went and children didn't really have any rights... actually something really radical is being said here to the person whose traditionally had all the power, that actually in that power you need to be loving and submitting to the ones you have the authority over. Yeah, I guess, so the third question here is really important... how do we take some of these principles today and apply them?

Two things are of note in this quote. First, the connection between the exploration of the cultural context and application of 'principles.' Johnny reflects on the authority of the husband/father as head of the household in Roman society which leads him to suggest the instructions are radical

given this context. His next point is to take such a principle of radicality, 'loving and submitting to the ones you have authority over' and apply it to life. The text's context led to an application of 'principles' rather than a direct application of the instructions.

The second point to note is the 'third question' Johnny refers to actually asked participants, 'does this text have any relevance for life today?' Johnny transforms this question, such that the relevance of the text is not at stake but is assumed and the question therefore becomes, in what ways might the text exert its relevance in contemporary life. This assumption of relevancy is explored below.

In summary, in line with informal participants, it appears that exploring the cultural context of the text places an emphasis upon the principles behind the instructions, rather than the instructions themselves, and this is what participants therefore attempt to apply to their lives. Lack of such exploration tends to lead towards more straightforward applications of the instructions in terms of the specific relationships stated.

#### 5: 4.2.2. Reasons for Relevance

What reasons did formal participants offer or imply as to why the text is relevant? Was the text relevant because of the doctrine of Scripture, or were other reasons given?

As with informal participants, for most formal participants the relevancy of the text was simply assumed. In the majority of cases, participants simply spoke of the text's association to their lives without offering a reason for why they were doing so. For example, Martin's first comment regarding the text was a question directed towards Adam asking how he applies the text as a single man 'because I fully believe it applies to everyone'. The asking of this question and the belief that the text applies to all is an assertion of relevancy that is assumed without explanation.

In this instance, it seems likely that Martin's assumption is based on the doctrine of Scripture. The text's content didn't relate to Adam as unmarried and childless, so Martin didn't appear to be basing his expectation of relevancy on the text itself, but rather his beliefs about the text *as Scripture*.

However, in most instances of assumed relevancy, *why* the text was relevant could not be discerned. It is probable that this was a consequence of the doctrine of Scripture, however only one participant explicitly stated this rationale. This participant was Nick (WO), who claimed the text was relevant because of its biblical nature. Nick actually didn't use the term 'relevant' but referred to the text's authority. However, these are closely connected concepts; a text can't be actively authoritative but irrelevant. Nick stated, 'for me, it's in the Bible, so there is no higher authority. I believe in Scripture, tradition and reason as an Anglican, but I believe that you can't just say "but I think the Bible's wrong".' Nick offers the traditional Anglican triad of 'Scripture, tradition and reason' as authoritative sources but stresses this does not allow readers the freedom of contradiction, because of Scripture's status as the ultimate authority. This comment was made in response to Sam who questioned the relevancy of the text for contemporary life based on moral and ethical principles. Nick reasserts that the text is relevant, or authoritative, because of its *biblical* nature. This was the only articulation of the text's authority and relevance based directly from the doctrine of Scripture.

This aside, when relevancy was not simply assumed it was often articulated as a result of the content of the text itself. The actual insights or subject matter of the text is intrinsically relevant to contemporary life. For example, Adam (GLC) states:

It really stands up because I think some psychologists did the languages men and women speak and women have this language of love and men have this language of respect. And you know, it's here, two thousand years ago. So, a man should love his wife "I should learn that means something to her that it doesn't quite mean for me", and a wife should respect her husband. I think women do tend to tell people that they love them more, but as a man I don't always hear that but if she says "hey, I respect you man!" it's like "ah cool!" and it kind of goes through to a man in a way in which the word 'love' might not and vice versa.

Here Adam demonstrates belief in the relevancy of the text because its emphasis upon a man's need for respect and a woman's need for love is mirrored in Adam's personal experience and by psychological research. This point is very similar to informal participant Henry's, quoted above. Of course, in both cases, belief in the relevancy of the text might not be solely based upon its content – it is more than likely that relevancy is a feature of their doctrine of Scripture as well, but this was not articulated. Instead, marvelling at how the text can continue to be reflective of psychological insight in a completely different time period and culture, Adam stresses the relevancy of the text's content.

Similarly, Luke (TO) also demonstrated the text's relevance according to its content; 'that point that we've all got a boss, we've all got a Lord, is still true today isn't it really?' The text is relevant because contemporary readers still exist within the matrices of relationships that the text speaks of. Though the practice of slavery no longer exists in western culture, Luke equates the slave master of the text with the bosses of today and therefore sees the content of the text as still



relevant because it reflects the human experience. The reader's context is a crucial factor in this determination of relevancy, discussed in 6:4.

Sam (WO) was unique in suggesting that the authority or relevancy of the text for readers often derives from its author: 'I think that this text causes so much debate and discussion among Evangelicals in particular from my experience because we start with the presumption that Paul must have been right, whatever he was saying.' Sam observes that Evangelical understandings of Pauline authorship lead readers to an unquestioning acceptance of Paul's writings simply because of who he is. As such, Sam maintained that many readers believe 'submitting to Paul's authority is more important' than any other source of authority. In other words, Sam believes that for many, the text is relevant to life today because its author is believed to have the authority to speak into how life should be lived. Interestingly, Sam didn't equate Pauline authorship with divine authorship as Neil did (5:4.1.2), though this could be implied. The implications of what this reveals about Sam's approach to authority is discussed below (5:5.1).

### 5: 4.3. Relevancy and the Doctrine of Scripture

What do these insights about the relevancy of the text indicate about participants' doctrine of Scripture?

Both formal and informal participants showed that they believed the text to be relevant to contemporary life by seeking to apply the text. Relevancy is thus closely connected with authority because participants demonstrated the text's authority in looking to it to inform their attitudes and behaviours. However, subscription to the relevancy of the text was rarely accounted for as a consequence of the doctrine of Scripture. Instead, it was predominantly validated in terms of the

text's content. Though it could be that participants based their belief in the relevancy of the text solely on the text's context, I think it is more likely that their appreciation of the relevancy of the text's content is offered as additional support for a pre-existing belief in the relevancy of the text on account of the doctrine of Scripture. I would suggest this is the case on several grounds.

First, the relevancy of the text as a *biblical* text was evident in the Genesis and Psalm discussion. Participants sought meaning in the text's teaching about belief and/or behaviour as a result of a conception of Scripture in terms of its function: teaching. What the text taught was theological insight about God and how to live - meanings that related to the life of the reader.

Second, it is likely that the ubiquity of the text as relevant as a result of its teaching function meant that participants didn't need to account for it on biblical grounds. This can be seen by the fact that the assumption of relevancy, which was rarely defended or explained, sits in contrast with how participants handled the question of the text's historicity in relation to Genesis.

Relevancy was assumed, but historicity was certainly not a given. This suggests that relevancy is a significant component of participants' working doctrine of Scripture.

Third, that participants spoke more of the text's relevancy on the grounds of its content could also perhaps be seen in light of the secular cultural context of participants that proved to be influential for the reading of Genesis (Section 5:2.1.2.3). Participants were keenly aware that the Bible is problematic for contemporary culture and therefore their demonstration of its relevance on the basis of its content could be seen as the influence of such culture, where the Bible's assumed relevance because of its divine origins would hold no weight.

On account of these reasons, it could be said that relevancy was a significant component of participants' doctrine of Scripture as a result of their perception of the text's teaching function.

The doctrine of Scripture's role was thus the same as it was for Genesis and the Psalm: it

determined the purpose of reading for learning and thus the location of meaning in the text's teaching of theological insight and life guidance.

#### 5: 4.4. Conclusion: Relevancy

In summary, participants believed the text to be relevant in seeking to apply it to their lives.

However, methods of application were not monolithic with participants evidencing both specific and broad applications, with the latter closely related to contextual considerations.

This demonstrates that the doctrine of Scripture may determine relevancy, but not how the text is deemed to be relevant.

Moreover, the relevancy of the text was largely assumed suggesting it's a fundamental aspect of participants' doctrine of Scripture. This accords with the emerging view of the Bible as having a teaching function – its relevance for the reader is intrinsic to its pedagogical purpose.

#### 5: 5. References to the Bible's Nature

What has been established so far from the text challenges is that participants conceived of the Bible in terms of its function as God's resource and this function related to divine communication and teaching. This indicates the role of the doctrine of Scripture is in setting the reading agenda – reading for the purpose of learning theological insight and life guidance. Take the following quotes for example:

'it's for us to use, to learn'

‘it’s a story to learn from’

‘the most important thing... is taking on board the reflection of God’

‘my main learning from this text...’

‘teaching for the future’

‘we can learn a lot from’

‘it’s another part of God we’re learning about’

‘the Bible teaches’

These quotes are not exhaustive but evidence participant’s emphasis on learning and information. However, participants also used more traditional doctrinal language to speak of the Bible. To continue to build an understanding of participant’s doctrine of Scripture, I will now turn to a consideration of what participants said/implied about the authority, sufficiency, inspiration, clarity and unity of the Bible. How did these statements relate to a conception of the Bible in terms of its teaching function?

## 5: 5.1. Authoritative (Sufficient)

As was noted in the Ephesians discussion, Nick (WO) gave the most explicit defence of the Bible's authority claiming there was no higher authority, though he recognised the role of tradition and reason. As a result of the Bible's authority Nick claimed, 'you can't just say "but I think the Bible's wrong."' Nick thus affirms the sufficiency of the Bible as source of information and the authority of the Bible in submitting to what the text asserts. However, interestingly, Nick was not a proponent of Genesis's historicity. This suggests that Nick's submission to what the text asserts is actually in relation to its teachings in the form of theological insight and life guidance, rather than information. This is further demonstrated by what Nick stated after affirming the authority of the text: 'my main learning from this text, is that ... when we find ourselves with power over someone legally as all these three relationships involve, we should hold that lightly again because it's provisional, it's relative to our relationship to Jesus.' What is authoritative for Nick is the underlying principle of what the text teaches about relationships.

The same approach to authority appeared to be true for Martin (GLC) who made an implicit affirmation of the Bible's authority following Johnny repeating an interpretation he'd read that claimed the Noah flood prefigured baptism. Johnny couldn't remember if this was an interpretation of the early church, or in the New Testament. Martin responded:

My immediate mind with that... wants to argue that it's an early church interpretation reading a little bit too much into the text. But the problem is, if it's scriptural then I have to approach it in a different way. If it's scriptural without the faith, you just look at it academically you could just say this was their attempt to bring Jesus into the Old Testament at the very

beginning of biblical theology... and it was wrong. But the faith element makes me not want to do that. The faith element wants me to go 'if it is in Scripture, then I need to re-examine what I think about that'.

Here, Martin evidences a clear distinction between what is biblical and what is not, demonstrating that the authority of the text, as for Nick, requires submission. Like Nick, Martin also did not believe the Noah story to be historical. What is authoritative is thus the Bible's theological teaching, which in this instance was the New Testament's interpretation of the meaning of the Noah narrative.

This also seemed to be the sense of Gina's (St.H's) assertion of the Bible's authority. In response to Charles' claim that he does not believe in Satan, Gina replied, 'I only go by what my Bible tells me Charles and I do believe most of it, maybe not always literally but if I don't believe it then... what am I trusting in if I don't trust, to me, what is a basic thing?' Gina affirms the Bible as a foundational authority in terms of its teaching about faith and thus its sufficiency; her understanding of the Christian faith comes from what the Bible says. Curiously, however, Gina also states that she does not always take the Bible literally. Like Nick and Martin therefore, this suggests that Gina's understanding of the Bible's authority relates to its teaching, which is sometimes literal – informing the reader of the state of things (such as the existence of Satan), and sometimes not literal, such as in Ephesians where Gina affirmed the text shouldn't be taken literally but its 'guidelines' were authoritative.

One participant, Sam (WO) demonstrated their resistance to the authoritative sufficiency of Scripture, as has been noted (Section 5:4.2.2). Sam claimed that one of the problems with the way the Ephesians text has been handled has been the assumption that 'submitting to Paul's authority

is more important than submitting to moral law'. Two points are of note here: first, Sam refers to Paul's authority, rather than the Bible's authority. Second, it's unclear what Sam means by 'moral law.' Is this moral law related to God? The second half of his comment provides some insight:

OK I can take this text and that's fine but it comes with a history of interpretation that's led to so much immorality ... that if Paul did have in his mind the things that people have said historically ... then I'm more than happy to kind of say I'm moving away from Paul because it's led to so much un-Christly action.

Sam's willingness to submit to the authority of the text's teaching is not based on the nature of the text but its content and how in keeping with the teachings and person of Christ it is. For Sam therefore, the person of Jesus appears to be what is authoritative and the Bible is authoritative in so far as it reflects this. Sam does not claim that the Ephesians text is not authoritative, but rather that if the author's meaning was to defend and promote slavery, as has been claimed in the past, then he could not accept the text's authority. Sam therefore demonstrates a more stringent approach to authority. In the comments above, the authority of the text was related to its theological teaching and insight. It appears that Sam would agree with this but with the added caveat that this had to be consistent with the person and teachings of Jesus. This was a unique approach to the authority of the text amongst participants.

In sum, participants affirmed their belief in the sufficiency of the text in their statements about the Bible's authority, which were also in keeping with a conception of the Bible related to function in the form of teaching. What was authoritative for participants was what the Bible taught, and this

took a variety of forms. Consideration of how participant discerned what the Bible taught is discussed in the next chapter.

#### 5: 5.2. Inspired (Word of God)

Two participants explicitly referenced the inspiration of the Bible and three references were made to the Bible as the Word of God. Though both terms seemingly confirm the divine authorship of the text, curiously they appeared to have a different force in participants usage.

Neil (St.C's) referenced that the Bible was 'God-breathed' on two occasions, the first of which was in relation to Genesis and included a mention to the Bible as the 'word of God', quoted in 5:2.1.2.1. Neil was concerned how the Bible could be God's Word if it included hyperbole or embellishment. In other words, he felt the text should be read in a certain way as a result of its divine authorship and this was at odds with stylistic devices associated with human authorship.

The Bible as the word of God implied it should be read in a particular way.

Similarly, Nick (WO) affirmed that the psalmists claims must be taken as true on account of the Psalm being God's Word. The nature of the Bible as the 'Word of God' was reason to take the claims of the Psalmist at face value, i.e., inform the way in which the text is read.

Finally, Adam (GLC) referenced the Bible as the 'Word of God' in opposition to Martin, who suggested that the psalmist was arrogant. In response, Adam claimed this wasn't appropriate because one can't judge the Bible as the 'Word of God.' The nature of the Bible as God's Word thus informed what Adam could say about the text.

In all these three instances, reference to the Bible as the Word of God impacted the way in which the text was read and the conclusions that participants made about the text.



By contrast, references to the Bible's inspiration reflected the emerging picture of the Bible's perception in relation to function.

Neil's second affirmation of the Bible as God-breathed in the Ephesians discussion (5:4.1.2) included an affirmation that the Holy Spirit was at work in Paul<sup>197</sup> which confirmed the text's relevance. The text was relevant to the reader, by virtue of its inspired nature. The inspiration of the text underscored its function to be relevant.

Similarly, Martin (GLC) stated, 'I'd say that the spirit allows... works within and through the writer, to put forward what God desires the individual and the people of God to know. I'd say the root of all Scripture comes through the inspiration of the spirit.' The focus of this statement of inspiration is to confirm that the final text is divinely ordained by God and carries God's intended communication. As with Neil, inspiration underscored the text's function as a medium of divine communication.

In sum, these comments confirm belief in the inspiration of the Bible and its being God's Word. References to inspiration appeared to be validation for a conception of the Bible's function emphasising its relevance and ultimate meaning in God's teaching, whereas references to the Bible being the Word of God focused on the way in which the text should be read as a result of its nature.

### 5: 5.3. Clear

Very few participants made claims about the clarity of Scripture. The most affirmative comment came from Jane (St.J's) who stated in the Ephesians discussion (5:4.1.2) that readers have to be

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<sup>197</sup> Paul was the presumed author of Ephesians.

able to understand the text as a result of the Bible being God's chosen method of communication with his people. God wouldn't provide something that people couldn't understand.

Two participants explicitly stated their inability to understand the Bible but didn't see this as an obstacle to engaging with Scripture. Rose (St.H's) affirmed that sufficient prior knowledge for reading is impossible, so she has to embrace learning as she goes. Similarly, Amy (St.H's) was encouraged by Psalm 131 which she described as promoting an attitude of trust in God despite not understanding. This exemplifies that the Bible was clear enough that both Amy and Rose believe and trust it, but not enough so that they understood everything. In these comments the Bible's clarity was an issue relating to the reader and their ability to understand, rather than the text.

It appeared that the majority of participants adopted the approach of Amy and Rose without explicitly claiming so. Participants had questions and discussed and debated various aspects of the texts which shows that they were not entirely perspicuous, but no one articulated this as egregious, instead seeing it as part of the process of engaging with the Bible, rather than an inherent flaw of the Bible itself.

#### 5: 5.4. Unit/Consistent

Though some participants did affirm their belief in the consistency of God across the testaments, affirmations of the Bible's unity were instead implied, through interpretive practices where participants linked or connected disparate biblical texts, demonstrating their belief in the unity of the texts.

Gina (St.H's) implicitly affirmed her belief that the Bible was consistent in highlighting that the verse in the Psalm which speaks of God sleeping is 'controversial' because the Bible elsewhere

states that God does not sleep. This is an acknowledgement that the Bible does not contradict itself and led to an interpretation of the verse in the Psalm as metaphorical.

This instance demonstrates an expectation that the Bible was to be consistent. This is corroborated by the concern raised by some participants in the Genesis discussion for a consistency of method regarding historicity and what a non-historical reading of Noah implies about other biblical texts (5:2.3). Participants' expectation that the Bible should be consistent however, did not blind them to instances where it was not. On several occasions, participants contrasted the text at hand with other biblical texts, either to identify what was unique about the text, or to raise the question of why the text at hand is different. None of these instances led to claims that the Bible was inconsistent, indeed some participants accounted for differences on the basis of a developmental or trajectorial understanding of the Bible that witnesses to the growth of human thinking, which explains some instances of difference. On other occasions, solutions or explanations were offered as to the differences. This suggests that participants were actively committed to the consistency of Scripture and operated under this principle.

Though no explicit link was made, this commitment to the consistency of the text can be seen in the context of participants' conception of the Bible as having a teaching function. If the purpose of the Bible is to teach, then it can't teach contradictory things, because then it is failing to fulfil its teaching function. It could be that rather than conceive of the Bible's consistency as a result of the character of God and the nature of the Bible as God's Word, the Bible was seen as consistent because of its teaching function.

## 5: 5.6. The Role of References to the Bible's Nature

Analysis of why and when the above articulations about Scripture were made highlights an important further aspect of the role of the doctrine of Scripture.

In several instances, the nature of Scripture was referenced in order to validate or to argue against another participant's interpretation. This was seen in participants' references to the Bible being the Word of God in particular. The doctrine of Scripture therefore acted as form of interpretive validation to bolster the case for a particular understanding of the text and was called upon to set interpretive boundaries, what can or can't be said of the text. This reinforces a link between doctrinal affirmation and interpretive conclusions; the former has a role in prescribing or setting limits on the latter. However, this wasn't always the case as has been seen. Participants did not frequently defend the text's relevancy or historicity on account of the text being *biblical*, instead offering other reasoning. In both these instances, contemporary culture was speculated to play a role in this behaviour. This shows that whilst the doctrine of Scripture does have a role in shaping the outcomes of interpretation, it is not the only significant influence. This will be explored further in the next chapter.

On other occasions, the Bible's nature was referenced by participants in order to validate the divine origins of the text, particularly in light of the human elements of the text which might challenge this. These references to the doctrine of Scripture were therefore for the purpose of reassurance that the text is from or of God and underscored and validated its teaching function. Rather than validate a particular interpretation, the doctrine of Scripture was called upon to validate that the text was capable of divine communication despite the complications associated with human authorship.

The final reason that participants referenced the doctrine of Scripture was to validate the overall purpose or agenda of their interpretation. This has already been noted in the text challenges. By calling upon what they perceived to be the ultimate end of Scripture, its function to teach, participants could set the ground for their interpretive conclusions. The doctrine of Scripture was called upon to determine interpretive direction and conclusions.

In summary, the doctrine of Scripture articulations functioned in the course of the discussion as a validation for interpretive conclusions, the divine origins of the text and interpretive goals.

## 5: 6. Engagement Practices

Having considered what participants explicitly said about the Bible, it is also worth summarising the extent to which participant's doctrine of Scripture influenced hermeneutical activity.

The focus group transcripts were coded for anything participants *did with* the text, distinguished from what participants *said about* the text, as described in Section 3:10.1. The following overview draws on this coding to make some statistical reflections of the doctrinally derived hermeneutical activity of participants.

### 5: 6.1. Historical Practices

Participants engaged in a number of practices that related to the historical, human nature of the text, accounting for 24% of their overall hermeneutical activity. These included reflecting on the author's identity, intention, thinking or worldview, the circumstantial context of the text, the theological context of the text, the text's recipients and specifics of the text's language and translation. The extent to which these practices constituted 'distancing' (2:7.2) is discussed in

6:7.3. Though participants appeared to lack some relevant knowledge for proper ‘historical-grammatical’ exegesis, the fact that just under a quarter of their engagement practices were aimed at elucidating the text’s context reflects participants’ appreciation of the human and historically embedded nature of the Bible and exegetical approach.

However, as has been seen, the conclusions of such exegesis were not always concurrent with a commitment to the doctrine of Scripture which would insist on the historicity and factual truth of the biblical material.

#### 5: 6.2. Doctrinal Practices

Whilst the engagement practices associated with exegesis might be employed by any reader of the biblical text, participants demonstrated a number of practices that were underpinned by their belief in the text as God’s Word, accounting for 26% of their hermeneutical activity.

Much of this activity was underlined by a belief in the unity of the biblical canon. As has been seen, participants contextualised the texts within a canonical trajectory, as well as compared and contrasted the texts with other biblical material. Canonical practices accounted for just under half of the total 26% of doctrinally derived practices. The majority of the rest of the doctrinally derived practices related to the practice of application – seeking guidance from the text as to belief and behaviour for the contemporary reader. Participants offered specific applications, discussed application possibilities and the text’s relevant underlying principles.

In addition to canonical readings and application, participants also engaged in practices that put the text in conversation with their broader beliefs and doctrines, accounting for 10% of their engagement practices. Although these ways of engaging with the text didn’t specifically reference

the Bible, they drew on bible-related content, such as salvation history or the person of Jesus and were thus an extension of a canonical approach.

Moreover, 9% of engagement practices drew upon the reader's personal context. These were not instances of application, but various ways in which participants brought the text in dialogue with themselves, such as responding to Ephesians 'as a wife' or empathising with the character of Noah. Whilst not specifically 'biblical' practices, these practices reveal a willingness to personally engage with the text, and this can be seen as the result of a belief in the relevancy of the text.

Taking biblical, doctrinal and personal engagement practices together then, 45% of participants' engagement practices appeared to be the result of their belief in the divine origins of the text.

It was previously outlined that the doctrine of Scripture is ultimately a belief in the Bible as both God's Words and human's words (2:6) and as a result hermeneutics must encompass practices that reflect both these aspects of the text (2.7). This did appear to be the case, when considering that historical and doctrinal practices together accounted for 69% of engagement practices, reflecting participants' belief in the dual authorship of the text. In particular, by engaging more with practices that derived from belief in the divine nature of the text, participants demonstrated that their doctrine of Scripture did dictate a lot of what participants did with the text. However, the text challenges discussed in this chapter have demonstrated how this was not always reflected in participant's *interpretative conclusions*. In other words, the practices participants used to explore the text were reflective of a commitment to the doctrine of Scripture, but the conclusions they came to did not always. This suggests there are other key factors at work that affect the interpretative process.

## 5: 7. The Doctrine of Scripture as a Lens

What is the overall emerging picture of participants' doctrine of Scripture given their response to the texts' challenges, references to the nature of the Bible and their engagement practices?

Participants subscribed to the inspiration, authority, truth and especially the relevance of the text as closely related concepts. The relevance of the text appeared to be particularly dominating in participants' perception of the Bible, resulting in a conception of Scripture related to its teaching function in the readers' life. In this way, the role of the doctrine of Scripture was to set the reading agenda. Participants' belief in the Bible as a teaching resource determined where the meaning of the text was to be found. However, participants also demonstrated diversity in both *how* they read the text and *what* conclusions they came to. A commitment to the text's truth did not ipso facto lead to a belief that the text was historically or even theologically accurate. Participant's determination of such issues was influenced by a number of factors both external and internal to the text, including the doctrine of God, the genre of the text and aspects of their individual context.

In the field of hermeneutics, these influential factors, inclusive of the doctrine of Scripture, are known as the reader's 'horizon.' Thiselton describes the reader's horizon as follows,

The horizon or pre-intentional background is thus a network of revisable expectations and assumptions which a reader brings to the text, *together with* the shared patterns of behaviour and belief with reference to which processes of interpretation and understanding become operative. The term "horizon" calls attention to the fact that our situatedness in time, history and culture defines the present (though always expanding) limits of



our “world”, or more strictly the limits of *what we can “see”*. The term “background” calls attention to the fact that these boundaries embrace not only what we can draw on in conscious reflection, but also the pre-cognitive dispositions or competences which are made possible by our participation in the shared practices of a social and historical world.<sup>198</sup>

The language of horizon has been advocated for by Thiselton, who was himself influenced largely by Gadamer, because it incorporates the idea that one's horizons can expand and move. This is often the result of engaging with the horizon of another, and in the case of reading, the reader's horizon is confronted by the horizon of the text and the text's author.

It has long been acknowledged in the field of hermeneutics that what the reader brings to the text, in terms of their horizon, affects what is read, understood and interpreted. However, when considering the doctrine of Scripture and other specific factors that make up a reader's horizon, the metaphor becomes less adept. Though a horizon can change and expand, only one horizon can exist at any one time; the metaphor breaks down if one starts to speak of multiple horizons. Yet a reader's horizon contains multitudes, as Thiselton draws attention to above. How do particular features of a reader's horizon affect their engagement with the text?

In order to explore the dynamics of the reader's horizon in more detail, the language of horizons will not suffice. Instead, I will be using the metaphor of reading the text through multiple lenses. This does not preclude the concept of a reader's ‘horizon.’ Indeed, the combination and totality of a reader's lenses equates to their horizon. What the metaphor of lenses allows for is nuance as to the specifics of the ‘expectations and assumptions’ and ‘patterns of behaviour and belief’ that

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<sup>198</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 46.

readers bring to texts, how these relate to one another in the forming of a horizon and what impact they have on interpretation. The metaphor of lenses appreciates the complexity of what a reader brings to the text.

In physical optometry, a person can look through a number of lenses at any given time. One might wear glasses or contact lenses, or both, and be looking through binoculars, a telescope, a microscope or a camera. The same is true for reading but to a much greater extent. Readers view the text through a large number of lenses at any given moment, and these can vary in combination and strength, affecting what it is 'seen'.

What has been explored in this chapter is how the doctrine of Scripture functions as a lens through which the text is viewed. But what this chapter has also identified is that this wasn't the only lens through which participants read the Bible. The other dominant reading lenses participants demonstrated will be explored in the next chapter but are depicted in figure 2 below. I am indebted to Andrew Todd for this diagram structure that depicts the use of lenses, following his portrayal of the interaction of prominent opposing 'voices' identified from his empirical research (figure 1).<sup>199</sup>

Todd's analysis of 'voices' in the Bible study process places focus on the social dynamics of interpretation, or 'interpretation-in-interaction' and views the Bible as one voice amongst those of the group.<sup>200</sup> As my research is doctrinally and hermeneutically oriented, the framework of 'lenses' centralises the role of the text and reflects on interpretive activity from an ideological angle, rather than a relational one. It also recognises the interplay of dynamics between all four lenses (explored in the next chapter), as opposed to two binary dynamics.

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<sup>199</sup> Todd, 'The Talk', 275.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

Indeed, it should be noted that Figure 2 depicts the dominant lenses that appeared to be at work amongst my participants in relation to the doctrine of Scripture, but countless other lenses could be included, such as culture, education, race and gender, as either additions or sub-lenses.

## 5: 8. Conclusion

With this metaphor as a controlling framework, the role of the doctrine of Scripture in interpretation can be articulated on three levels, based on what has been established in this chapter.

First and primarily, reading the text through the lens of the doctrine of Scripture sets the **agenda** for reading. *Participants read with the goal of learning theological insight (belief) or guidance for life (behaviour) as a consequence of their belief that the Bible was God's teaching resource.* This was the predominant influence of the doctrine of Scripture lens across all three texts. The doctrine of Scripture lens determined the reading agenda and located where the text's ultimate meaning was found – in God's communication, which participants had to learn in the form of belief or behaviour. This insight accords with Perrin's research (see Section 1:3.4) which equally identified amongst her millennial participants that they prioritised theological questions and personal reflection when reading and were motivated to read for the purpose of establishing and justifying doctrine and making contemporary applications.<sup>201</sup>

Secondarily, reading the text through the lens of the doctrine of Scripture had a role in determining the engagement **practices** with which participants handled the text. This is demonstrated in that 26% of participants overall engagement practices with the text were

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<sup>201</sup> Perrin, *Bible Reading*, 73/83.

specifically related to their beliefs about Scripture's divine association. Some of these practices were directly related to agenda, above, such as the practice of application. But many of these practices simply underscored belief in the unity of the Bible and stemmed from a belief in the canon of Scripture.

A final and tertiary role of the doctrine of Scripture lens related to the interpretive **conclusions** that participants made. This role was minimal and largely the responsibility of the other active lenses, as will be seen in the next chapter. However, as was noted, participants did call upon their Bible beliefs to support, validate or justify their interpretative conclusions about the text, or question, criticise or reject other participant's interpretative conclusions. The doctrine of Scripture therefore did seem have to role to play in the outcomes of interpretation, but this largely seemed to emerge in relation to other participants and as a result of the dynamic of group discussion.

If determining the location of meaning and thus setting the interpretive agenda is the primary role of the doctrine of Scripture lens, how did the other prominent lenses at play influence this role? Additionally, what role did these have to play in participants' interpretive practices and conclusions, if these weren't the sole responsibility of the doctrine of Scripture? A deeper analysis of these other lenses provides further insight into the role of the doctrine of Scripture in interpretation.



# CHAPTER SIX: PROMINENT LENSES: THE DOCTRINE OF GOD, GENRE AND CONTEXT

## 6: 1. Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated how reading the text through the lens of the doctrine of Scripture had the effect of directing participants to read with the goal of learning theological insight (belief) or guidance for life (behaviour) as a consequence of their belief that the Bible was God's teaching resource. Yet, the previous chapter also noted alternative lenses through which the text can be read which affected the reading and interpreting process.

This chapter, therefore, explores these lenses in more detail: the doctrine of God, genre, and context, asking first, what participants did when they were engaging with the text through these lenses, second, how the overall force of each lens shaped interpretation, and third, how this relates to the doctrine of Scripture lens.

It should be noted at the outset that the lenses noted as dominant amongst participants are not of the same kind. The doctrine of Scripture and doctrine of God are theological lenses through which the text is read, whilst genre is a literary lens and context is a lens of experience. These different ways of viewing the text reflect the reality of life as a Christian in a British context. The text is viewed through a myriad of overlapping, and at times, clashing frameworks, because this corresponds to the frameworks readers are engaged in in their everyday lives.

## 6: 2. The Doctrine of God Lens

When participants read the text through the doctrine of God lens, they were letting their beliefs and assertions about God colour their understanding of the text.

Though reading the text through the lens of the doctrine of God naturally resulted in a focus upon the character of God in the text, it should be noted that this is also the result of the doctrine of Scripture. The doctrine of Scripture lens meant participants sought to gain insight into belief about God as one of their goals of reading, as was noted in the previous chapter. Additionally, such theocentric reading was enhanced by the content of the text in question: the presence of God in the text and the level of difficulty associated with its portrayal. In other words, reading through the doctrine of God lens is not the same as a theocentric reading which focuses upon the portrayal of God. Instead, it is reading that puts the text's portrayal of God in conversation with the reader's own understanding of the character of God. Before looking at such practices in more detail however, it is worth considering what participants believed about God in order to have a sense of what the doctrine of God lens actually consists of.

### 6: 2.1. The Content of the Doctrine of God Lens

The data gathered was not geared towards discerning participants' doctrine of God. However, it is worth briefly summarising what participants did say about God in order to ascertain something of the 'norm' and establish a basic framework of beliefs participants had about God.

Participants had a varied doctrine of God. A total of 40 different statements were made about the character/nature/actions/intentions of God. Interestingly, not one statement occurred in all six groups. However, the statements that achieved the most consensus (five out of six groups) were

affirmations that God is loving, powerful and sovereign. Additionally, four out of six groups made declarations that God is creator and God is good. These higher consensus statements across the groups were reflected in overall frequency. The most frequently made statements about the nature of God were that God is loving, good, powerful, relational, creator and sovereign. This demonstrates a central cluster of ideas around the nature of God that proved to be pre-eminent in participants' reading of the Bible.<sup>202</sup> It should be noted however that the subject matter of the texts themselves will have strongly influenced what participants stated about God, so different texts may have prompted different reflections.

With this overview of what participants believed about God in mind, we can examine the consequences of reading the text through this understanding of the character of God.

#### 6: 2.2. Extrapolating from the Character of God

As was noted in the previous chapter, participants extrapolated from the character of God to discern what actually happened in the text (see sections 5:2.1.2.2/5:2.2.2.2). For example, in Genesis, several participants called upon the omnipotence of God to affirm the historicity of the text. If God can do anything, then what is scientifically impossible is actually possible and not grounds upon which to dismiss the historicity of the story. Additionally, Jessica also pointed to the faithfulness of God who keeps his promises to dismiss a local flood interpretation. Similarly, in the Psalm, participants denied that God abandons his people as the psalmist professes because of their belief that God is omnipresent and faithful. Beginning with their knowledge of the character

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<sup>202</sup> These attributes are similar to Todd's identification in his dialogical analysis that the 'voice of God' is conceived as a concern or care for people. A such, 'people's voices and the Bible's voices may be criticised for their inhumanity, but if that is the case they are both perceived as being of human origin. God is never, within this data, criticised for being uncaring.' Todd, *The Talk*, 278.



of God, participants discerned what ‘really happened’. The character of God was taken as a primary foundational basis upon which to explore their understanding of the narrative (see sections 5:3.1.1/5:3.2.3).

This suggests that participants have a clear and defined doctrine of God that they were confident in asserting. By employing deductive reasoning that extrapolated from the doctrine of God rather than the doctrine of Scripture, participants were articulating that they had more faith in the character of God than the text. This suggests, first, that God is a primary and core element of a Christian reader’s faith, more so than the Bible, and second, that as a primary core element of faith, readers are much more confident about the nature of God than the nature of the Bible.

#### 6: 2.3. Tensions Relating to the Character of God

Participants’ reading through the lens of their doctrine of God also involved identifying tensions. As noted in the previous chapter, Genesis and the Psalm were challenging for some readers because the actions of God in the text did not fit with their understanding of how God operates. If a participant had no prior expectation or beliefs about who God is or how God operates, then whilst they might find the texts disturbing or upsetting, they would not produce tension or feelings of conflict. It is a commitment to the belief in the character of God as good and loving that ultimately leads to tension regarding the actions of God in the text.<sup>203</sup>

Participants did not always identify a resolution to their felt tension but addressing the tension and trying to understand it was a focus of the discussion.

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<sup>203</sup> Anna Strhan’s empirical research highlights how her evangelical participants ‘experience the personality of God as coherent’ which underscores why emerging tensions from reading the Bible were experienced as problematic for my participants. See: Anna Strhan, *Aliens and Strangers?: The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015), chap. 5, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198724469.001.0001.

An example of tension is the following comment made by Neil (St.C's) in discussion of Psalm 44:

one concern is the extent to which, certainly the first half, God seems to be partisan. He sides with one army and then helps them destroy the other... I almost never got my head around that cos the other army were slaughtered and surely God made the amekalites, and the hittites and hashites and whomever...

Neil's concern about God being partisan stems from his understanding that God is the creator of all humanity - why would God create segments of society he intends to destroy? Neil brings to the Psalm his understanding of God as creator and benevolent and this sits in tension with the Psalm's declaration that God actively defeats other armies.

Such instances of tension are a result of reading the text through the doctrine of God lens, i.e. bringing to the text certain expectations and assumptions about who God is and how God acts.

#### 6: 2.4. Contextualisation of the Character of God

Whilst reading through the doctrine of God lens produced tension, it also provoked attempts to solve, or at least ease such tension. This took the form of contextualisation, the practice of participants employing their pre-existing doctrine of God in order to address this tension rather than state it. Participants used their broader knowledge of who they understood God to be in order to balance the picture provided in the text. Different types of contextualisation occurred but predominantly, participants read the God of the text in the light of other facets of God's character.

The 'judgement' of God in Genesis provides the best example of this. The following five formal participants all placed God's 'judgement' in the context of their broader understanding of God, though interestingly, the precise context adopted differed for different participants.

Martin's (GLC) understanding of God as a **saviour**, who fights for light against darkness and good against evil led him to believe the flood was a *required* action of God, on account of God's love and salvific purposes. Johnny (GLC) brought to the text the understanding that God is **creator** and **perfectly** good and loving. He understood that the extremity of sin caused the flood but leaned on God's characteristics of being creator, good and loving to suggest that God was thus *qualified* to judge humanity and act as he sees fit. Dean's (TO) understanding of God that he brought to the narrative was derived from the New Testament which he quoted (2 Peter 2:9) to establish that God is **patient** and does not want humanity to perish. It was against this backdrop that he framed the narrative of Noah as a warning story that demonstrated an *atypical* side to God's character. Winston (WO) understood God's actions in the context of God's **sovereignty** and salvific purposes. His understanding that God's sovereignty leaves room for human free will and that God judges in response to human choice, framing the flood as God being *obligated* to respond to sin. In all these instances, participants were reading through the lens of the doctrine of God in bringing to the text their broader understanding of the character of God that helps them to contextualise the actions of God in the text.

This highlights an interesting consideration about the relationship between the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Scripture, or more broadly speaking, between theology and the Bible.

Participants had a clear working understanding of who God is and though this was likely derived from the Bible, it also seemed to conflict with the Bible. This suggests beliefs about God do not originate solely from Scripture and therefore have a complex origin, which is worth exploring next.

#### 6: 2.4.1. Origins of the Doctrine of God Brought to the Text

The fieldwork data was not designed to determine where participants' ideas about God came from. Insight into this can only be gleaned from occasions where participants stated the basis for their belief. This did not often occur, as most frequently participants presented their theological claims about the nature of God as being self-evident, with no justification or explanation made either explicitly or implicitly from context.

On some occasions, participants' conception of God drew directly upon their personal experience, such as Emma (St.J's) who said,

I do not think of God as someone whose name is used as a way to tread down other people, like that is the exact opposite of the God that I experience who is about, not oppressing, and freedom, and you know, the reunification of all things.

The experience Emma is referring to is unclear, but by referencing 'experience' she implies that she is drawing upon her own personal understanding of God which centres on freedom and reconciliation. It could be that this experience is shaped by the Bible or tradition, but this does not reduce the personal element of her understanding of God.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Tanya Lurhmann has explored in-depth how Evangelicals experience God and engage with God as a reality. See: T.M. Lurhmann, *When God Talks Back: understanding the American Evangelical relationship with God* (New York, NY: Alfred, A. Knopf, 2012); *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2020).

More rarely, participants' claims about God were made on the basis of biblical material, such as Dean (TO) who quoted 2 Peter to claim that God is patient.<sup>205</sup> Only a couple of participants drew directly upon biblical material to make claims about God, though it could be argued to be implied in other claims that participants made.

Some claims were based on tradition, such as Henry's (St.J's) references to practicing the presence of God. Though not explicitly stated, this phrase comes from the writings of Brother Lawrence.<sup>206</sup> Implied in this statement is the claim that God is always present despite how it feels. This is not to say that this understanding about the nature of God is not also an experiential, biblical or self-evident reality, but rather that it was presented by Henry in terms of a tradition associated with Brother Lawrence.

Though not a dominant approach, Sam and Winston, both from WO, explicitly demonstrated a Christocentric doctrine of God. This emerged in relation to the issue of divine violence which was a topic of discussion prompted by Psalm 44. Sam's understanding of God through the revelation of Jesus led him to question whether the violence involved in the taking of the promised land was what God really instructed. His perspective is worth quoting at length:

If you really want to take the Christocentric lens to its fullest extreme, Jesus is the full revelation of God, which means that it's not simply that the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible shows us what Jesus is like, but Jesus shows us some of the problematic elements of the Hebrew Bible that make us wonder 'did God really command Joshua to do those things?' ... 'was

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<sup>205</sup> 2 Peter 3:9, The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (NRSV)

<sup>206</sup> Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. E.M. Blaiklock (Chatham: Hodder & Stoughton, 1981).

Jesus with the Israelites slaughtering the Canaanites and the other nations in that sense?’ and I think for me, Jesus Christocentric hermeneutic leads me to say no, I don’t think that’s what was going on.

Reading the Psalm with the person of Jesus in mind was problematic for Sam because it highlighted what, for him, was an inconsistency in the Bible’s depiction of God. This inconsistency was accounted for by Sam’s understanding that the Bible witnesses to a progressive development of people’s understanding of the nature of God culminating in the revelation through Jesus. Winston also allowed for a sense of development within the biblical canon which he referred to as ‘progressive revelation’. Rather than this be humanity coming to an increasingly accurate understanding of God, Winston understood God to be accommodating according to the needs of the people in the historical time in which they occupied.

revelation is progressive in that God also worked with these people with revelation levels that were different in kind of getting to where we are today and understanding Christ, his character, his nature and just his fullness, the whole Godhead embodied in Christ himself. But in the olden days, in the previous dispensations, wars were part of their culture, were part of their tradition, were part of their lifestyle, and so for them to see the victor of God they had to see their God defeating their enemy physically.

Winston acknowledges that his understanding of God is shaped by the person of Jesus, ‘the whole Godhead embodied in Christ’ but that this wasn’t how those in the Old Testament understood God and so God acted in accordance with their expectations.

In both these cases, Sam and Winston pointed to the character and person of Jesus as a dominating force in their understanding of the character of God and God’s behaviour.

Though by no means conclusive, this brief overview identifies enough evidence to suggest that the doctrine of God is built upon and from a variety of sources. As such, when participants read through the doctrine of God lens, they’re reading through a lens that has a potentially complex multi-origin, specific to the reader’s context, making each reader’s doctrine of God lens unique. The particulars of the doctrine of God lens in operation will impact the tensions identified and the contextualisation employed to solve such tensions. Did participants demonstrate such different working doctrine of God lenses?

#### 6: 2.4.2. Unique Doctrine of God Lenses

A clearer insight into individual participant’s doctrine of God can be seen on occasions where participants demonstrated beliefs about God that were against the general thrust of the discussion and the central cluster of views presented in 6:2.1.

On the occasions where most participants identified a tension between the text’s portrayal of God and their own conception of God, some found agreement between the two. These participants’ conception of God seemed to more readily incorporate facets of God that other participants articulated tension about.

Jesse (TO) provides a particularly striking example of this in relation to the Genesis narrative. This was first articulated in terms of the text's portrayal of 'judgement': 'I don't have a problem with the judgement aspect of it! I mean, I don't see a need for us to explain why God does what he does.' This statement demonstrates comfortability with the idea of God as judge and an open doctrine of God such that God's actions don't need explaining. Jesse later went on to expand his view in more detail:

I don't think we ever just read the text from the perspective of 'God is a God of love and therefore everything goes', I think that would be a very shallow reading of any text and I certainly think it would be a shallow understanding theologically of who God is, so I don't have a problem counterbalancing a God of love with a God of justice, I don't have a problem with understanding grace and mercy as kind of aspects that go together in some senses.

Here, Jesse demonstrates a complex doctrine of God that holds within it characteristics that are seemingly in tension. Because of Jesse's ability to hold conflicting ideas within his dominant conception of God, he didn't find tension in the text because his understanding of God already encompassed the portrayal of God found in the Genesis narrative. In contrast, he spoke against what other participants seemed to demonstrate, which was that the concept of God as love or loving was so dominant that it didn't allow room for ideas such as judgement, which were pushed to the periphery and therefore caused tension when the text was read.



Another example, not so strongly stated, was Jane's (St.J's) openness to the psalmists claims about God being true, quoted in 5:3.1.2. Unlike many participants who denied the psalmist's claims,

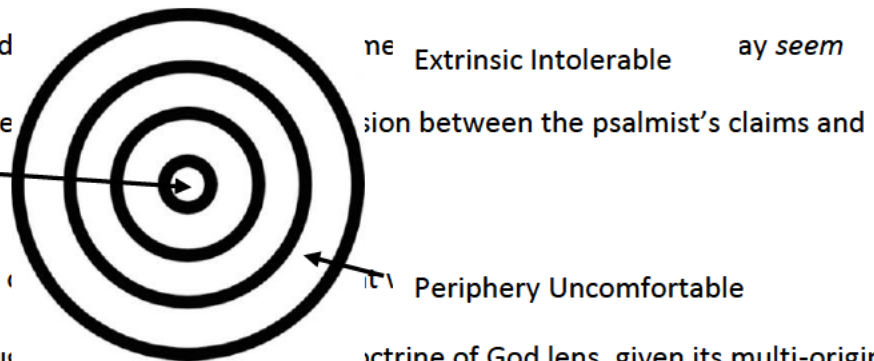
Jane's doctrine of God included

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her understanding of God.

Both Jesse and Jane's doctrine

participants. What does this suggest about participants' doctrine of God lens, given its multi-origin and the different dynamics this produces?



## 6: 2.5. Mapping the Doctrine of God

Given what has been noted so far, Figure 3 below offers a helpful depiction of the emerging understanding of the doctrine of God lens. The circle in the centre at the heart of the doctrine of God consists of participants' most dominant and secure conceptions of God's character, which I've named 'core comfortable'. As the circles widen moving outwards, they contain increasingly uncertain, insecure or tentative conceptions of God, such that the outer layers could be considered conceptions that are 'periphery uncomfortable'. These are ideas about God that are accepted, but not with ease. Beyond the circle are conceptions of God that are firmly denied, the 'extrinsic intolerable'. Though not included in a participants' doctrine of God, these 'extrinsic intolerable' conceptions of God have a crucial role to play in the formation of the doctrine of God. God is defined just as much by what God is not as by what God is.

What this section has demonstrated is how participants see the text through their 'core comfortable' conceptions of God. This core comfortable conception of God at times became the foundation from which the reality of the text was explored, and at other times provided the cause and resolution of the text's central tension. In these practices, participants demonstrated that they had a clear and confident core understanding of the nature and character of God.

If the doctrine of Scripture lens determined the reading agenda of finding the text's meaning in its divine teaching about right belief and behaviour, then the function of the doctrine of God lens was in regulating what these meanings could be. The doctrine of God lens therefore set parameters in relation to the interpretative conclusions that participants made: they couldn't just dismiss the flood on scientific grounds, because God's omnipotence goes beyond science; Psalm 44 couldn't be affirming the theological truth that God abandons as this is 'extrinsic intolerable'; and where Genesis insinuates that the flood is God's judgement upon a sinful humanity, this was understood in the context of love, sovereignty and goodness.

Reading through the lens of the doctrine of God therefore primarily affected the interpretative conclusions that were made. These had to accord with the particulars of the reader's pre-existing beliefs about God.

#### 6: 2.6. The Doctrine of Scripture through the lens of the Doctrine of God

So far, this section has examined instances where participant's read the text through their doctrine of God lens and has suggested what the results of such readings were and how the lens ultimately functioned in the process of reading.

However, participants not only viewed the *text* through the lens of the doctrine of God but also evidenced viewing *the doctrine of Scripture* through the lens of the doctrine of God. This demonstrates how reading lenses have the capacity to form and inform each other and not just approaches to the text.

In many respects it is unsurprising that the doctrine of Scripture is viewed through the lens of the doctrine of God, as the latter has always been central to a traditional Evangelical doctrine of Scripture. As the Bible is conceived as God's Word, its character and properties are corollaries of a particular understanding of God – it can't contradict itself, it can't lie, it can't be unauthoritative because God is consistent, truthful and the ultimate authority, as was demonstrated in 2:6. It has already been outlined in the previous chapter that the doctrine of God was significant in participants' construal of the doctrine of Scripture, sometimes in this traditional sense, but more so in conceiving of the text as God's resource and in terms of its function in reader's lives. This nuances a conception of the doctrine of Scripture in the emphasis that is placed upon God's intention, action or purposes in providing the texts. The text is not conceived so much in terms of its inherent properties, but instead is conceived in terms of *the use* to which God puts it and therefore *how it functions* in the life of the believer. The doctrine of Scripture is underpinned by an understanding of a God who wants to communicate, and effect change in the life of the believer.

#### 6: 2.6.1. The Doctrine of Scripture as God's Use of the Text

A first example of this can be seen from Amy (St.H's), who made several comments about her difficulty in understanding the Bible, which she always qualified with a version of the following statement about her understanding of the passage: 'It's in the Bible because God wanted it there'.

This demonstrates how Amy's view of Scripture is primarily concerned with her understanding of God's intentions. Amy views God as someone who wants to teach her how to live and behave and uses the Bible to do this, and this dominates her understanding of the nature of the Bible.

Gina (St.H's) also demonstrated a view of the Bible that is primarily concerned with function. Her main focus when reading texts is to understand what it reveals about God: 'Well I think it's showing reflections of who God is. Actually, that's the most important thing, whether we individually believe bits of it and not other bits is irrelevant if we're taking on board the reflection of God.' In the same way that Amy viewed the Bible as God's medium for teaching her how to live, Gina views the Bible as God's medium for teaching her about God's nature. Both Amy and Gina's understanding of the Bible reflects their understanding of how God uses it, rather than particular attributes or beliefs inherent to the text. The doctrine of God is thus influential in forming participants' doctrine of Scripture that focuses on the text's function.

#### 6: 2.6.2. The Doctrine of Scripture as Content about God

However, Gina later elaborated on her statement about the Bible reflecting who God is (in the Genesis discussion), providing an example for further insight into how the doctrine of God informs the doctrine of Scripture:

If we're looking at the Bible as telling us aspects of who God is and it's talking about the coming of his son Jesus Christ right from the very beginning, then this story to me talks to me about the obedience that you talked about and that he's a God of detail. That he does care but that there

is judgement. Whether it's here on earth or in the next life after we die.

But there is judgement and I think it's important that we know that.

This statement reveals not only that Gina conceives of the text in relation to its function or how God uses it ('telling us aspects of who God is'), but also that her conception of Scripture relates to an overarching theological understanding of its content or what it's about ('the coming of his son Jesus Christ right from the very beginning'). Such a theological construal of Scripture involves the determination of an overall narrative purpose, in Gina's case this is Christocentric. David Kelsey has demonstrated this practice in relation to how theologians use Scripture to authorise their theological proposals:

Theologians do not appeal to Scripture-as-such to help authorize their theological proposals. In the concrete practice of doing theology, they decide on some aspect or, more exactly, some pattern in Scripture to which to appeal. That is to say that they decide on some one *kind* of unity to ascribe to the texts, and not some other kind. Not the text as such, but the text-construed-as-a-certain-kind-of-whole is appealed to.<sup>207</sup>

One such pattern that Kelsey identifies amongst theologians is Scripture construed as a unified narrative of 'a single, organic history of salvation'<sup>208</sup>, in other words, a theological meta-narrative. This does not seem too much of a stretch from Gina's assertion that the whole Bible is oriented

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<sup>207</sup> David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 103.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

towards the coming of Jesus – in other words, Jesus as the saviour of mankind is the pinnacle and overall *point* of the Bible. The theological meta-narrative of the Bible is ultimately about the history of salvation which reaches its zenith in Jesus.

Gina's interpretation of the Noah narrative then, is offered in the context of her construal of the Bible's *use* by God and its *content* as being christocentrically oriented, closely linked with a view of the Bible as a meta-narrative of salvation history. This prioritisation of Jesus as the pinnacle of the Bible is unsurprising given that one of the hallmarks of being an Evangelical according to Bebbington's famous quadrilateral is crucicentrism, a focus on the atoning work of the cross.<sup>209</sup> Indeed, Christian Smith has argued that a truly Evangelical reading of Scripture is Christocentric, prioritising the gospel of Jesus Christ as the 'purpose, center, and interpretive key to Scripture.'<sup>210</sup> Gina's statement demonstrates how her theocentrism in relation to function, and her christocentrism in relation to content, combine to offer an interpretation of the Noah story that is consistent with her understanding of God and God's purposes.

Not all participants were explicit in revealing how they construe the text 'as-a-certain-kind-of-whole' but it is not too farfetched to speculate that their overarching conception of the narrative of the Bible would likely be closely related to the character and action of God reaching its height in the person of Jesus, especially given Evangelicalism's historical tendency to focus on the salvation of the cross. If this is the case, the doctrine of Scripture can be said to be construed through the lens of the doctrine of God on two fronts: in conceiving of the Bible's function, and second, in conceiving of the Bible's content.

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<sup>209</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*.

<sup>210</sup> Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 97.

## 6: 2.7. Conclusion: The Doctrine of God Lens

In summary, this section has demonstrated that participants had a central cluster of prominent conceptions about the character of God, but these differed amongst participants as a result of the doctrine of God having multiple sources. Participants read through the lens of their doctrine of God when they brought these pre-existing ideas to the text and this resulted in the practices of producing tension, contextualisation and extrapolating.

In these practices participants demonstrated that they were confident and clear in their core conceptions of the character of God, more so than the doctrine of Scripture, and that the doctrine of God lens had a parameter-setting function in relation to participant's interpretive conclusions. Moreover, the doctrine of God lens also dominated in participants' understanding of the doctrine of Scripture, evidenced by their emphasis on God's use of Scripture and thus its function in believers' lives, as well as in conceiving of the Bible's overall content as being about God and God's revelation in the person of Jesus.

## 6: 3. Genre Lens

Reading a text through the lens of its genre is not something specific to Bible reading, but all reading events. Humans seek to assign categories to the texts they encounter, usually on account of the text's context and content. Texts are therefore always assigned to some pre-existing category: fact, fiction, list, poem, tweet, headline, story. etc.<sup>211</sup>

It is not surprising therefore that all participants demonstrated an implicit recognition that the three texts were different genres, although an explicit exploration of genre did not always occur.

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<sup>211</sup> Fish, *Is there a text?*, 322-37.

The genre of Genesis prompted the most discussion with suggestions of myth, true myth, origin story, mythology, prose, poetic story and reinterpretation. These genre designations were all offered by participants who indicated that the text shouldn't be taken as historical. Those who opted for a historical reading did not designate the text as 'history' but rather specified the text should be read 'literally' which is a method of interpretation rather than a classification of genre. The Psalm was described either as poetry or lament. For Ephesians, participants were aware it was a letter and referred to it as such, but only one participant classified the text as anything other than a letter, referencing the passage as 'instruction.'

It is likely that genre was considered in greater depth for Genesis because of the question of historicity that participants were tasked with, which naturally led to reflections of what type of text the narrative was intended to be. However, though explicit discussions of the genre of the Psalm and Ephesians were minimal, genre implicitly played a significant role in the way participants handled and approached the text. The following sections identify three ways in which genre influenced reading and concludes that this lens has an important role to play in focusing participant's interpretive activity.

### 6: 3.1. Extrapolating from Genre

The previous chapter's analysis of responses to the Psalm highlighted the role that genre played in participants' determination of the truth of the psalmist's claims (5:3.1.3/5:3.2.3). Genre played a similar function to the doctrine of God in being used to establish the reality of the text.

Participants began with the genre of the text and, using deductive reasoning, established the extent to which the text reported reliable information. This was demonstrated by Jake (St.H's) in relation to the Psalm: 'So I think we have to accept that this is a different kind of writing from



history, it's not history, it's actually poetry... it's about people's feelings.' In this quote, Jake actively distinguishes between how one reads history and poetry and aligns the genre of poetry with 'feelings.' This suggests he associates history with objective fact and poetry with emotion and subjectivism and thus the claims of the text need to be weighed in the light of genre.

The use of extrapolating from genre as a method to determine the reality or historicity of the text, was also evident in discussion of Genesis. Participants used the genre of the text to determine the text's historicity. By doing this, participants were able to suggest that 'history' was not an appropriate category considering the very nature of the text and the intentions behind it. The text was never meant to be read as an accurate factual account of something that happened, and a historical reading is thus not respecting the inherent nature of the text.

This extrapolating from the genre of the text was closely linked with participants' assumptions of the text's author.

#### 6: 3.1.1. Extrapolating from the Author

Contemplating the genre of a text requires examining the content of the text itself but also its historical context and origins. Who wrote this text and (to the extent that we can know this) what were they intending to communicate? Who were they writing to, and what were they hoping to accomplish by writing? Were they supposing themselves to be writing a factually accurate account, or were they more concerned with making an ideological or theological point, or conveying their emotions? These types of question are part of the way in which the reader consciously or subconsciously determines the extent to which the author is trustworthy.

In my focus groups these questions were rarely explicitly addressed though many illusions were made to authorship. For example, at St.C's Vanessa and Neil discussed the likelihood that the

author of Genesis was prone to exaggeration or embellishment and Neil commented (erroneously) that scholars generally agree Moses is the author of Genesis, which would explain the anachronism of the distinction between clean and unclean animals when the law had yet to be given. This was deemed to be troubling because Moses was not present for the events of the flood thus leading the group to question his ability to report them.

A further example where the author was considered in relation to the text's truthfulness was Henry's (St.J's) proposal of accommodation (5:2.1.2.4) the assumption that the author was truthful according to the limitations of their knowledge.

The use of genre in determining the text's historicity outlined above is thus nuanced by the character and trustworthiness of the implied author. It is not simply that poetry equates to subjectivism or history equates to objectivism, but that the perceived character and agenda of the author contributes to how the genre of the text is construed. Identifying genre is thus not simply a matter of categorising what type of text is being read which leads *ipso facto* to a determination of the text's historicity or truthfulness, but rather an exercise in identifying what the author was doing in the writing of their text and given what can be gleaned about them from the text, whether they are to be 'trusted'.

In summary, participants read through the lens of genre when they let the text's genre, inclusive of its perceived author, function as a foundational consideration upon which to build a case for the text's factual accuracy and trustworthiness.

### 6: 3.2. Genre Based Engagement Practices

Whilst extrapolating from genre influenced what participants *concluded* about the text, a further significant practice when reading through the lens of genre related to how participants *handled*

the text. It was the text's genre and content that largely determined what participants did with the text and how they engaged with it. Many of these ways of engaging with the text according to genre are to be expected. For example, Genesis elicited 23 instances of participants referencing either the chapter before or after the one read, whereas this only occurred three times in relation to the Psalm and once for Ephesians. Given that Genesis 7 is the middle section of a narrative, this is unsurprising, but is evidence of the genre of the text determining what practices participants employed.

A further genre-based differentiation in engagement practices was reflections upon the society and culture from which the text arose which occurred 27 times in discussion of Ephesians, but only three times for Genesis and five for the Psalm. This is likely because participants simply had more knowledge about the Greco-Roman society behind the Ephesians text, but it is also likely to be the result of the epistle genre. Participants were more mindful that the text had original recipients and thus reflected on their culture and historical setting more than for the Psalm and Genesis where the intended audience is not clear.

Reflections on the text's textual history occurred 10 times in discussion of Genesis, but only four times for the Psalm and never for Ephesians. These reflections focused on the composition and transmission of the text to account for particular features of it. As Genesis was the oldest text and in a narrative style that was very different from contemporary narrative, participants were inclined to make more comments about its style and history, reflecting on the oral tradition to account for these features.

These examples all serve to illustrate the point that the lens of genre had a significant role in determining the practices that participants used to explore the text.

However, though genre certainly played into the extent to which certain methods were employed, many ways of engaging with the text were demonstrated across all three texts corroborating what was identified in 5:6.2 that participants have a bank of hermeneutical practices that were deemed appropriate for the exploration of the text as a *biblical* text, rather than as a particular *genre* of biblical text. The extent to which these biblical practices were employed was however related to the content of the text. For example, all three texts prompted instances of participants comparing the text with other theologically similar biblical content, a result of their belief in the unity of the canon. However, the Psalm elicited slightly higher instances of this practice most likely because it raised the most complex theological questions for participants and also possibly because of their inability to contextualise the Psalm – it was therefore contextualised theologically in light of the whole Bible.

In summary, though some reading practices were employed for all three texts as a result of them being biblical, the extent to which this occurred varied according to genre and thus reading the text through the lens of genre largely determined what practices were used to explore the text.

### 6: 3.3. The Doctrine of Scripture through the Lens of Genre

Having established the effect of participants reading through the genre lens, it is worth asking whether participants viewed the doctrine of Scripture through the lens of genre? If they did, how does the genre lens shape the doctrine of Scripture lens?

Whilst the genre lens didn't affect participants' perception of the Bible as the doctrine of God lens did, participants demonstrated that genre did influence how their Bible beliefs functioned. This is because participant's predominant belief about the Bible, that it is a vehicle of divine communication, functions itself as a genre – a textual category. The text's genre as *divine teaching*

also had to be married with the text's literary genre – *narrative, poetry, epistle*. The process of marrying these two genres determined how exactly the text was conceived as teaching. Genesis and the Psalm taught the reader indirectly, in that the text's 'teaching' was not explicitly stated. Genesis was understood to be divine teaching in what the narrative *shows* about God (teaching theological truths) and in the example of Noah (teaching how to live). The Psalm was understood to be divine teaching in what the poem *demonstrates* about relating to God (teaching how to live). On the other hand, the teaching of Ephesians was explicit in what the text *instructs* which was either taken as specific behaviour or underlying principles (teaching how to live). A commitment to the doctrine of Scripture which centred on the Bible's teaching function, thus manifested itself in different forms according to the nature and content of the text being read. What it means for the text to be divine teaching for the majority of participants, is consequently genre and content related. The effective force of the doctrine of Scripture lens is determined by the genre lens. What this ultimately means is that if the doctrine of Scripture lens sets the reading agenda in locating meaning in the text's teaching, the genre lens determines how that teaching is manifested and methods of discerning it. The genre lens can therefore be profitably seen as a focusing lens that sharpens the reader's interpretive focus both in identifying what form the text's teaching takes and prescribing what hermeneutical activity is appropriate for engaging with such teaching.

#### 6: 3.4. Conclusion: Genre Lens

In summary, reading through the lens of genre involved extrapolating from the text's genre and implied author to determine the factual accuracy of the text. Additionally, how participants handled the text was genre-dependent. As such, reading through the genre lens prescribed both interpretative conclusions and practices.

Most significantly, reading through the genre lens, in relation to the doctrine of Scripture lens gives force and specificity to determining how the text functions as a teaching resource.

These factors combine to give the genre lens the overall force of a focusing lens that hones the reader's understanding of the text as teaching and the practices to employ in relation to this.

## 6: 4. Contextual Lens

A person's context is their social environment and the culture in which they live. This context not only shapes an individual but also shapes their self-perception and experience of the world. As such, a person's context is not just what is external to them, but what is internal to them as an individual: their identity and experience of the world. A person's context is not a single entity, but the product of a number of interdependent sub-contexts or contextual paradigms of which they partake. For example, my participants all lived in Britain and were therefore living in a contemporary 'western' context but within this culture are a myriad of sub-contexts relating to a variety of factors, for example socio-economic status defining a person's context as 'middle class'. I have already conjectured that participant's secular scientific cultural context could have been a reason that defences for Genesis' historicity and Ephesians' relevance did not draw upon the doctrine of Scripture (Sections 5:2.1.2.3/5:4.3). This is just one example of participants demonstrating their participation in a myriad of contexts by referencing societal norms and shared cultural knowledge and insight. However, two contextual paradigms in particular emerged in discussion: participant's Christian context and their personal context.

The following sections overviews instances of participants reading the Bible through their contextual lens and concludes that this lens has a significant role to play in determining the specific meaning that participants took from the texts they read.

#### 6: 4.1. Christian Context

All participants were Christians and shared in being part of Christian culture which was further specified by being Evangelical and Anglican. When participants read the text through the lens of their Christian context, they employed relevant knowledge and experience to elucidate the text and make connections to their lives. The Christian context thus established the parameters within which participants could identify the text's meaning. Though closely related, the following sections reflect on participants' use of their Christian knowledge and experience, gained from their Christian context.

##### 6: 4.1.1. Christian Knowledge

Participants' reading of the texts through the lens of their Christian context involved their drawing upon Christian knowledge. This knowledge took two forms: tradition and contemporary input. The best example of drawing upon tradition as a form of Christian knowledge is Gina's (St.H's) assertion of the Bible's authority as the 'basic thing' to be trusted in for information and she states this specifically in reference to the issue of the existence of Satan. Her full quote is as follows:

Because [God] allowed free will and he created angels and one of them decided he didn't like... he wanted to be God as well. I only go by what my Bible tells me Charles and I do believe most of it, maybe not always literally

but if I don't believe it then what am I trusting in if I don't trust, to me,  
what is a basic thing?

This comment is somewhat unintentionally ironic as in claiming she trusts the Bible as an authoritative source regarding the existence of Satan, Gina actually details a prominent Christian tradition, rather than Scripture itself: that Satan was an angel who wanted to be like God and fell from heaven. The only explicit biblical reference to Satan falling from heaven comes from Luke 10:18,<sup>212</sup> but this does not mention the idea that Satan wanted to be like God as Gina declared. There are more complex scriptural passages that Gina could have been referring to – several prophecies addressing human figures have traditionally been interpreted as also speaking of Satan.<sup>213</sup> The association of these verses with Satan is the result of an interpretative tradition rather than a plain reading, though Gina claims her belief in the origin of Satan is a result of her trusting in 'the basic thing', the Bible. This demonstrates how tradition as Christian knowledge can operate largely under the radar. Gina did not differentiate between the Bible's content and traditional biblical interpretations.

Another example of the blurred lines between Scripture and tradition was also demonstrated in participants' false Noah narratives. Participants from both St.J's and St.H's incorrectly remembered that Noah either warned his contemporaries of the impending flood or was mocked by his contemporaries for building the ark. This does not occur in the biblical text. At a stretch, the

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<sup>212</sup> Luke 10:18, 'He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.' NRSV

<sup>213</sup> In Ezekiel 28:12-17, the Prince of Tyre is described as being in Eden with God and then subsequently cast out because of violence and a proud heart. In Isaiah 14:12-15, the King of Babylon is spoken against and referred to as 'Day Star, Son of Dawn' which in the King James Version is translated as the proper name Lucifer. Here, the Day Star's intention is in line with Gina's declaration, "I will make myself like the Most High" and their subsequent fall is described.



idea that Noah interacted with his peers could be claimed as ‘biblical’ on the basis of 2 Peter 2:5 which describes Noah as a ‘preacher of righteousness’.<sup>214</sup> However, this is a tenuous link and most likely itself the result of an earlier tradition attested to by Nadav Sharon and Moshe Tishel who establish several occurrences of this embellishment in second temple Jewish literature, showing it has been a persistent idea early in the history of interpretation.<sup>215</sup> Participants therefore demonstrated first, how tradition forms a part of their Christian knowledge as a result of their Christian context, and second, how Christian knowledge in the form of tradition is often confused with biblical content. This undermines the EA belief in the Bible’s sufficiency as a sole authority (2:6.3).

However, there were two notable explicit uses of tradition from the same participant, Sam (WO). In the discussion of Genesis, Sam stated that he was influenced by Jewish readings of the narrative, and in discussion of the Psalm and divine violence Sam stated that he reads the Old Testament acts of violence ‘with the lens of the Church Fathers in terms of allegorical readings.’ In both these instances Sam was aware and owned his interpretation as belonging to certain strands of historical tradition.

Sam’s use of tradition was consonant with the second way in which the majority of participants read through the lens of their Christian knowledge: citing contemporary teaching, preaching and scholarship. For example, Emma from St.J’s explicitly stated that she now interpreted the Noah

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<sup>214</sup> 2 Peter 2:5, ‘and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly’ NRSV

<sup>215</sup> Nadav Sharon and Moshe Tishel, ‘Distinctive Traditions about Noah and the Flood in Second Temple Jewish Literature’ in *Noah and His Books*, ed. Michael Stone (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 156-8. Additionally, the persistence of this tradition has been propagated as a result of its reiteration in children’s bibles, documented by Russell Dalton’s analysis of the story of Noah in children’s Bibles throughout American history: Russell Dalton, *Children’s Bibles in America: a reception history of the story of Noah’s Ark in US children’s Bibles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

narrative in light of a book she had read by Rob Bell.<sup>216</sup> This is just one example of many instances where participants referenced some form of contemporary input, often vaguely, as something ‘read the other day’ or ‘heard.’ These sources of input were all a product of participant’s knowledge as a result of being engaged in a Christian context.<sup>217</sup>

When participants drew upon their Christian knowledge either in the form of tradition or contemporary external input, they were fleshing out the text through providing additional detail or background information. The text was then read in the light of this information. In other words, the traditions or teaching to which participants were exposed, whether this be explicitly or implicitly, framed and limited participant’s understanding of the text. Understanding was therefore restricted to the parameters set for it by the participants’ collective Christian knowledge. The false Noah narratives highlights this. Whilst the participants at St.J’s checked their Bibles to confirm the entirety of the story and realised their mistake, participants at St.H’s did not, and in fact, Amy formed a textual application on the basis of their false narrative:

I usually take from this that God asked Noah to do something that seemed ridiculous and everybody else was sort of making fun of him, ‘why is he building this boat?’ and I take it from this that sometimes God might want me to do something and I think ‘really?’ and other people ... might say ‘well

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<sup>216</sup> Several explicit and implicit references were made to knowledge gained from books reflecting Bielo’s finding in his research that ‘books... have become the primary way that Evangelicals learn and reproduce core Christian doctrines, as well as matters of orthopraxy.’ See: Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 111.

<sup>217</sup> Rogers explores how knowledge and hermeneutical practices are learnt by church members through mediation (rather than direct Bible reading) as a result of the congregational horizon. See: Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, chap.7.

that's ridiculous' and I then have to struggle and think 'well is it ridiculous or is this really the path that God wants me to follow?'

This demonstrates how a reader's Christian context and the knowledge this furnishes them with, both traditional and contemporary, correspond to the interpretations that participants were able to make. Where the false Noah narrative was *not* identified, Amy made an application of the text about remaining faithful to God despite opposition. Where the false Noah narrative *was* identified, participants were unable to conclude about the opportunity for others beyond Noah's family to be saved. Their Christian knowledge set the scope of what they could conclude about the text.

#### 6: 4.1.2. Christian Corporate Experience

In addition to knowledge, participants also drew upon their experiences of Christian culture at a corporate level. For example, Anne (St.J's) contrasted contemporary Christian attitudes with that of the psalmist:

It's very different to the way that we would pray. I think that most people, what would be most common, is that people feel distant from God because they're not spending enough time in prayer or they're not seeking God, rather than God is sleeping and not responding.

Anne offers her knowledge of how Christians tend to think about God. This knowledge was not predicated on a specific doctrine or source of external input but rather was offered anecdotally,

presumably as something she had learnt and experienced from being a part of Christian culture.

Participants often made such references to corporate Christian tendencies or proclivities, such as Taylor's (TO) comment that 'we expect God to be on our timeframe' or Jane's (St.J's) observation that Christian churches have an optimistic, positive outlook.

At times, participants showed self-awareness of the influence of their Christian experience and knowledge. For example, having asked participants at St.J's about their ability to understand the text, they showed self-awareness about their own education, exemplified in Jane's comment:

If a non-Christian reads this part of the Bible they can very much be like  
'oh, so you agree with slavery then, the Bible says you can have slaves.'  
And you're like, 'no, it's cultural!', and they're like, 'so what about this part  
of the Bible?'... 'no, that's not cultural, that's for now!' That is quite  
interesting and it's really true that when you come from a Christian  
background, then there's certain things that you just hear over and over  
again and you're like 'ok that's what we believe'

This quote demonstrates how participants realised that their reading of the text had been shaped by their Christian background. Occasionally participants would refer to their specific Christian experience, such as 'conservative' (Adam, GLC) or 'liberal' (Emma, St.J's), but on the whole Christian background experience was an implicit factor of reading the text.

Whereas participants wielded Christian knowledge in order to shed light upon the text, they used the text to shed light upon their corporate Christian experience. Participants sought to make connections between the text and their own lives (a consequence of the doctrine of Scripture, as

has been seen) and therefore frequently contrasted the text with their corporate Christian experience.

In both these activities, reading through the lens of Christian context ultimately set the scope of what conclusions could be drawn from the text. Interpretations were limited first, by the available knowledge that participants had to expand their understanding of the text, and limited second, in the applications made according to their perceived corporate Christian experience.

#### 6: 4.2. Personal Context

Very much connected to participants' Christian context is their individual, personal context. This incorporates facets of their personal identity, experiences and knowledge. As no one lives in a vacuum, one's individual context is shaped by their broader context and culture and the following sections are thus mindful of the ways in which one's personal context is related to their Christian context. The dominant ways in which participants read through the lens of their individual context included their previous encounters with the texts they were reading, their identity and their personal Christian experiences.

##### 6: 4.2.1. Previous Readings

Participants had prior experience with the texts and referenced these when reading. Sometimes, this was simply acknowledging previous unanswered questions or notes a participant had made when reading the text in the past. On other occasions, participants offered their previous interpretations of the text, such as Amy (St.H's) commenting regarding Genesis, 'what I usually take from this...'. Amy then went on to offer a practical application from the text about obedience to God; she read the text in light of her previous application.

A third type of reference to previous readings, was the acknowledgement of a change in the way the participant read the text. For example, Emma (St.J's) reflected on how her attitude towards the Ephesians text had changed over the years:

15 years ago, before I became a Christian, I would have been incensed by this passage.... because there's so much cultural oppression of women, that it taps into that kind of fire, and it took me a long time to get to where I could actually think about the whole bit, the whole passage, rather than just spluttering.

Emma reveals that her personal experience as a female and her knowledge and experience of the 'cultural oppression of women' had initially caused her to react strongly to the passage, such that she hadn't fully appreciated it.

These examples reveal two different ways in which previous readings can function. Amy's previous readings determined her present reading so that she was repeating what she 'usually takes' from the text, rather than exploring new avenues of meaning. In contrast, Emma's reflection reveals that she built upon her previous readings allowing them to grow and change. However, it should be noted that in both instances, previously held interpretations were offered; Emma's view of the text had changed in the past, not upon reading the text during the focus group.

Indeed, it was difficult to discern the extent to which participants embraced new interpretations in the focus group discussions of the text. Though participants clearly did indicate that some ideas they or others suggested were new to them, no one expressly stated a strong conviction that they

were adopting a new interpretation. The extent to which participants were actively participating in a hermeneutical circle or spiral was therefore difficult to discern.

What is of note, is that participant's read through the lens of their previous experiences with the text and so weren't beginning their interpretation from a neutral or uninformed perspective. What they brought to the text, in terms of their history with it, affected where they could go with it.

Emma's journey over several years with the text meant that she was highly unlikely to revert to an interpretation that the text is sexist in the course of a single reading. Whilst there is always a possibility of new and different interpretations, these cannot emerge regardless of the interpretations of the past. Previous readings limit the scope of interpretations that a reader makes.<sup>218</sup>

#### 6: 4.2.2. Identity

Emma's comment above demonstrates not only the tendency for participants to read through the lens of their previous experiences directly with the text, but also their personal identity and life experiences. Emma reflected on the text in light of her identity and experience as a Christian, a female and elsewhere, a wife. Other participants also referenced aspects of their personal identity and these were both individual (as in the example above) and collective, such as references to participants being members of 'modern, western, liberal society' (Christopher, TO) or simply 'contemporary readers' (Neil, St.C's). Though Ephesians prompted identity reflections the most,

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<sup>218</sup> The influence of previous encounters or experience of the Bible is explored on a broader level by David Ford in his empirical research focused on the Bible-reading of those outside the church. Ford highlights how his participants' previous encounters with Christianity and Church affected their reading of the Bible. See: David Ford, *Reading the Bible Outside the Church: A case study* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

they also occurred in relation to Genesis and the Psalm, showing that reader identity and context was a consideration even if the text didn't directly address questions of identity.

By commenting on their own identity, either personal or collective, participants showed an awareness of the subjectivity of reading; they understood their response to the text in light of the influence of their experience. This served both to highlight the difficulty of engaging with the text, as well as prompted deeper engagement. By acknowledging the limitations of personal identity in understanding and interpreting the text fully, participants were prompted to attempt to engage with experiences beyond their own identity. For example, at GLC, Martin as a married man wanted to hear how Adam engaged with the text as a single man, and vice versa. They sought to expand their own understanding from the identity perspective of someone different to themselves. In this way, the group offered a broader collective perspective for approaching the text than any single individual could have on their own. However, this perspective was ultimately limited by the members of the group. As Johnny pointed out at the beginning of the Ephesians discussion, 'I'm really aware that the discussion is being had by three men, so it would be good to have a female perspective.' The three male members of GLC couldn't engage with the text beyond their male perspective.

#### 6: 4.2.3. Christian Personal Experience

In addition to participant's identity and previous readings, their personal context also involved their individual Christian experience. This is very closely connected to, but not the same as, their corporate Christian experience. Rather than experiences of the Christian community or Christian tendencies on a broader scale, personal Christian experience involved participants reflecting on their own spiritual experiences and text applications.



References to spiritual experiences occurred amongst various participants varying from implied visceral, charismatic experiences, to experience of how God had been active in their lives.<sup>219</sup> For example, Henry spoke of God healing his heart and bringing transformation and Dean spoke of having felt far away from God. Drawing upon personal spiritual experience was a way in which participants found connections between the text and their personal lives.

In addition to spiritual experiences, participants reflected on their personal experience of applying texts. This occurred predominantly in Ephesians, with some reflections prompted by Psalm 44 but none from Genesis. Closely aligned with previous encounters, participants related how the texts functioned in their own lives. In other words, their previous readings of the text did not just establish certain lines of interpretation, but certain lived consequences. In the Ephesians discussion married participants in particular reflected on their marriage relationship and how the text related to their experience and behaviour, for example Henry (St.J's) reflected on his previous struggle to express his love to his wife. In the Psalm discussion, participants spoke about their experiences of being open and honest before God and of God's comfort when they're in a distressed place. For example, Dean (TO) spoke of the Psalms as being a 'go to' for his personal expressions of grief and frustration.

As with spiritual experiences, participants drew upon their individual Christian experience to make connections between themselves and the content of the text. Participants saw the text as something that should actively relate to their lives, and they made this relation explicit in reflecting on their spiritual and applicatory experiences.

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<sup>219</sup> For an empirical account of such spiritual experiences and how they can be learnt and associated with a broader Christian context, see: T.M. Lurhmann, Howard Nusbaum and Ronald Thistead, 'The Absorption Hypothesis: Learning to heart God in Evangelical Christianity,' *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 1 (2010): 66-78.

### 6: 4.3. The Doctrine of Scripture through the Lens of Context

Having overviewed how participants read the text through their context lens, in what ways did participants view the doctrine of Scripture through their contextual lens? How did readers' context shape their understanding of the doctrine of Scripture?

First, the doctrine of Scripture is a traditional doctrine of the Christian church and participant's beliefs about Scripture had thus come to be formed in relation to their Christian context. This was evidenced on a number of occasions. Most explicitly, Nick (WO) referenced his Anglican heritage that holds in belief to Scripture, tradition and reason as an authority triad. More subtly, Neil's (St.C's) comments about the inspiration of Scripture reveal a traditional origin: 'Because I think with Scripture, if we believe Scripture is God-breathed, that's the word, the phrase in the New Testament: God-breathed... that is, we as Christians believe this is the Word of God.' Neil quotes a traditional interpretation of 2 Timothy 3:16 by assuming it applies to the entirety of the canon and his emphasis is placed on corporate belief ('we as Christians believe'). The nuance is subtle but significant, indicating that Neil, despite quoting the Bible, is actually drawing upon a traditional belief from his Christian context and using biblical language to underpin it rather than drawing upon the Bible to emphasise the scriptural origins of the belief.

A final example demonstrates some of the nuances involved in one's Christian context and how this shapes an understanding of the doctrine of Scripture. In response to Martin's suggestion that the psalmist is arrogant, Adam (GLC) replied,

I try not to judge Scripture as such and I wouldn't want to say, 'oh he's arrogant' because it's like 'this is the Word of God' and that's partly my background of being fairly conservative and everything whereas you were

saying you're from a... you have a more different approach to things and so when we come to certain issues I'm approaching from one angle, he's approaching from another angle...

Adam implicitly affirms that his understanding of the Bible as the Word of God does not allow room for the authors to be criticised in a negative fashion and this is a consequence of his 'conservative' background which he contrasts with Martin's background. This quote affirms that the doctrine of Scripture is viewed through the lens of one's Christian context and this can differ amongst Christians depending on the specifics of their background.

However, participants' Bible beliefs weren't just shaped by their Christian context but also their personal context. This is because the Bible is an experienced reality for EAs. It's not just that readers let their personal experiences inform their reading, but that their reading itself *is an experience*.<sup>220</sup> Experience of the Bible informs readers' dispositions and beliefs *about* the Bible.

What does it mean for the Bible to be an experienced reality? First, participants experienced the Bible in the form of encountering the text, i.e., the actual experience of reading the text and the response that it evokes. This has three components: first, an emotional experience that the text evokes, such as Stacey (St.C's) claiming reading Genesis 7 made her 'uncomfortable'. Second, an experience of understanding or lack thereof. Participants' experience of the texts they read was closely related to their ability to understand and engage with the material. For example, Rose (St.H's) expressed not always being able to understand the message of a Psalm. The emotional experience and the experience of understanding may therefore be connected – the ability to

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<sup>220</sup> For research on Catholic experiences of the Bible, see: Tim Gorichanaz, 'Experiencing the Bible,' *Journal of Religious and Theological Information* 15: 1-2, 19-31. DOI: [10.1080/10477845.2016.1168278](https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2016.1168278)

understand itself evokes certain emotions. Third and finally, the event of reading the text might prompt the experience of divine communication – hearing God ‘speak’ or teach through the text or having an experience of God through the medium of the text. This third component is not a given of the reading experience and is partly determined by the expectation the reader places on the text.

This connects to the second way in which participants experienced the Bible - the experience of application, i.e., how the text makes a practical difference in participant’s lives. This was the most common type of reflection participants made about their experience of the Bible, with contributions focusing on how texts function pragmatically. This was both specific, as has been noted in relation to the focus group texts, but also broad, such as Jane’s (St.J’s) comment about Romans 5:3-5 acting as a ‘mantra in my head’.

In summary then, the act of reading the Bible is in itself an experience. This accumulation of experiences of encountering the Bible has a role in shaping the doctrine of Scripture. In other words, the doctrine of Scripture is not just an intellectual reality but an experienced reality through the event of reading. Experience of the Bible influences beliefs about the Bible but this is reciprocal; beliefs about the Bible equally influence experience of the Bible. For example, the experience of being taught by God through the text reinforces the belief that the Bible is God’s teaching resource. But similarly, the belief that the Bible is God’s teaching resource sets the expectation of being taught through the text. Beliefs about and experiences of the Bible are thus mutually reinforcing.

Viewing the doctrine of Scripture through the lens of context therefore nuances individuals’ doctrine of Scripture. As with the doctrine of God, a participant’s personal background, membership in specific Christian communities and experiences of reading the Bible contributes to

a unique slant in relation to their doctrine of Scripture and how this plays out in the process of reading and interpreting.

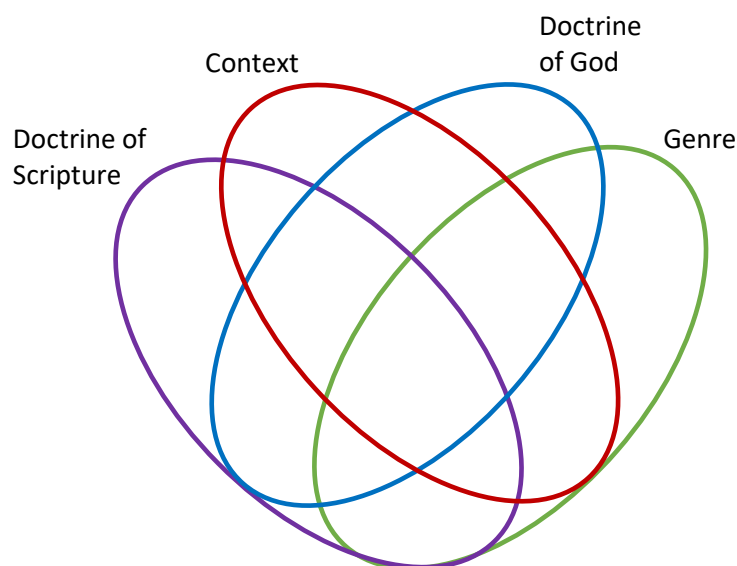
#### 6: 4.4. Conclusion: Context Lens

In summary, participants' contextual lens was dominated by their personal and Christian context. Participants' reading of the Bible through this lens involved a variety of practices: drawing upon Christian knowledge in the form of tradition and contemporary sources of input to shed light on the text; letting the text shed light upon their corporate Christian experience; building upon previous interpretations; reflecting on the influence of their personal identity; and making connections between their personal experiences and the text. The overall force of reading through a contextual lens was setting the scope within which it could be determined *what* the text meant. As the doctrine of Scripture lens determines the reading agenda in finding the text's meaning in the form of divine teaching, the contextual lens determines what that teaching could be is. The text's meaning was thus identified within the matrixes of participants' personal and Christian context. In other words, what participants brought to the text, in terms of their personal and Christian experiences and knowledge, limited the scope of what the text could teach them. Moreover, the contextual lens also had a role to play in participants' understanding of the doctrine of Scripture, evidenced by their references to the traditions and communities which formed their understanding of the Bible, as well as their experiences of reading and engaging with the Bible.

## 6: 5. Lens Combinations

Framing the way in which participant's engaged with the text through the metaphor of lenses demonstrates the complexities of reading through numerous lenses at once. The way the four lenses I have outlined combine together in the process of reading is depicted in figure 4. What this diagram demonstrates is that, depending on the emphasis or strength of each particular lens, participants have a myriad of approaches to the text.

It is worth reiterating at this point that many more 'lenses' could be added to this scheme, as well as be broken down into further sub-categories. The 'lenses' I have elaborated on in this chapter have been chosen for both their prominence identified amongst participants but also because of the significance of their crossover with the doctrine of Scripture, my lens of interest.



In practice all these lenses are active at any given time just to different degrees of prominence. The lenses are not something that are 'put on' but are integral to perception, much in the same way that human beings have no choice but to see through their eyes.

At times, participants appeared to be constantly juggling the lenses through which they read, often trying to give due weight to each in their interpretative conclusions – this was seen most clearly in the discussion of Genesis where participants were torn between commitments to science, the omnipotence of God, the authority of the text and the intentions of the author. At other times, participants appeared to be actively engaging one particular lens making it more dominant. If all the lenses are active, but the reader has some control over the lenses they prioritise, what does this indicate about lens choice?

#### 6: 5.1. Lens Choice

Given that the lenses are always active, readers don't consciously 'choose' to read through them. However, as has been demonstrated, certain lenses were employed to a greater extent in relation to the text's content – the doctrine of God lens was more prominent in Genesis and the Psalm where the portrayal of God was somewhat problematic. This is the equivalent of a person using their near-sighted or far-sighted vision depending upon the object being viewed; they are still looking through their eyes, but the object being viewed affects the vision employed.

Additionally, participants did evidence both the ability to intentionally let a particular lens dominate or attempt to see beyond their lenses by disregarding them. These latter instances, however, were only ever attempts because participants weren't able to ignore their lenses, they ultimately had to temporarily transform them. For example, when participants at St.J's speculated what non-Christians would make of the Ephesians text, they didn't eradicate their doctrine of Scripture lens, rather they transformed the lens into a non-Christian equivalent: 'religious text' rather than 'Word of God'. This transformation of the lens was wholly provisional; one can

speculate how someone of different experiences or beliefs might respond to the text, but this will only ever be a speculation from within the limits of one's own lenses.

## 6: 6. Conclusion

This chapter has explicated three dominant lenses that participants read the text through, the doctrine of God, genre and context, and has highlighted examples of reading through these lenses, the results of such readings and therefore the general overall function of the lens in the process of Bible reading. It is important to stress that the lenses have a number of different functions depending on the text in question, but I have attempted to identify their most prominent role evidenced by my participants' conversation. Including the insights from the previous chapter, the overall thrust of the lens dynamic can be described as follows.

The biblical text is read through a number of lenses, which are pre-existing frameworks of belief, knowledge and experience that shape how one reads. Prominent lenses for my participants were the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of God, genre, and context. These lenses have an affective relationship both with the text, and each other. As my focus is on the doctrine of Scripture, I have explored the God, genre, and context lenses in terms of these two relationships: how they shape the doctrine of Scripture and how they impact engagement with the text.

The roles of these lenses can thus be summarised:

- 1.) Participants construed the Bible as God's teaching resource. The result of reading through the lens of this **doctrine of Scripture** was primarily setting the agenda or purpose of reading, *why* the



text is read. The text was read to seek its ultimate meaning: divine teaching in the form of belief and behaviour.

a.) That the Bible was construed as God's teaching resource was the result of a dominant **doctrine of God** lens which understands the nature of the Bible in terms of its *function* by God and its *content* being about God.

b.) The ultimate meaning of the text was qualified by the **genre** of the text at hand which determines how the text functions as God's teaching resource.

c.) The belief in the Bible as God's teaching resource will be affected by the reader's Christian **context** and personal experiences of reading. Their beliefs about the Bible will therefore be individually nuanced.

2.) Reading through the **doctrine of God lens** has a limiting function in setting parameters as to *which* meanings are valid, acting as a touchstone for interpretative conclusions.

3.) Reading through the **genre lens** has a focusing function prescribing what hermeneutical activity is appropriate and thus *how* meaning is determined, as well as contributing to the interpretive conclusions drawn from the text.

4.) Reading through the **context lens** sets the scope of *what* meanings are found: divine communication in the form of theological insight (belief) and life application (behaviour) is somewhat restricted to the knowledge and experience of a reader's context.

Having established how these lenses function, I now turn consider the role of the text in relation to these dynamics.

# CHAPTER SEVEN: THE ROLE OF THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE AND THE TRANSFORMATIONAL ROLE OF THE TEXT

## 7: 1. Introduction

This chapter explores the role of the doctrine of Scripture in relation to the transformational role of the text. It begins with an overview of hermeneutical theory which posits that texts have the capacity to transform readers as a result of them being authentically addressed by the text through engaging with the text's context. The chapter then considers to what extent this occurred amongst my participants and concludes that a narrow focus on the outcome of reading as learning, set by the doctrine of Scripture, limits the potential transforming capacity of the text.

## 7: 2. The Text's Transforming Capacity in Theory

According to hermeneutical theory, a text is not a passive object but an active subject and as such has the capacity to shape the reader and their lenses. Lenses should therefore act as a provisional framework through which the text is viewed, as they are capable of being changed by the active agency of their subject, the text. It is in this respect that reading can be considered transformational for the reader, making the process of bible reading dynamic and progressive. But how does a text affect and transform a reader? According to Thiselton (whom I rely on heavily for the following overview), there are many ways in which a text can have a transformative effect:

Because of their capacity to bring about change, texts and especially biblical texts engage with readers in ways which can productively transform horizons, attitudes, criteria of relevance, or even communities and inter-personal situations. *In this sense we may speak of transforming biblical reading.*<sup>221</sup>

In order for texts to enact their transforming capacity, a reader has to be ‘addressed’ by the text ‘speaking.’ The text’s address is only authentic when the distinctiveness of the text’s voice is recognised in contrast to the reader’s own voice. Being addressed therefore involves paying attention to the context of the text, its author and recipients. To stretch the lens metaphor a little further, this attention to the text’s context might be described as adopting *the text’s lenses* in order to read the text on its own terms.<sup>222</sup> This involves asking questions such as, when the text speaks of God, what or who is it envisioning and how does that compare to the my vision of God? When the text speaks of marriage, what social institution was in view and is this the same as the way I understand marriage today? Accordingly, by inhabiting the lenses of the text, a reader both views the text and themselves and sees both in a new light. Adopting the lenses of the text allows the text to speak authentically and thus for the reader to be genuinely addressed by an ‘other’ and not merely by the echo of their own voice. It is only by being properly addressed from outside of oneself that the text can be transformational.

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<sup>221</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 8. (emphasis Thiselton’s own)

<sup>222</sup> There are a number of complexities regarding the fact that the context of the author of the text, the recipients of the text and/or the characters within the world of the text, are not necessarily aligned. I do not have space to discuss the nuances of these different perspectives, but rather will refer to the ‘text’s context’ or ‘text’s lenses’ as a shorthand for all three of these perspectives, akin to ‘historical context’.

If reading does reflect something of an echo-chamber of the reader's own perspective, readers are, according to Thiselton, prematurely assimilating. This is failing to read the text through its own lenses and only engaging with it through the reader's natural lenses. The results of this are described by Thiselton:

In such a case the reader may stand under the illusion that the texts have fully addressed him or her. Still more significantly, interaction between the horizons [lenses] of texts and readers will, if premature assimilation has taken place, appear *uneventful, bland, routine, and entirely unremarkable*. Within the Christian community the reading of biblical texts often takes this uneventful and bland form. For the nature of the reading-process is governed by horizons [lenses] of expectation already pre-formed by the community of readers or by the individual. Preachers often draw from texts what they had already decided to say; congregations sometimes look to biblical readings only to affirm the community-identity and life-style which they already enjoy. The biblical writings, in such a situation, become assimilated into the function of creeds: they become primarily institutional mechanisms to ensure continuity of corporate belief and identity.<sup>223</sup>

This thesis has established how the reading process is governed by 'horizons of expectation already pre-formed', which has been framed as lenses. Participants' doctrine of Scripture set the expectation of how the text was meaningful ahead of reading. Does reading through the lens of

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<sup>223</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 8. (emphasis Thiselton's own) ('lenses' added)

the doctrine of Scripture therefore undermine the text's capacity to transform the reader? To answer this question, I will first consider the extent to which my participants appeared to be open to the text's capacity to transform the reader.

### 7: 3. The Text's Transforming Capacity in Practice

In theory, the text's capacity to transform relies on the reader's engagement with the text's context, that I've termed 'adopting the text's lenses.' How far did this happen in practice? Assessing the extent to which participants adopted the text's lenses can be measured by identifying the engagement practices they employed that dwelt upon the text's context, which was noted in 5:6. However, though this type of hermeneutical activity can be identified, it is difficult to determine the extent to which participants were being authentically 'addressed' by the text. What would this look or sound like? Were participant's actually being changed as a result of engaging with the text's context? I will explore these questions below.

Of the 78 engagement practices identified amongst participants, 13 categories corresponded with contextual reflections: differentiating the reader's culture from the text's culture, considering the author's identity/intention/thought-process/worldview, reflecting on the circumstantial context prompted the text to exist, the text's faith context, the recipients of the text, providing general historical societal and cultural information, exploring genre, cultural stylistic devices, and analysing language and translation.

These contextual practices accounted for 24% of all engagement practices, but the majority (66%) were a product of the reader's context, depicted in Table 2 below.

These statistics show that the majority of participant exploration of the text took place within the reader's natural lenses, rather than the text's lenses.

Further, it should be noted that participants did engage in a number of practices that showed they were aware of the text's lenses, but this awareness did not always result in an 'adoption' of such lenses. For example, George (St.J's) made the following comment about the Psalm: 'I guess British culture is quite reserved, but I feel like not all countries are like this and maybe that's coming through in this passage, it's like, extreme.' George does not dig further into Middle Eastern culture to reflect on the emotions of the psalmist, or consider whether the psalm can really be considered 'extreme' if this is the cultural norm, or reflect on the appropriateness of reading the psalm through a 'British reserved' lens. Instead, the style of the psalm is accounted for as being 'cultural'. What George might be described as doing is noting that the text has different lenses to his own, but not actually adopting such lenses to see the text and himself in a new way.

Contrasting this is Emma's (St.J's) handling of the Psalm's affirmation of God's help in defeating the enemy:

Emma: And more than that, we don't live in a tribal, warring society. So actually, the bit I find most difficult in this passage is verse 5, 'through your name we tread down our assailants'... I do not think of God as someone whose name is used as a way to tread down other people... that is the exact opposite of the God that I experience, who is about not oppressing, and freedom and... the reunification of all things. And that's where I'm like,

‘but I don’t live somewhere where there are people who are trying to kill me’... and if I did, I would definitely...

Jane: ...want them dead...

Emma: yeah... I’d be focusing on the assailants bit of that rather than from my nice privileged luxurious place being like ‘tread down? That’s a heavy phrase.’

Emma engages with the text’s lenses and rather than dismiss enemies as being irrelevant, she imagines how she would feel if her life were in danger from a known enemy. This leads her to reconsider her response to the idea that God ‘treads down’ the enemy, which didn’t correspond with her previously held idea of God. Emma notices her own historical situatedness (‘nice privileged luxurious place’) thus seeing herself through the lenses of the text and by imagining herself in the context of the Psalmist, hears the claims of God in a different way. It wasn’t just that the text stated something about God that Emma was receptive to being challenged by (thus reshaping her doctrine of God lens), but that engaging with the text’s lenses helped Emma to see how her own doctrine of God lens is shaped by her experiences of the world. As difficult as it is to identify exactly when someone is being authentically ‘addressed’ by the text, Emma’s reflection does appear to be an example.

Contrasting George and Emma’s comments provides nuance to the reality of exegesis. Whilst Evangelical Bible-reading might profess to promote a contextual approach, and readers themselves know this, the extent and manner with which the text’s ‘context’ is engaged with can vary wildly. This was established in 2:7.2 where it was noted that exegesis can take two forms: the



applying of relevant contextual knowledge, or personal involvement with this context through distancing. My participants tended to opt for the former form of exegesis, rather than the latter. That participants were less open to the address of the text and thus its transforming capacity is bolstered by recalling that on the whole, participants did not demonstrate a willingness for their doctrine of God to be challenged by the text. Where the text's portrayal of God and participant's own doctrine of God were in conflict, participant's own understanding prevailed and the text was interpreted in a way that upheld such preconceived conceptions of God. In other words, participants weren't open to the text changing the frameworks that they brought to the text and read the text through, which in this example, was the doctrine of God lens.

In summary, participants did not evidence a significant proclivity to adopt the text's lenses and see the text, and themselves, through them. Instead, they tended to read the text through their natural lenses and these were fixed rather than provisional, and subsequently not open to being changed. This meant the text's transforming capacity, for my participants, was limited. What does this reveal about the role of the doctrine of Scripture in interpretation?

#### 7: 4. The effect of the Role of the Doctrine of Scripture upon the Role of the Text

It was established in Chapter 5 that participants predominantly viewed the Bible as God's resource and thus focused on the function of the Bible in their lives. This focus on the Bible as God's resource was conceived in terms of God's purpose of teaching and the corresponding reading approach was thus learning what God was intending to teach. A focus upon reading for learning ultimately locates the meaning of the text in its teachings about right belief and behaviour, which

is essentially *information*. Participant's sought the information God wanted to communicate. By contrast, the text's capacity to transform locates the meaning of the text in being authentically 'addressed,' in *communication* from the 'other.'

Information and communication are not mutually exclusive, but they are significantly different. Indeed, one communicates information; a reader who is 'addressed' may quite likely 'learn' something. The difference is found in the expectation of the reader.

When a reader seeks communication, they expect to engage with an 'other' and as such, can't prescribe the form or content of the communication. By contrast, when the reader seeks information, the communicator fades to the background and the nature of the communication in the form of imparting information has already been determined. If the reader does not engage with the text's context, then an emphasis on information runs the risk that the information does not actually stem from the 'other' at all, but rather oneself.

This distinction is made clearer with reference to Rosenblatt's efferent-aesthetic reading scale.

When a text is read efferently, 'the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out.'<sup>225</sup> This correlates with my participant's reading for the purpose of learning right belief and behaviour. By contrast, when a text is read aesthetically, 'the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event'<sup>226</sup>, '*the reader's attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.*'<sup>227</sup>

Being 'addressed' by the text in authentic communication might not strictly align with a purely

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<sup>225</sup> Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 23.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, 25. (Emphasis author's own)

aesthetic reading, but it is much further towards that end of the scale than reading for learning and information, which is strongly efferent oriented.<sup>228</sup>

The location of meaning in information or communication is thus prescribed by a reader's expectation of the function of the text. As my participants largely seemed to understand the Bible as God's teaching resource, the reading task was therefore about learning, which locates meaning in gaining information. As a result, participants didn't seek communication in the text and thus engage with the text through the text's lenses. A heavy emphasis upon learning meant participants engaged with the text predominantly in relation to their own context and read through their lenses (as has been seen), ultimately reducing the text's capacity to transform.

In summary, *reading through the lens of a doctrine of Scripture that construes the Bible as God's teaching resource actually restricts the text's capacity to transform the reader.* Whilst in theory the doctrine of Scripture prescribes that the text has an authoritative function in the reader's life, in practice the narrow conception of the Bible's divine communication as teaching actually diminished the text's capacity to be authoritative in the reader's life by changing and shaping of the very frameworks that a reader brings to the text.

If the function of the doctrine of Scripture lens locates meaning in *learning* then this focus appears to have the effect of tunnel-vision at the expense of the text's meaning in *communication*. The participants' expectation that the text would communicate in the form of learning, clouded them to what Briggs describes as conceiving of Scripture as 'before' the reader: 'it precedes us and thus, in God's economy, the Word of God summons us to interpretive paths which it is not our job to

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<sup>228</sup> It should also be noted that these two ways of reading are not mutually exclusive, either on the basis of the nature of the text or the proclivities of the reader, and my participants evidenced both.

delimit in advance; and it invites us to an attentiveness before what is actually said in Scripture which it is not our job to prejudge in advance.’<sup>229</sup>

In Chapter 2 I outlined how Packer and Stott posited that a commitment to the doctrine of Scripture was necessary for proper interpretation, determining both hermeneutical activity and interpretative conclusions (2:7). What this chapter has suggested is that reading within a commitment to the doctrine of Scripture that conceives of the Bible primarily as God’s teaching resource, actually dulls the potential transforming role of the text and thus paradoxically undermines the reader’s commitment to the doctrine of Scripture in the first place, which affirms the life-governing role of the Bible.

## 7: 5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the role of the doctrine of Scripture in relation to the role of the text. Having considered how texts have the capacity to change and transform their readers, it was noted that my participants didn’t particularly partake in the practices that enable the text to have an effective impact. These practices involved adopting the lenses of the text in order for the text to authentically communicate. As such, participants’ beliefs and experiences, i.e. their lenses, didn’t seem to be affected by the text.

Participants’ doctrine of Scripture, which emphasised the Bible as God’s divine resource, placed emphasis upon reading for learning, and this was to the detriment of an emphasis upon communication, and thus transformation. There is thus a resulting irony in the fact that

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<sup>229</sup> Richard Briggs, ‘Evangelical Possibilities for Taking Scripture Seriously’ in ed. Tom Greggs, *New Perspective for Evangelical Theology: engaging with God, Scripture and the world* (London: Routledge, 2010), 19.

participants appeared to believe in the authority and inspiration of Scripture and thus sought to shape their lives according to their learning from the texts, but this ultimately reduced the authority of the text in minimising its ability to address the reader in authentic communication.

# CHAPTER EIGHT: COMPARING FORMAL AND INFORMAL PARTICIPANTS

## 8: 1. Introduction

So far, this thesis has examined my participants as a whole and only made brief indications as to the differences between formal and informal participants. This final chapter examines the conclusions of the previous chapters specifically in relation to whether there were any notable or significant differences between the two categories of participants. It begins by highlighting differences in their discussion of each text, both in relation to what participants *said* about the text and what participants *did* with the text, concluding with some implications regarding the doctrine of Scripture. This chapter then goes on to consider any relevant differences between the lenses and lens usage of the two categories, and then concludes with some reflections as to what all these differences might indicate about how theological education affects the doctrine of Scripture and its role in interpretation.

It should be noted at the outset of this chapter that formal participants were educated in a variety of theological institutions, both confessional and secular. Whilst the majority of participants had undertaken theological education for the purpose of going into ministry, some participants were in academia, and some were in roles unrelated to theology or ministry. This means participants' theological education not only varied but was also being 'used' in different contexts and for different purposes and therefore varied in terms of how much the content of their education was a part of their everyday lives. Though some differences could be seen between formal and

informal participants as will be elaborated, none were overwhelmingly stark, and this could likely be due to this breadth of theological education and current employment.

## 8: 2. Genesis

### 8: 2.1. Interpretations

The points made by participants across all groups, as was seen in Section 4:7, can be loosely categorised under six topics: 1) historicity, 2) narrative form, 3) moral challenge, 4) correct interpretation and/or implications/challenges, 5) story detail, and 6) meaning.

When looking at the points that were unique to informal and formal participants, the only topic with a distinct difference was number six listed above - statements of meaning about what the story is about, what can be learnt from it and what it means for Christians today. Formal participants made significantly more points of this nature, with 27% of all the points made being about meaning, in comparison to 5% for informal participants. These additional comments about meaning were closely related to formal participants' engagement practices, which I turn to discuss next.

### 8: 2.2. Engagement Practices

Of all three texts, Genesis demonstrated the most disparity between how formal and informal participants handled the text.

Informal participants seemed to have a tendency to gather all relevant knowledge that they were able to and approach the text from a variety of angles: scientific, cultural, historical, literary,

theological and personal. For example, informal participants drew upon historical knowledge, scientific knowledge, and various resources and 'external input' in discussion of the plausibility of the events occurring. Additionally, they also drew upon their previous readings and understood the text through the lens of these experiences much more than formal participants. Informal participants also placed the narrative within the context of salvation history and discussed broader issues of sin and salvation in light of God's salvation plan. Two final practices that dominated for informal participants included language analysis and imaginative speculation. These reflect two opposite ways of engaging with the text. The former, language analysis, looks closely at particular words or phrases of the text to ensure that the full depth of meaning has been discerned. The latter, imaginative speculation, engages on a creative level with the events of the narrative and suggests possibilities or potential consequences/details/circumstances that the text is silent about. These two practices, in combination with the others just listed, demonstrates the breadth of informal participants' engagement with this text.

This breadth is connected to informal participants' recognition of both their own limited understanding and more general limitations impeding the ability to understand. In light of these acknowledged limitations, the informal participants wielded all their available knowledge to shed light on the text and approach it from a variety of angles.

By contrast, formal participants were more confident in their ability to understand and interpret the text with no expression of limited understanding either inherent to the text or their own ability. Additionally, formal participants presented a more cohesive range of engagement practices than informal participants, one of which was demonstrating a stronger tendency to make links between Genesis and the rest of the Bible, with many of these intrabiblical references relating to



Jesus' use of the Noah narrative. No informal participants referenced Jesus' use of the narrative and only one informal participant noted that Noah is mentioned in the New Testament. Similarly, formal participants were more inclined to reference other theologically similar biblical content and thus read canonically. They made more connections between the text and other biblical narratives, particularly within Genesis.

Additionally, formal participants were also distinct in contrasting the narrative with non-biblical historical literature, specifically the Gilgamesh epic. Whilst one informal participant demonstrated knowledge of the Gilgamesh epic, this was only mentioned briefly and as confirmation of the existence of a flood, rather than a point of comparison to identify distinctive features of the Genesis text. This demonstrates more of a tendency for formal participants to consider the historical/literary context of the text. Taken together then, these insights suggest that formal participants are more inclined to read both canonically and contextually, in contrast to informal participants who embraced a variety of perspectives from which to understand the text.

### 8: 2.3. Historicity and the Doctrine of Scripture

With regards to the historicity of Genesis, as a general tendency, informal participants showed more consensus in arriving at a hybrid understanding of the historicity of the narrative, believing it to contain both historical and non-historical components. The evidence or data that informal participants called upon in their determination of the text's historicity included scientific and historical knowledge. Additionally, informal participants were the only ones to raise the issue of the implications of historicity for the rest of the Bible. This indicated a concern for a consistency of approach to the biblical text as a whole, particularly the New Testament.

In contrast, formal participants demonstrated a broader range of opinions regarding historicity, from understanding the narrative as completely historical to largely fictional. In other words, formal participants demonstrated stronger views about historicity on either end of the liberal-conservative spectrum, whilst informal participants tended to occupy more of the middle ground. Village's survey data found that amongst his Anglican participants, higher levels of education, particularly theological education, corresponded with a move towards more liberal beliefs about the Bible. Amongst Evangelicals however, education was found to have no impact upon levels of literalism, especially when combined with charismatic gifts.<sup>230</sup> Against this insight, my theologically educated Evangelical participants appeared to be both typical and atypical in demonstrating both literal and non-literal approaches to Genesis.

The evidence or data that formal participants called upon in their determination of the text's historicity was much more text focused. This would suggest that interpretation for formal participants was conducted in relation to the text at hand, rather than the text in light of contemporary knowledge. However, as has been noted, formal participants also showed a greater awareness of other ancient flood accounts which was also a factor for many in their consideration of historicity. This shows a formal concern for historical context contrasting informal participants' use of knowledge from a contemporary context in determining historicity.

Formal participants did not reference a concern for what a non-historical reading indicates about the rest of the Bible. This could be because formal participants were more comfortable or familiar with the idea that Genesis 1-11 is differentiated from the rest of the text in terms of historicity, which is a common idea amongst scholarship (Section 4:4.3). Or it could be that formal

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<sup>230</sup> Village, *The Bible and Lay People*, 67.

participants were equally more comfortable or familiar than informal participants with the idea that different texts require different interpretive strategies.

However, despite these differences, formal and informal participants showed no difference in their commitment to the truth of the narrative in a 'deeper' sense with no participants disregarding the text as being irrelevant or unimportant even if they deemed it to be unhistorical. Doctrinally speaking therefore, both informal and formal participants were aligned in seeing the 'truth' and value of the narrative in what it teaches.

## 8: 3. Psalm

### 8: 3.1. Interpretation

As we saw (4:8), discussion of Psalm 44 tended to focus around five main topics: 1) author and events, 2) God's character, 3) the form of address, 4) human suffering, and 5) purpose or meaning. Naturally, several points intertwined several of these topics.

Whilst both informal and formal participants reflected on suffering, informal participants did so to a much greater extent considering why suffering exists, if it has any purpose and whether/what God's role is in it. Points about suffering accounted for 29% of all the points made by informal participants, as opposed to 14% for formal participants.

Discussion of suffering more broadly was unique to informal participants and contrasted with formal participants' tendency to stay closer to the text rather than venture into broader topics, suggesting that theological education could instil a sense of text-focus. This was a general trend across the three texts as was seen with Genesis where several formal participants focused on the

text for indications regarding the text's historicity as opposed to informal participants who drew upon scientific and historical knowledge.

As with Genesis, formal participants showed a preference to reflect on meaning and purpose accounting for 31% of all the points made, whereas only 18% of informal points reflected on meaning. This formal preference for meaning was very much linked with their preference for intrabiblical referencing and connecting the Psalm with the New Testament (another practice that was also demonstrated in Genesis). These connections were either relating the Psalm to Jesus or making reference to Paul's usage of the Psalm in Romans. None of these points were made by informal participants. Related to this, formal participants situated the text within a 'canonical trajectory' that sees a progressive development in an understanding of who God is, culminating in the person of Jesus. Meaning is therefore discerned from wider canonical context or frameworks through which the text is viewed. This focus on meaning also corroborates the suggestion above that formal participants are more text-focused than informal participants.

### 8: 3.2. Engagement Practices

For the Psalm, informal participants demonstrated several practices more frequently than formal participants. Two such practices focused on understanding the Psalm in relation to the rest of the Bible. First, participants commented on theologically similar biblical content, where the Bible deals with similar themes or challenges that the Psalm deals with. Some of these instances were prompted by the setting of the focus group, with links being made to Genesis, the previous text the group had read. Second, participants also made more general points of comparison or similarity with 'biblical tendencies' i.e. things the Psalms 'tend' to do, or practices of the Israelites/God in general. In these practices, informal participants demonstrated much more

specificity in the way they engaged with the text compared to the breadth of approaches employed for Genesis.

Informal participants also demonstrated some contextualising practices that differentiated their theology with the contextual theology of the text. They recognised that 'the Bible' might conceive of God differently to themselves, but this was not framed as evidence of a developmental or progressive faith to which the Bible gives witness. The psalmist's thinking about God was attributed to them living in a more primitive time, but this was loosely alluded to and not fully explained.

Several informal practices centred around participants' personal response to the text including practicing empathy to relate to the experience of the Psalmist and in connection with this, drawing upon personal experience of the Christian faith when relating to the Psalm. Additionally, informal participants reflected upon their personal experience of 'applying' the Psalm which predominantly took the form of emulation - sharing stories of their own honesty and outpouring of emotion before God. Informal participants stressed how they've prayed in a similar vein to the Psalm or experienced what the Psalmist has, and these experiences were placed in conversation with the text, rather than owned as something they bring to their understanding of the text.

In contrast, the contextualising practices of the formal participants were more specific than those of informal participants. Whereas informal participants drew upon anything similar or relevant from the Bible, formal participants, as has been noted, showed more knowledge in making intrabiblical references and situating the Psalm within a canonical narrative arc. Several formal participants recognised that the Psalmist represents a particular point within a canonical trajectory and understood the psalmist's perspective and claims in light of that context, which

none of the informal participants did. The different ways in which formal and informal participants contextualised the text in relation to the rest of the Bible therefore suggests that theological education provides knowledge that enables contextual specificity but also provides a depth and richness to the canonical picture, which informal participants lacked. This is expanded upon below. Formal participants also demonstrated a personal response to the text, but they tended to reflect on their identity as a reader (English, a preacher, Charismatic) and how this shaped their approach, rather than their personal experiences. They therefore demonstrated an awareness of approaching the text from a specific context and how this impacts their understanding and response to the Psalm.

### 8: 3.3. Theology and the Doctrine of Scripture

In terms of the approach to the theology of the Psalm and what this indicates about the Doctrine of Scripture, informal and formal participants showed little difference. The majority of participants across both categories dismissed the psalmist's claims about God on account of the psalmist's emotional state and desperate situation. The notable exception to this was formal participant Nick, but as the only one who upheld the claims of the Psalm his view can't be taken as a representative of his category.

As has been noted, there were topical differences between the two categories and the points that were raised but these were not indicative of a substantial difference in terms of participant's doctrine of Scripture.

## 8: 4. Ephesians

### 8: 4.1. Interpretations

Discussion of Ephesians centred around five central topics: 1) culture, 2) meaning, 3) dynamics of interpretation, 4) relevance, and 5) irrelevance (4:9).

Though the smallest topic of discussion, informal participants made more points about the fifth topic, the irrelevance of the text to contemporary society. These accounted for 7% of the points made as opposed to just 1% from formal participants. This practice can also be seen as evidence of an informal tendency to fuse the text with contemporary society. As such, instances where fusion was difficult on account of cultural difference resulted in points about the text's irrelevance.

Informal participants also made several general reflections on topic three above, the dynamics of interpretation, which formal participants did not. Using the text as a jumping off point, informal participants reflected more broadly on the process of interpretation and their role as readers in this process.

Formal participants demonstrated more thorough knowledge of the first of these topics, the cultural context from which the letter came. It was only in formal groups that slavery was mentioned as potentially a positive and respectable form of 'employment' in Roman society, whereas the underlying sense of the way in which informal participants spoke of slavery was to equate it with the transatlantic slave trade of the 16th century and beyond. This shows greater knowledge and understanding of the context, which is likely a result of their theological education. Equally, formal participants tended to reflect on societal and cultural norms of the text's time in order to contrast the text against such a background. Though informal participants did this too,

they tended to make more frequent moves between the culture of the text and contemporary culture, moving between topics one and four above. Formal participants were more focused on what light cultural insight sheds upon the text, rather than contemporary society, and they demonstrated more specific knowledge and confidence in their understanding of ancient culture. Formal participants also demonstrated a tendency to reflect more specifically in relation to details of the text, rather than more generally about the dynamics of interpretation, evidencing again a formal preference to stay text-focused rather than use the text as a launch pad to discuss broader issues.

#### 8: 4.2. Engagement Practices

In Ephesians, the informal participants showed preference for a variety of practices, three of which were in relation to the reader context. Though formal participants also engaged with their own context in relation to the context of the text, informal participants did this to a much greater extent. Particularly, they reflected on their previous encounters with the text, their personal experience of applying the text and general Christian tendencies as a context into which the text is applied. The other two predominant practices used by informal participants related to application, specifically discussing whether certain applications could be made and identifying the underlying meaning of the text. Informal participants were unique in considering what the text does and does not 'allow' and different ways in which it could be applied to today's context. Additionally, many informal participants stressed that the best method of 'application' was to identify the underlying meaning and principles of the text and apply those to today's context rather than simply take the instruction straight from the page - this often led to an understanding that the text should lead its readers to treat others with love and respect. These two tendencies pose a curious but not



unexpected tension for informal readers. On the one hand, discussion of the legitimacy of applications from the text demonstrates an instinct to follow the instructions of the text closely and discern exactly what they entail and what they do and don't allow. On the other hand, identifying principles beneath the text is a much more open approach that understands application to be broad and subject to discernment. This reflects the breadth of approaches to application and interpretation within the Evangelical community.

The formal participants only demonstrated two practices significantly more frequently than the informal participants in their discussion of Ephesians. The first was reflections upon the author's intention. Whilst both groups naturally referenced the author, the formal participants were the only ones to couch this in terms of the author's meaning or intention behind his writing. This could be due to theological education providing formal participants with the skills and knowledge to make more confident claims about authorial intention. Formal participants also evidenced a greater tendency to 'import' a theological concept to their understanding of the text. This was often repeated several times in different ways, demonstrating that the link between the text and the theological concept had been made in the past and was now a prominent paradigm or vantage point from which to understand the text. This is unsurprising given that theological education provides individuals with the knowledge and understanding to make such connections and understand texts in light of other theological ideas.

#### 8: 4.3. Relevancy and the Doctrine of Scripture

As with the Psalm, formal and informal participants were fairly equally balanced in their affirmation of the text's relevancy. Though informal participants tended to lean towards applying

the underlying principles of the text rather than specific applications whereas formal participants were equally split between both, this did not signify anything conclusive about the two categories' doctrine of Scripture.

However, as with the issues of historicity, formal participants did evidence more extreme approaches to relevancy on both ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum. Sam expressed concerns about the relevancy of the text and claimed that if the author had been intending to promote unjust relationships, particularly the institution of slavery as anti-abolitionists claimed, then he felt the text should not be applied to contemporary life as it leads to 'un-Christly action.' On the other hand, Martin offered the most 'direct' application of the text to contemporary life expanding upon his role as head of his family and what this means practically in relation to his wife and child. This continued the trend found in the discussion of historicity, that formal participants had stronger views both for and against literalism.

## 8: 5. Trends and Lenses

Having considered some of the key differences in what formal and informal participants said about the texts, the practices they used to engage with them and their emerging doctrine of Scripture, it is worth summing up these trends in relation to the lens framework. What do these differences indicate about the way in which reading lenses functioned for the two groups?

## 8: 5.1. Doctrine of Scripture Lens

Both formal and informal participants demonstrated a predominant view of the text as God's teaching resource from which to learn guidance for behaviour (application) and belief (knowledge).

As was noted above, formal participants tended to make more meaning-related points than informal participants, which corresponds with a preference for learning outcomes; the meaning of the text was what could be learnt from it. In Genesis, 27% of all the points formal participants made related to meaning, compared to just 5% from informal participants. Similarly for the Psalm, 31% of points formal participants made related to meaning compared to 18% of informal participants' points. The discussion of Ephesians, however, was much more balanced with 33% of informal points and 37% of formal points relating to meaning.

The type of meaning made varied according to genre – for Psalm and Ephesians, meaning was reflected on mostly in relation to behavioural application but in Genesis meaning points were related to both behaviour and belief. Formal participants demonstrated a preference for finding meaning in the latter, making a total of 36 theological insights from the Genesis text compared to 15 from informal participants. An example of meaning related to belief is the following comment by Jesse about Genesis: 'ultimately I think part of that narrative is that God is a God of justice and here are things that we need to be cognisant of and actually saying here are some of the reasons we need a redemption story, we need a redemption narrative.' This is contrasted to meaning in the form of application, exemplified by Jake: 'It's also about obedience and trust, isn't it? You know, are we actually going to obey when all the signs are that...' (unfinished comment).

In terms of the doctrine of Scripture lens therefore, whilst both groups saw the agenda of reading as being discernment of divine teaching, it would appear that formal participants have a broader

understanding of this teaching in seeking theological insight (belief) *as well as* application (behaviour). This is to be expected considering their theological education: formal participants' study of theology will likely have made them familiar with the Bible as a source of theology. They therefore sought theological meaning in the text as well as meaning relating to life and behaviour. This insight reflects Powell's findings that clergy (i.e., the theologically educated) are *less* likely to relate the text to themselves and focus on the text's *meaning* whereas laity are *more* inclined to orient meaning towards themselves in terms of the text's *effect*.<sup>231</sup> Accordingly, that formal participants conceive of meaning more broadly might also be bolstered by the fact that many formal participants were actively involved in a form of ministry and therefore had responsibility in the areas of preaching and teaching. This means that many formal participants would have been in the habit of analysing a text to present several points of meaning to a congregation or audience. Indeed, some formal participants explicitly mentioned their response to the text in terms of how they would preach it.

The doctrine of Scripture's secondary role in determining the engagement practices of participants reflects the findings above regarding formal participants' canonical tendencies. Bible related engagement practices accounted for 30% of formal participants overall engagement practices, with informal participants behind at 24%. The disparity here can be accounted for by formal participants' preference for intrabiblical referencing and canonically contextualising, practices they employed because of belief in the Bible's unity.

In sum, formal participants were more in tune with the conception of the Bible as a source of theology and informal participants were more in tune with conception of the Bible as a guide for life and behaviour and as such were the only ones to explicitly speak of the Bible this way. Of

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<sup>231</sup> Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star*, 54.

course, formal participants demonstrated their belief in the Bible as a guide for life and behaviour in their discussion of applications, but this was implied rather than explicit. The doctrine of Scripture lens therefore functioned slightly differently for informal and formal participants in their respective leanings as to the ultimate meaning of the text. Formal participants also evidenced a more dominant doctrine of Scripture lens in relation to the practices that they employed when engaging with the text.

#### 8: 5.2. Doctrine of God Lens

In terms of beliefs about God, informal and formal participants made a fairly equal number of assertions about God's character. Some aspects of God's character were asserted more by a particular category, depicted in Table 3 below. Amongst informal participants, Gods' goodness and power were the two attributes mentioned most frequently, accounting for 14% each of all assertions made about God. In contrast, God's power accounted for only 4% of formal participant's assertions about God, and God's goodness only 6%. Instead, formal participants showed a strong preference to speak of God as loving, accounting for 21% of their assertions about God compared to 10% of informal participants. Similarly formal participants also spoke more of God being just (6% compared to informal 0%) and sovereign (8% compared to inform 4%).

These differences might tentatively suggest a potential variance in approaches to talking about God – informal language is reminiscent of the God of classical theism, whereas formal language is more typically biblical and specific to the Christian God. Additionally, only formal participants referenced the Trinity. It has also been noted that two formal participants, Sam and Winston (WO), evidenced a Christocentric doctrine of God (6:2.4.1). Whilst two participants having a Christocentric doctrine of God can't be considered representative of their category, formal participants did demonstrate higher levels of christocentrism overall, which indicates something of a trend. Taken together, these insights imply that formal participants appeared to be working with a slightly more complex and nuanced doctrine of God.

However, both formal and informal groups contained at least one participant who demonstrated evidence of incorporating judgement as part of their core comfortable conception of God.

Moreover, Jane, an informal participant, expressed an openness to the idea that God can cause the seemingly negative. This suggests that whilst overall formal participants might have a more complex and biblical conception of God, theological education is not a dominant factor in determining core comfortable, periphery uncomfortable and extrinsic intolerable layers of one's doctrine of God. Both formal and informal participants both included and excluded judgement as part of their core comfortable conception of God.

Section 6:2.6 described the close relationship between the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Scripture and how the latter is looked at through the lens of the former to conceive of the Bible's function and content. It was noted how the Bible is a 'text construed as a certain kind of whole' and this can take the form of a unified meta-narrative of 'a single, organic history of salvation', as

was the case for informal participant, Gina (St.H's). Despite previously having illustrated this point with an example from an informal participant, it was actually formal participants who both demonstrated more *defined* theological meta-narratives that were closely tied to their conception of God, as well as more instances of *employing* these meta-narratives in relation to the text. Like Gina, salvation formed a part of their meta-narratives (9% of the total formal theological assertions made, compared to 2% from informal participants) as well as conceptions of the overarching trajectory of the Bible (9% compared to 1%). Winston (WO) provides a helpful example in relation to the Psalm:

Don't you think that revelation is progressive in that God also worked with these people with revelation levels that were different in kind of getting to where we are today and understanding Christ, his character, his nature and just his fullness, the whole Godhead embodied in Christ himself. But in the olden days, in the previous dispensations, wars were part of their culture, were part of their tradition, were part of their lifestyle and so for them to see the victor of God they had to see their God defeating their enemy physically. They also had to see God giving them or granting them the victory in massacre, in so doing they saw the hand of God, purely his arm at work.

This higher tendency to employ meta-narratives is reflected in higher instances of formal participants' practicing contextualisation. This is because first, the more defined meta-narratives offered by formal participants suggest that they were practiced at integrating theological concepts

into a unified whole, which they then sought to do in relation to the character of God through contextualising. Second, a meta-narrative actually *requires* contextualisation for proper understanding by relating the part to the whole. It was not just that participants needed to contextualise the depiction of God in the text with their own understanding of God, but that participants were attempting to contextualise the depiction of God in the text with the overarching depiction of God in the Bible. As such, for formal participants, reading the text through their doctrine of God lens was more likely to take the form of contextualisation than tension because their doctrine of God was intertwined with their theological meta-narratives.

In sum, formal participants' doctrine of God appeared to be more complex and integrated with theological meta-narratives relating to salvation and a developmental understanding of the biblical narrative. This was connected to higher instances of contextualisation meaning that, generally speaking, for formal participants the role of the doctrine of God lens was predominantly to provide a background *within which* to understand the text, rather than informal participants' doctrine of God lens which provided a background *against which* to understand the text.

### 8: 5.3. Genre Lens

Both informal and formal participants were equally balanced in their genre reflections and authorial reflections. Both categories practiced extrapolating and deductive reasoning by utilising the genre of the text as a starting point from which to discern the reality of the events within the text. Formal participants did this more for Genesis most likely because their assessment of the genre of the text related to other ANE narratives, which only one informal participant mentioned, unconnected to genre.



Formal participants also demonstrated more differentiation across the three genres in their engagement practices. Of all the engagement practices employed by formal participants, a third only occurred in discussion of one of the texts, compared to a fifth of informal participants. This higher proportion suggests that the hermeneutical activity of formal participants was more closely related to genre; the employment of an engagement practice was specifically related to the genre of the text. Thus, genre lens was more dominant in the process of interpretation for formal than it was for informal participants.

When it came to reflections on the author, the types of reflections the two categories made differed, with formal participants tending to speak of the author's intention and informal participants tending to reflect on the author's process or thinking. This is exemplified by contrasting Christopher's and Jake's reflections in relation to Paul and Ephesians:

I also think ... Paul's doing something here in a whole letter so you know as quickly as I can, Ephesians 1:10 – God is bringing everything back together including reuniting heaven and earth, in Ephesians 2:10 we realise he's done with Jew and Gentile, in Ephesians 3:10 the church is the manifestation of this incredible diversity brought back together. So, then Paul turns to talk about household codes, and I think he chose a line very Judaic in his thinking here which is a line against chaos right? If the church is to evidence the sense of God's working, it can't, in some sense he's instructing them to live in certain forms of togetherness and unity, so we can't have husbands and wives killing each other, we can't have disobedient kids, we can't have slaves fighting... I think you're seeing Paul

trying to say, that you know, he thinks temporally about the world that we're in right now...(Christopher, TO)

I mean nobody is going to want to defend slavery but what Paul does is to accept it as part of the scene and try and make the best of it that he can so he says to slaves, 'when you're serving your master, do it willingly and not grudgingly' and he says 'masters don't threaten them and don't beat them unnecessarily' (Jake, St.H's)

The slight nuance between these authorial reflections is significant. Formal participants were much more confident in proffering an intended purpose and their focus on authorial intention also connected with a higher focus on the text's meaning, as this was often discerned in terms of what the author was trying to communicate through their text. In contrast, informal participants' focus on the author's worldview and thinking/process in writing suggests more of a tentative approach to making overall claims about intention or purpose. Informal participants' reflections focused on the composition process and societal or cultural factors influencing the author, which are ancillary to, but not the same as, considerations of the author's intention or purpose.

With regards to the function of the genre lens in identifying how the text's meaning as divine communication is manifested, both informal and formal participants were aligned, with the exception of Nick (WO) and the Psalm. Whereas for most participants the poetry genre of the text qualified how the text was understood as the 'Word of God', for Nick the text as the 'Word of God' qualified how the text should be understood as 'poetry'. As this was only one participant, it cannot

be indicative of a formal tendency, but it is worth noting that the exception came from a formal participant.

In sum, formal participants tended to view the text through the lens of genre slightly more than informal participants on account of their genre-based hermeneutical activity, and the genre lens itself was slightly more focused in relation to the author's intention, most likely as a result of better knowledge. However, no significant difference was identified in the role of the genre lens determining how the text functions as the 'Word of God' and divine communication.

#### 8: 5.4. Context Lens

Naturally, as a result of their difference in theological education, the participants were working from different contextual standpoints. This was evident when it came to their respective Christian context, specifically their Christian knowledge.

Formal participants demonstrated much more thorough historical knowledge particularly in relation to slavery, and ANE flood accounts. They also demonstrated more precise biblical knowledge in making increased intrabiblical references, compared to only a couple from informal participants. Informal participant's knowledge of the Bible appeared to be much vaguer with informal participants making more references to general 'biblical tendencies' compared to only a couple such references from formal participants. Additionally, formal participants were the only ones to reference Christian knowledge in the form of tradition. These references however, demonstrated both a respect and disregard for classical tradition and therefore in-keeping with overall findings that formal participants demonstrated stronger views on both ends of the spectrum. In terms of Christian knowledge from contemporary sources, both informal and formal

participants called upon 'external input' in the form of teaching, preaching, reading or scholarship to a similar extent.

In relation to corporate Christian experience, both informal and formal participants made a similar number of reflections about the contemporary church's response to the text. However, informal participants made over double the number of references to 'Christian tendencies' than formal participants, drawing upon perceived common Christian narratives or experience as a framework in which to explore the text. For example, Frank (St.J's) joked how the church would respond if someone prayed the Psalm at the front: 'If someone got up this Sunday and preached, and prayed 9 to 25, [our vicar] would be up there taking them off the stage wouldn't he? Probably.' Frank recognises in this jovial comment that accusatory language towards God is not something commonly found in church.

This higher tendency for informal participants to draw upon general Christian experience is reflected in their drawing upon personal experience. Informal participants demonstrated a much stronger preference for personal engagement practices, accounting for 12% of their engagement compared to 6% for educated participants, double the amount. These personal practices included relating the text to their personal experience of the Christian faith, sharing their personal experience of text application and previous encounters with the text, as well as practicing empathy in relation to the text. In particular, references to previous encounters with the text occurred 16 times amongst informal participants and not at all amongst formal participants. This suggests that theological education could contribute to a less personal approach to Bible reading. Informal participants were much more open in bringing themselves and their history to the text, and frequently shared more personal anecdotes and stories, as well as their feelings about the text in general, but formal participants did not do this.

The only two experience-related engagement practices that formal participants exhibited more than informal participants were reflections on their identity and education. The latter is perhaps unsurprising as GLC participants were undertaking their focus group at their theological institution and during term time, so references to their learning and environment would be expected. For example, Johnny referenced a point about Genesis being 'in our church history paper'.

Additionally, all the participants were aware that the research involved a comparative factor in relation to education which could also explain an increase in formal references to this.

What all this suggests is that not only is informal participants' context lens more dominant in their reading of the text, but that formal participants are also more acutely aware that they are reading through such a lens, particularly in relation to their personal identity. Informal participants also had moments of awareness, but formal participants showed more sustained awareness of how aspects of their personal identity inform their reading of the text. The overall outcome of a more dominant contextual lens, in combination with a preference outlined above for informal participants to view the text's meaning in terms of life guidance, was that informal participants made more specific reader-related applications from the text.

#### 8: 5.5. The Text's Lenses

Did the formal and informal participants differ in their adoption of the text's lenses and thus their receptiveness to the transforming capacity of the text?

Formal and informal participants' exploration of the text's context accounted for almost the same percentage of their overall engagement practices, 14% and 13% respectively. However, comparing some of their specific contextual engagement practices highlights areas of differentiation.

As has already been noted, in relation to the author, formal participants focused more on intention, accounting for 16% of their contextual practices, compared to 2% for informal participants. Conversely, informal participants reflected more upon the author's thinking or process, accounting for 12% of their contextual practices compared to 6% for formal participants.<sup>232</sup> Formal participants' focus on intention reflects their better contextual knowledge, as has been noted. This is also reflected in 29% of formal participant's contextual practices involving sharing historical societal and cultural information, compared to 20% for informal participants. Formal participants actually knew more about the context from which the text came. Though formal participants led in knowledge, informal participants engaged more personally with the text's context. 8% of their contextual practices were reflections on the text's recipients, compared to 2% of formal participants'. Moreover, 27% of informal participants' contextual practices were pointing out the difference between the text's culture and the reader's culture compared to 16% of formal participants. These two practices present an interesting finding regarding informal participants' adoption of the text's lenses. As was noted in 7:3, not all contextual engagement was equivalent to adopting the lenses of the text. In reflecting on the text's recipients, informal participants evidenced a stronger tendency to adopt the text's lenses by hearing it on its own terms. For example, Vanessa (St.C's) made the following point regarding Ephesians:

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<sup>232</sup> Village's horizon preference research found that higher levels of education engender more interest in the author horizon, which is reflected here in 22% of formal participants' reflections relating to the author, compared to 14% of informal participants. See: Andrew Village, 'Biblical Interpretative Horizons and Ordinary Readers: An empirical study,' *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 17 (2006): 157-76.

When we read that first paragraph when it talks about wives submitting to their husbands, in a modern reading, we read that and go, 'not sure about that, that's a little bit close to the bone', whereas we read the bit about the husbands loving the wife and we're like, 'well of course, that's a marriage is not it? That's how everyone should behave in marriage in theory.' Whereas to them, they probably would have read the first bit and been like 'well of course the wife is going to submit to the husband but oh my gosh that's how you expect a husband to behave?'

Vanessa both recognises the effect of her natural 'modern' lenses and attempts to imagine how she would respond in a different context, with the outcome that the force of the passage is entirely different; she adopts the text's lenses effectively.

It could be that informal participants were better situated to do this because of their personal approach to the text. It has already been noted how informal participants engaged with the text much more personally, and in particular, the practice of empathy was higher amongst informal participants. This personal angle likely led informal participants to engage with historical societal and cultural information from a more invested perspective – placing themselves into the shoes and world of those in the text.

However, whilst informal participants showed higher levels of lens adoption in their reflections on recipients, their higher levels of pointing out differences between the text's culture and the reader demonstrated the reverse. These types of reflections, whilst recognising the different contexts, rarely engaged to any depth with the text's context. For example, Terry's (St.H's) comment that the Ephesians text '...almost makes the male sound like a shrinking violet, doesn't it? You know,

“for this reason a man will leave his father and mother”, but it’s more common for a daughter to leave a father and mother to marry the bloke, isn’t it?’ Here Terry makes a distinction between the text and reader context but fails to adopt the lenses of the text to explore the familial dynamic on its own terms.

What does this indicate about the ability of the two categories of participant to see the text and themselves through the lens of the text and thus be open to the text’s transforming capacity?

Whilst formal participants had better knowledge and were thus better situated to engage with the text’s context, informal participants’ personal approach to the text actually gave them the edge in adopting the lenses of the text. However, such a personal approach also had the opposite effect of centring informal participants upon their own context and situation. Strangely then, informal participants were both better and worse than formal participants at adopting the lenses of the text. As such, there was no overall distinctive difference in the extent to which formal and informal participants appeared to be receptive to being authentically addressed by the text.

## 8: 6. Conclusion

To repeat the caveat I offered in the introduction, my formal participants had undertaken their theological education in a variety of contexts and for a variety of reasons. As such, any reflections this conclusion makes on the effect of theological education cannot be specifically connected to particular types of theological education. However, some insights can profitably be noted.



## 8: 6.1. Doctrine of Scripture

What difference does theological education make to an understanding of the Doctrine of Scripture?

Formal and informal participants were generally closely aligned in their beliefs about the Bible, but theological education seemed to prompt more 'extreme' views on both the liberal and conservative end of the spectrum in relation to historicity and relevancy. What this indicates overall about formal approaches to the doctrine of Scripture, is an increased confidence and certainty as to its nature. This was seen in formal participants openly disagreeing with one another, as well as more nuanced comments about the overarching narrative or trajectory of the Bible. In these types of assertions formal participants demonstrated that they knew what they believed about the Bible and were set on this.

Theological education, then, can perhaps be said to fortify theological beliefs about the Bible. How theological education does this is a matter of conjecture. It could be that students are simply taught biblical beliefs which they then accept (either unwittingly or wilfully). Conversely, it could be that students strengthen and solidify their beliefs in reaction or opposition to the biblical beliefs they are taught. In these models the theological institution is conceived of as championing a particular theological standpoint. Alternatively, it could be that the process of theological education both introduces key ideas to students but also cultivates individual exploration and thinking so that students navigate themselves to their own strength of conviction. However the process actually occurs, theological education is likely to produce Bible readers with clearer and stronger views about the nature of the Bible and how it should be read.

## 8: 6.2. Role of the Doctrine of Scripture

What difference does theological education make to the role of the doctrine of Scripture in reading and interpretation? Though theological education provided stronger convictions about Bible beliefs, this didn't mean that the doctrine of Scripture had a more prominent role for formal participants in reading and interpretation. In terms of setting the reading agenda, the doctrine of Scripture lens was similar for both categories, with slight preferences towards reading for theological insight (belief) for formal participants and reading for life guidance (behaviour) by informal participants. The doctrine of Scripture lens did however have slightly more prominence in terms of determining participants' engagement practices, with formal participants demonstrating more bible-based practices in their preference for canonical considerations.

In relation to the other active lenses and how they affect the doctrine of Scripture lens, genre had a more significant impact for formal participants in determining what type of meanings might be taken from the text. This was evidenced in Genesis being the text where theological insight was sought more than application for formal participant. The two lenses were therefore closely connected, as the doctrine of Scripture's role in setting the reading agenda was qualified by the genre and content of the text. Moreover, the doctrine of Scripture and doctrine of God also appeared to be more closely related for formal participants in their more complex doctrine of God informing their understanding of the Bible's content: a theological meta-narrative spanning an overarching trajectory of the biblical canon. It could therefore be suggested that theological education affords a more complex integration of a reader's lenses.

However, this is not accounting for the context lens, which was much less dominant for formal participants. Perhaps this is not unrelated to the close integration of the genre, doctrine of Scripture and doctrine of God lenses. Theological education, though often with a focus on

formation and reflection in some contexts, still exists within the rubrics of an academic approach. As such it promotes a more detached, critical and objective perspective, even amongst confessional theological education contexts, as these are largely subject to the requirements of secular institutions with most courses being accredited externally. If theological education therefore affords its students with better knowledge and better integration of key facets pertinent to reading a biblical text, this could be at the expense of a more invested approach. As was noted, formal participants did not evidence any higher levels of being 'addressed' by the text and being transformed as a result, indeed they fared slightly worse than informal participants on this front by failure to consider the recipients of the text.

What this means for the doctrine of Scripture, is that whilst its role as a source of theology is reinforced through theological education, conversely its role in enabling the reader to be adequately addressed from beyond themselves, is limited.

## 8: 7. Overall Conclusion

This thesis has analysed six groups' interpretation of three Bible passages that each present a challenge to the Doctrine of Scripture. My Evangelical Anglican participants' responses to these challenges revealed both their dispositional beliefs about the Bible and their interpretative habits. This thesis has identified that amongst my participants a range of Bible beliefs exist corresponding to traditional doctrine of Scripture language. However, there was an overall preference to speak of the Bible in terms of function, and a general tendency for this function of the Bible to be couched as God's resource for teaching Christians what to believe and how to live. As a result, this view of

Scripture led participants to read for the purpose of learning what the text said about what to believe and how to live. This is where the text's ultimate meaning was found.

The predominant role of the doctrine of Scripture in interpretation was thus setting the reading agenda or purpose – what the reader was reading for. In addition, the doctrine of Scripture also appeared to influence some of the interpretative practices that participants employed, and at times held sway in participant's interpretative conclusions. However, the bulk of both interpretative practices and conclusions were determined by other factors, namely the text's genre and content and the reader's pre-existing beliefs about God and personal experiences. The role of the doctrine of Scripture was therefore diverse, though its primary influence related to the reading agenda and the location of meaning.

I discussed this role in terms of a reading 'lens' because it was not the only pre-existing framework that participants read the text through. Indeed, the other prominent lenses, which for my participants were the doctrine of God, their context and the text's genre, had an impact upon both the overall conception and function of the doctrine of Scripture, as well as the interpretative practices and conclusions that participants employed and resolved, mentioned above. The doctrine of Scripture's primary role then, cannot be isolated from other aspects of a reader's background, beliefs, knowledge and experience. It is not the case that the doctrine of Scripture is the only aspect determining the purpose of Bible reading. Rather, the doctrine of Scripture's role in determining the reading agenda is filtered through and brought into connection with specific aspects related to the reader (doctrine of God and context).

This thesis identified one implication of reading through these lenses with the particular agenda of learning, was a diminishing of the text's capacity to transform. Participants wanted the Bible to be relevant to their lives and so dove in to interpretation with fixed lenses that led to conclusions that

fit within their pre-existing matrices of belief. By contrast, hermeneutical theory suggests that in order for the text to authentically communicate, one must actually step back rather than move closer, in adopting the text's lenses prior to the reader's own.<sup>233</sup>

Finally, this thesis then considered these findings in relation to the two categories of informal and of formal participants. It concluded that theological education led to stronger beliefs about the nature of the Bible on both ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum, as well as a marginal preference for the reading agenda to be related to learning theological beliefs over behaviour.

#### 8: 7.1. Implications of Findings

The above overview of this thesis's key findings highlights several important implications about what this research has contributed to our understanding of the role of the doctrine of Scripture in interpretation.

First, issues in Bible interpretation are likely to be a result of conceptions of the Bible, rather than hermeneutical practices. This is because hermeneutical activity is ultimately oriented around one's reading agenda, and this is the result of beliefs about the nature of the Bible. In other words, particular conceptions of the Bible appear to result in particular reading agendas which result in particular hermeneutical approaches.

My participants' view of the Bible's function as God's teaching resource led them to read for the purpose of learning, and this learning was construed as right belief and right behaviour. However, different conceptions of the Bible's function would most likely lead to different reading agendas. If the text was viewed as a medium of God's presence, for example, the purpose of reading would

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<sup>233</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 34-6.

not be related to learning but rather to experience or transformation, discussed in 2:7.5. This is the view of Thiselton who suggests:

The question “what can I learn from this?” is not always the right one to ask. Some parts of Scripture serve not to speak about joy, but to give joy; some serve not to instruct us about reconciliation but to reconcile us. The Bible not only tells us about Christ, but also brings Christ to us.<sup>234</sup>

If my participants had a broader conception of Scripture related to the text’s transformation, their reading agenda would encompass both learning and experiencing. The role of the doctrine of Scripture is still the same, it still sets the reading agenda, but that agenda will vary according to the view of Scripture held in view.

As a result of a different reading agenda, the hermeneutical approach employed will differ. For example, the belief in the Bible’s function as God’s resource and thus the participants’ goal of learning right belief and behaviour oriented their reading towards their own context and themselves rather than the text’s context. This instinct to apply the text meant that, on the whole, my participants did not adopt the text’s lenses and were not authentically addressed by the text. A different conception of the Bible and thus agenda for reading would have an impact upon the reader’s instinct to properly engage with the text’s context, or text’s lenses. One implication of my research is therefore that interpretation of the Bible should not be considered the concern of the field of hermeneutics alone, but actually that of systematic theology, in particular the doctrine of Scripture.

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<sup>234</sup> Thiselton, ‘Understanding God’s Word Today,’ 105.

Second, the importance of one's conception of the Bible, needs to be considered in light of the doctrine of Scripture's connection to the doctrine of God, genre and context. In particular, the doctrine of God and the reader's context and experience proved to be key factors that shaped views of the Bible. This is where individual nuance to the doctrine of Scripture is to be found. The doctrine of Scripture from a dispositional perspective is personal and construed differently according to different experiences and understandings of the character and purposes of God, as well as Christian context and tradition. If conceptions of Scripture are key to hermeneutical activity as I propose they are, then how these conceptions of Scripture are shaped by a reader's understanding and personal experience of God and the Bible is significant.

Third, theological education had a disparate effect upon conceptions of Scripture. As the first two points have identified, conceptions of the Bible are key to hermeneutical activity in establishing the reading agenda. Theological education certainly appears to be effective at shaping understandings of Scripture, but with a variety of results, as my theologically educated participants evidenced views on the doctrine of Scripture from both ends of the liberal and conservative spectrum. If improvements or reform of interpretation start with conceptions of Scripture, then education can be a driving force for refining and shaping such conceptions. But how education works exactly is an area for further research, which I shall discuss next.

## 8: 7.2. Limitations of the Research and Areas for New Research

There are many avenues for further exploration as a result of the findings of my research but also because of its limitations.

As was just noted, one of the limitations of my research was not being able to specify why theological education appears to result in stronger biblical beliefs at both ends of the liberal-

conservative spectrum. A further avenue of research would be to explore in more detail how this occurs – is the resulting range due to differing theological contexts, teaching or individual factors? Moreover, this research is both too narrow and too broad in focusing upon Evangelical Anglicans. Whilst the denominational perspective is insightful for that particular group of Bible readers, my research would benefit from further exploration of other denominations to understand to what extent the dynamics witnessed are evidenced across other Christian groups. On the other hand, Evangelical Anglicans encompass a broad variety of views, and a focus upon either one of these traditions (non-Anglican Evangelicals or non-Evangelical Anglicans) might have produced more monolithic results.

Connected to this, with regards to the role of the doctrine of Scripture, further research into different conceptions of Scripture and the reading agendas they produce would add further insight into the role of the doctrine of Scripture and pave the way for constructive suggestions as to ‘best practice’ or rather ‘best conceptions’ of the Bible, for optimum biblical engagement.

### 8: 7.3. How to Conceive of Scripture

This research has identified what role Evangelicals’ beliefs about the Bible play in their reading and interpreting of Scripture. Such an insight is useful to anyone seeking to understand more about the dynamics of Bible reading, whether from an academic or ecclesial perspective.

This thesis has not sought to assess my participants’ conception of Scripture and how this functions in interpretation, other than to note that according to hermeneutical theory, a conception of the Bible as God’s teaching resource can lead to a limited engagement with the reality of the text. In order to evaluate what has been outlined here, one has to return to systematics and ask what the Bible is, how it should function and thus what the goal of bible



reading *should* be. This is the subject of numerous systematic treatise and whilst I have not ventured to contribute a proposal in this thesis, I'll finish with a tentative suggestion implied from its findings.

What the Bible is, how it functions and what the goal of reading is, should always be considered provisional and subject to the transformation of the text. Any conception of Scripture that is too rigid, narrow or fixed has already decided in advance what the text is capable of saying and doing. But the text can say and do many things, it tells us so: 'All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.'<sup>235</sup> Whilst accounts of the doctrine of Scripture have typically been based on the first part of this verse, deliberating over the translation of 'inspired' and what this means and how this works, it might be better to base accounts of the doctrine of Scripture on the second half. The Bible has a variety of functions and thus can be conceived in a variety of ways with the ultimate goal of equipping those who belong to God. Perhaps the best conception of Scripture is one that, rather than limit such variety, recognises the limits of one's conception and thus lets the text determine how it will equip, rather than deciding for oneself in advance. Reading through the lens of *this* doctrine of Scripture broadens the reading agenda and makes the reader vulnerable to the power of the text, so that it can do all that it is capable of doing as the inspired, authoritative, sufficient, clear and consistent Word of God.

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<sup>235</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16, NRSV



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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Text Handouts

### Genesis 7

**7** Then the Lord said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. **2** Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; **3** and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. **4** For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.” **5** And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him.

**6** Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth. **7** And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood. **8** Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, **9** two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah. **10** And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.

**11** In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. **12** The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. **13** On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark, **14** they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. **15** They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. **16** And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the Lord shut him in.

**17** The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. **18** The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. **19** The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; **20** the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. **21** And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; **22** everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. **23** He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark. **24** And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1.) What do you think is interesting/of note in this text?
- 2.) What concerns, or questions do you have about this text?
- 3.) Do you think this text is historically accurate?

## Psalm 44

To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Maskil.

<sup>1</sup>We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us,  
what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old:  
<sup>2</sup>you with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted  
you afflicted the peoples, but them you set free;  
<sup>3</sup>for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory;  
but your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance,  
for you delighted in them.  
<sup>4</sup>You are my King and my God; you command<sup>[a]</sup> victories for Jacob.  
<sup>5</sup>Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down our assailants.  
<sup>6</sup>For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.  
<sup>7</sup>But you have saved us from our foes, and have put to confusion those who hate us.  
<sup>8</sup>In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever.

*Selah*

<sup>9</sup>Yet you have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies.  
<sup>10</sup>You made us turn back from the foe, and our enemies have gotten spoil.  
<sup>11</sup>You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations.  
<sup>12</sup>You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.  
<sup>13</sup>You have made us the taunt of our neighbours, the derision and scorn of those around us.  
<sup>14</sup>You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.  
<sup>15</sup>All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face  
<sup>16</sup>at the words of the taunters and revilers, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.  
<sup>17</sup>All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant.  
<sup>18</sup>Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way,  
<sup>19</sup>yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness.  
<sup>20</sup>If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread out our hands to a strange god,  
<sup>21</sup>would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart.  
<sup>22</sup>Because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.  
<sup>23</sup>Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!  
<sup>24</sup>Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?  
<sup>25</sup>For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.  
<sup>26</sup>Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1.) What do you think is interesting/of note in this text?
- 2.) What concerns, or questions do you have about this text?
- 3.) Does this text provides an accurate depiction of God?

## Ephesians 5:21 – 6:9

<sup>21</sup>Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. <sup>22</sup>Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. <sup>24</sup>Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. <sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup>in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, <sup>27</sup>so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup>In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup>For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, <sup>30</sup>because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup>“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” <sup>32</sup>This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup>Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

**6** Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. <sup>2</sup>“Honour your father and mother”—this is the first commandment with a promise: <sup>3</sup>“so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” <sup>4</sup>And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

<sup>5</sup>Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; <sup>6</sup>not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. <sup>7</sup>Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, <sup>8</sup>knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

<sup>9</sup>And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1.) What do you think is interesting/of note in this text?
- 2.) What concerns, or questions do you have about this text?
- 3.) Do you think this text has any relevance for life today?

## Appendix 2. Recruitment Advertisement

A version of the following email will be sent to participating organisations, with the 'Participant Information Sheet' attached.

### **Churches:**

My name is Anna Hutchinson and I am a postgraduate researcher at the University of Birmingham, studying for a PhD in Theology and Religion. I am getting in touch to ask if you would consider providing participants from your church to be involved in my research fieldwork.

This research investigates how Evangelical Christians in the Church of England read and interpret the bible, and the extent to which this is driven by an understanding of the doctrine of Scripture. This research seeks to gain an accurate picture of the extent to which church members are familiar with the doctrine of Scripture and what this means for the way they read the Bible. My hope is that this research will be interesting and useful to the Church's leadership in providing an insight into the Bible practices of their congregants.

### Your Involvement

I am looking for Anglican Evangelical Churches to partner with me in this research and provide participants for a focus group bible study. I will need between 5-10 members of your congregation of a mix of ages and genders, but none of whom have received any type of formal theological training. These participants will need to be voluntary and can be gathered according to your preferred method, either through a general advertisement I will provide asking for volunteers to contact myself, or by individually inviting participants you think will be willing and able to participate and fit the criteria.

These participants will need to meet once, for two hours in a convenient location for all, which may require the use of a room owned by your Church. The time and location of such will be arranged at the Church's convenience. Participants will be provided with refreshments for the duration of the focus group. As volunteers, participants are not required or expected to answer any questions they don't wish to. They may withdraw at any time, though any data provided subsequent to signing a consent form (at the start of the group) up until the point of withdrawal will be retained.

All information regarding the church and participants will be kept confidential in the research process and will be anonymous in the thesis write-up and other academic publications that draw upon the data gathered. A summary of the findings can be made available to anyone involved should they request it.

### Research Plan

My plan is to conduct two different categories of focus groups to research a cross-section of approaches and beliefs: Evangelical Anglicans and theologically educated Evangelical Anglicans. These focus groups will consist of between 5 and 10 participants who will meet for two hours to read and discuss three different unseen Bible passages (30 minutes per text) and fill out a

questionnaire (between 15 and 30 minutes). The discussions will be recorded and moderated by myself.

A questionnaire will supplement the data gathered from the focus group discussions, solidifying what participants understand by the doctrine of Scripture, and their opinions on the passages. Assistance with any reading or writing required can be provided for whatever reason should participants wish it.

All data will be stored securely and only accessible to myself. Physical surveys and notes will be typed up and the originals destroyed, and all electronic information will be kept on a password protected laptop.

If you would like to be involved or will consider this research project with other members of your leadership, please do let me know. If you have any further questions, clarifications or comments then please don't hesitate to be in touch.

### **Theology Centres**

My name is Anna Hutchinson and I am a postgraduate researcher at the University of Birmingham, studying for a PhD in Theology and Religion. I am getting in touch to ask if you would consider providing participants from your institution to be involved in my research fieldwork.

This research investigates how Evangelical Christians in the Church of England read and interpret the bible, and the extent to which this is driven by an understanding of the doctrine of Scripture. This research is not pejorative and is not seeking to assess or pass comment on the quality of your institution's teaching. It is intended to gain a sense of how much theological education affects Christians' attitude towards the Bible. My hope is that this will be interesting and useful to the leadership and staff of your institution, providing insight into the effects of the education received by your students.

### **Your Involvement**

I am looking for institutions that teach Theology to partner with me in this research and provide participants for a focus group bible study. I will need between 5-10 members of your college of a mix of ages and genders. Ideally these participants will be studying or will have studied at the same level. These participants will need to be voluntary and can be gathered according to your preference, either through a general advertisement I will provide asking for volunteers to contact myself, or by individually inviting participants you think will be willing and able to participate and fit the criteria. These participants will need to meet once, for around two hours in a convenient location for all, which may require the use of a room at the college. The time and location of such will be arranged at the college's convenience. Participants will be provided with refreshments for the duration of the focus group. As volunteers, participants are not required or expected to answer any questions they don't wish to. They may withdraw at any time, though any data provided subsequent to signing a consent form (at the start of the group) up until the point of withdrawal will be retained.

All information regarding the institution and participants will be kept confidential in the research process and will be anonymous in the thesis write-up and other academic publications that draw



upon the data gathered. A summary of the findings can be provided to anyone involved should they request it.

### Research Plan

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All data will be stored securely and only accessible to myself. Physical surveys and notes will be typed up and the originals destroyed, and all electronic information will be kept on a password protected laptop.

If you would like to be involved or will consider this research project with other members of your leadership, please do let me know. If you have any further questions, clarifications or comments then please don't hesitate to be in touch.

## Appendix 3. Participant Information Sheet

### Understanding, Reading and Interpreting the Bible

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study conducted by myself, a post-graduate researcher in the department of Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham. Joining the study is entirely up to you, and this information sheet provides you with an overview of why the research is being done and what it would involve so that you can make an informed choice about your participation.

If you have any further questions, or need clarification on any part of the research, my contact information is provided at the bottom of this sheet in order for you to get in touch.

#### 1.) Area of Research

The aim of my research is to find out how individuals understand, read and interpret the Bible and the factors that influence the way they do this. In particular, I am interested in the effect that theological education has on the way individuals approach and read the Bible.

The Bible is a central aspect of the Christian faith and determines many Christians' choices about what to believe and how to live, yet there continues to be persistent disagreement within Christianity about how to read the Bible and what it means for faith and life today.

By conducting this research, I will help shed light on why such different interpretations occur and provide insight into how Bible understanding and reading might be better conducted.

## 2.) Research Study

In order to do this, I will be conducting numerous focus groups with different types of 'Bible readers'. You are being invited to join one of these focus groups with between 4-9 other participants to read 3 Bible passages and discuss them as a group. This will be followed by a survey which you will complete individually, your answers for which will not be shared with the group.

### 2.a.) Who is involved?

- This research study involves 2 types of participant: individuals who are Christians but not theologically educated and individuals who are Christians and theologically educated.
- The focus groups will be made up of individuals who all belong to one category, i.e. if you are a theologically educated Christian, you will be in a focus group with other theologically educated Christians.
- All participants must be over 18, literate and groups will have mixed genders and ages.
- Groups will contain between 5 and 10 participants.
- I (the researcher) will act as moderator for all focus groups, asking questions and guiding the conversation if necessary.

### 2.b.) What commitment will this involve?

- Your involvement will require a single meeting of two hours at a location and time that will be determined so as to minimise inconvenience for the group.
- This two-hour meeting will consist of 3 discussions, roughly 30 minutes long, each on a different passage from the Bible. This will be followed by a brief time to fill out an individual accompanying survey, which will take between 15 and 30 minutes.
- You do not need to have any specific knowledge in order to take part but must be willing to contribute to discussion and offer your opinions and thoughts.
- You will not be provided with, or informed of, the texts ahead of the study but will be provided with the texts and read them for the first time in the focus group with other participants.
- Refreshments and breaks will be provided.
- Your participation is completely voluntary, and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to.
- You are free to withdraw at any time prior to or during the focus group. However, upon signing the consent form to be involved (at the very start of the focus group) you agree to have whatever participation you do complete to be used in the

research study. i.e. If you leave after 30 minutes of discussion, your contributions in that 30 minutes will still be used as valid data in the research study. Should you withdraw prior to the focus group and signing the consent form, any personal information you have provided will be destroyed.

### 3.) Data Gathered

#### 3.a.) How is data gathered?

- The focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed into a script of the conversation that takes place.
- Extra details will also be noted by myself as the moderator to fill in information that the audio would not provide, such as body language, facial expression. etc.
- The surveys you fill in will also be documented to facilitate statistical analysis. These surveys ask for your level of agreement with various statements relating to the Bible and the texts you have read.

#### 3.b.) How will data be used?

- The above audio recordings and survey responses will be analysed for patterns and causal relationships. The findings will be presented in my doctorate thesis which will be submitted to the University.
- The data gathered may also be used for other academic outputs including conference and journal papers.
- All data gathered will be confidential which allows me to identify participants with their verbal contributions. In the final thesis and any related publications based on the data from these focus groups, participants will be anonymous and unable to be identified or traced from the information that is provided. This information will likely be a combination of general summaries of group discussion, specific quotes and statistics from the collated survey responses.
- All data will be stored securely and only accessible to myself. Physical surveys and notes will be typed up and the originals destroyed, and all electronic information will be kept on a password protected laptop. Parts of original data may be shared and discussed in supervision meetings.
- All participants may receive access to the summary of the study findings, which will be provided upon request.

Contact Information: Anna Hutchinson - [REDACTED]

## Appendix 4. Scholarship Overview

### Genesis

Genesis 7 was chosen for focus group participants predominantly because of the historical challenge it poses for readers. Is this an event that is meant to be understood as factual history, something that actually happened to a person called Noah and his family? Or is it intended as a type of myth or legend? For Evangelicals, the designation of the Bible as the Word of God means that it must be truthful, which for many implies historically accurate, but how is this expectation dealt with when a story presents events that do not seem materially possible? A significant factor that determines whether Noah is read historically is how one approaches the genre of Genesis. What is the purpose of this book and what is it intending to do? This is the first challenge facing any reader of Genesis 7, which I will discuss first.

As well as genre, evaluations of the historicity of Genesis 7 may be determined by approaches to extrabiblical information. This is the second challenge of reading the text which I will look at.

Archaeological, geographical and scientific evidence suggests that the account of Noah and the flood did not take place. How might evangelicals respond to these insights from such disciplines? Is the historicity of the narrative upheld, modified or abandoned?

The third challenge this text poses is found in features inherent in the narrative itself. Genesis 7 portrays a somewhat disjointed account of Noah and the flood with what appear to be contradictions and repetitions in the story. What do readers make of these textual features and how do they contribute to arguments surrounding the historicity of the events? How might 'contradictions' be understood considering the Bible is thought to not be able to contradict itself as God's Word? What does this mean about the human authorship of Genesis and the editorial history of these texts?

Whilst Psalm 44, below, is the main measure of readers response to the theological challenge of God's 'immorality', Genesis 7 also provides insight into how readers deal with a God who does not appear to act benevolently towards creation. The narrative contains God's explicit action against his own creation and the death of all humankind at God's hand – how can a God of love cause such a thing to happen? Is this, aside from extrabiblical scientific evidence, grounds upon which the story is designated as myth or legend? Do readers attempt to absolve God, and if so, how do they do this?

Finally, as will be the case with all the focus group passages, a challenge facing Evangelicals whenever they read the Bible is how they understand the text at hand in the light of the entire biblical canon. Are other passages used to help understand and interpret the events in Genesis 7? What results does this produce?

#### 1.1. Genre

A significant factor that determines whether Noah is read historically is how one approaches the genre of Genesis. What is the purpose of this book and what is it intending to do? Answers to these questions are by no means monolithic, particularly within Evangelicalism, and are connected to broader issues relating to the authority and inspiration of Scripture.

American Catholic biblical scholar David Pleins, who overviews the interpretative history of the Noah narrative, distinguishes between what he designates as 'exact literalists' and 'loose literalists', both of which could be considered an evangelical stance.<sup>236</sup> Pleins describes 'exact literalists' as those who read Genesis as a literal historical account, ignoring any extrabiblical evidence that might suggest otherwise. On the other hand, 'loose literalists' are much more likely to incorporate extrabiblical insight into their readings so that the genre is understood as historical in a modified manner; 'The story of Noah's food will thus be thought to correlate with some ancient catastrophe that changed civilisation in some decisive way.'<sup>237</sup> Pleins argues that this method often loses sight of the actual text so that it becomes a secondary concern.<sup>238</sup> Negotiating these approaches to genre and reading, that either hold too tightly or too loosely to the text, Pleins holds up the value of 'myth' as a genre that can socially construct and provide divine foundations to political circumstances.

Thinking about the Noah account in this light locates the text's meaning not in its historical factuality, but in its ongoing use in the present. This is somewhat similar to Rabbinic and Patristic readings of the text, that can be quite creative in their understanding of the text's meaning for the present. For example, Jerome reads the dimensions of the ark typologically (300x50x30 cubits) seeing penance foreshadowed in the number 50 because of Psalm 50, the age of Jesus at baptism in the number 30, and 300 as the sign T, which symbolises the crucifixion.<sup>239</sup> This is not to say that such interpretations meant the text was not understood to be historical, but rather that meaning was continually readdressed in light of the present and the events of Christ. Whilst Evangelicals typically seek modern application from their readings of Scripture which often leads to Christological interpretations, their understanding of the Bible as the Word of God limits the extent to which they would be comfortable 'overwriting' meaning found in the author's intention, to its continuing mythical use.

A much more typically Evangelical response to the problem of genre comes from Evangelical Calvinist and academic Vern S. Poythress, who determines genre according to that which the text claims for itself. Seeing Genesis as prose narrative covering generations and descendants,<sup>240</sup> Poythress turns to the issue of whether the text can be considered fiction or nonfiction and concludes that on its own terms,

Genesis belongs to the same broad genre of narrative prose as does 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. Since there is no literary signal to tell us that it is fiction, and since, indeed, it belongs to a continual temporal development leading from creation to the exile, we conclude that it is nonfiction.<sup>241</sup>

For some adherents to the infallibility of Scripture therefore, the text's self-claim to be nonfiction must be upheld as true considering that Genesis is the 'Word of God' and therefore cannot be

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<sup>236</sup> David Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened: classic and contemporary readings of Noah's flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17, Oxford Scholarship Online.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*, 18-19.

<sup>239</sup> Andrew Louth, ed. *Genesis 1-11* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), 130-31, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>240</sup> Vern Poythress, 'Dealing with the Genre of Genesis and its Opening Chapters,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 2 (2016): 224.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid*, 228.

deceitful. It is also typically Evangelical to let Scripture determine how Scripture is understood, which can also be seen in John Stott's approach to the author of Ephesians (3.4 below). As the Bible is authoritative, its self-claims must be taken seriously. Whilst Genesis does not explicitly claim to be nonfiction, according to Poythress, there is no evidence to suggest otherwise, so it must be understood as nonfiction. However, this does lead to the further question whether the genre of nonfiction necessarily equates to accounts that are historically accurate?

Methodist biblical scholar Lloyd R. Bailey focuses on this issue with regards to chapter 1-11 of Genesis, the 'primeval narrative'. This narrative is segmented from the following chapters in Genesis on various counts: first, the literature shares content and has parallels with material from across the Ancient Near East whereas the accounts of the Patriarchs are unique to the Israelites.<sup>242</sup> Second, from chapter 12 forwards, Genesis has a narrative form, whereas chapters 1-11 consist of a genealogy into which narrative material is inserted.<sup>243</sup> Third, the world of the primeval narrative is alien and strange to that of the known universe. What would typically be considered miraculous is considered the norm: snakes talk, the human lifespan is excessively long, etc.<sup>244</sup> Given all this, should Genesis be considered 'history' from chapter 12 with the beginnings of the accounts of the Patriarchs? Bailey claims that whilst cuneiform texts have confirmed some of the names and practices found in the patriarchal narratives, this does not necessarily confirm the historicity of the individual narratives.<sup>245</sup> Bailey concludes that history, in the modern sense of 'objective reporting' is not an appropriate category to which Scripture, and Genesis, can readily apply;

By contrast with the modern concern for objectivity, the Bible was not concerned to distinguish "what really happened" from the impressions of the proper observer and recorder. It is overtly written from a theological point of view. Thus it speaks of God's involvement in a way that, even if it is true, could not be demonstrated to the impartial observer.<sup>246</sup>

This implies that the way in which to read Genesis is theologically, concerning oneself with the theological message of the narrative and secondarily with its historicity. This is in line with Protestant liberal Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann's approach who claims that the text should be read not as history or myth but as the proclamation of how God restores the fractured world; 'This story is not concerned with historical data but with the strange things that happen in the heart of God that decisively affect God's creation'.<sup>247</sup> This distinction however, between history and theology, is warned against by Poythress who claims that to read the Bible with a fundamental belief in the sovereignty of God over history is to expect the theological, historical and literary to be integrated and that the presence of one does not outweigh the others.<sup>248</sup> How focus group readers will approach the book of Genesis should differ across both categories with various of these scholarly responses reflected in different groups. I anticipate that amongst

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<sup>242</sup> Lloyd Bailey, *Noah: the person and the story in history and tradition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 118.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

<sup>247</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 74.

<sup>248</sup> Poythress, 'Dealing with the Genre of Genesis,' 228.

informal readers there may be more individuals who simply assume the historicity of the account due to the fact that it is in the Bible and the Bible is God's Word. Amongst the formal readers who are likely to be more familiar with discussions of genre, the historicity of the account may be up for debate; perhaps more of a theological reading could be expected here. Whether, and to what extent, readers explicitly or implicitly link their reading method of the Genesis text with their opinions regarding the Bible as a whole will be something to make note of. Will constraints regarding beliefs about the nature of the Bible force a reading that is predominantly historical, theological, literary or a combination of these?

## 1.2. Extrabiblical Knowledge

As well as genre, evaluations of the historicity of Genesis 7 may be determined by approaches to extrabiblical information. This is the second challenge of reading the text which I will look at. Archaeological, geographical and scientific evidence suggests that the account of Noah and the flood did not take place. How might evangelicals respond to these insights from such disciplines? Is the historicity of the narrative upheld, modified or abandoned?

Evangelical conservative writer Paul Seely puts it, 'not only is there no evidence of a flood that covered the Near East, there is archaeological evidence that no flood covered the Near West or even all of Mesopotamia between 5000 and 2300 B.C.'<sup>249</sup> How this insight from the scientific disciplines is handled by commentators who uphold the inspiration of Scripture takes various forms. Geology Professor and Evangelical Reformed Calvinist Davis Young, suggests 5 approaches Christians typically take when dealing with extrabiblical knowledge: 1) Scientific evidence is ignored as it contradicts Scripture. 2) Miracles are appealed to in order to absolve contradictions between the text and extrabiblical evidence. 3) The validity of extrabiblical knowledge is discredited. 4) Extrabiblical evidence is accepted and proved consistent with the Bible. 5) No contradictions are allowed to exist between science and the Bible and therefore both need to be revisited, reassessed and adjusted to be in accord with one another.<sup>250</sup>

One example of such harmonisation between scientific findings and the biblical text with regards to the Noah account specifically, is those that argue the flood was actually local and not universal. Seely designates this strand of thinking as 'concordism' and the alternative, belief in a universal flood, as 'creation science.' 'Concordists' who claim the flood was local, posit that the universalist words in the text such as 'all' and 'earth' can be interpreted as 'some' and 'a particular area.' This interpretative line is canonically based, on the grounds that the same phrase is used in 2 Samuel 18:8 and Daniel 6:25 to refer to situations that did relate to the whole universe.<sup>251</sup> By claiming that the flood was local on this basis, the scientific evidence and the biblical text can be upheld. On the other hand, 'creation scientists' take the text at its word and offer various interpretations of the scientific data so that it will fit with the text. In general, it is more extreme conservative evangelicals who would opt for this latter approach, such as Presbyterian academic Richard Belcher who affirms the 'global flood' in his evangelical commentary.<sup>252</sup> It is typically more liberal evangelicals who opt for reinterpretation of the text rather than the scientific evidence.

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<sup>249</sup> Paul Seely, 'Noah's Flood: It's date, extent, and divine accommodation,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 299-300.

<sup>250</sup> Terrence Fretheim, 'The God for the Flood Story and Natural Disasters,' *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2008): 29.

<sup>251</sup> Seely, 'Noah's Flood,' 294.

<sup>252</sup> Richard Belcher, *Genesis: the beginning of God's plan of salvation* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012), 96.

Seely's solution to avoiding the trap of either unjustly reinterpreting the biblical text or the scientific evidence, is accommodation. This is the idea that the flood was universal according to the prevailing notions of the time. He writes,

It is thus perfectly in accord with an orthodox view of inspiration to recognize that the Flood account encompasses an accommodation to ancient cosmology. Yet that cosmology lacks any real existence, and therefore the literal history of a cosmic Flood that is dependent upon it is falsified.<sup>253</sup>

This view upholds that the Bible is God's Word but that it is also temporally and culturally located and therefore does not go beyond the bounds of the commonly accepted notions of the time. Another source of extrabiblical knowledge that sheds light on the Noah narrative is the other ancient flood accounts from the Ancient Near East (ANE). The four major texts that exist are the Sumerian account of the deluge (the story of Ziusudra) which is the oldest, the Akkadian text of the Gilgamesh Epic, the Atrahasis Epic upon which the Gilgamesh Epic is dependent and the account of Berossus.<sup>254</sup> The existence of these narratives that all speak of a significant flood attests to a common religious tradition of flood accounts from which the Genesis narrative derives its existence. For many scholars, including Brueggemann, the way in which this story has been adapted in the Genesis accounts helps locate the theological significance of the narrative; 'our exposition will indicate that the theological intent of the story as shaped in Israel has significantly altered it from the purposes of earlier traditions.'<sup>255</sup> This is expanded on below in 1.4. It is unlikely that focus group participants will have detailed knowledge of the archaeology or literary history related to the text. Common knowledge, however, dictates that many aspects of the narrative are scientifically 'impossible'. How formal or informal participants might negotiate between what common sense suggests and what the text claims to be true, will be one of the key measures of this reading in focus groups.

### 1.3. Repetition and Contradiction

The third challenge this text poses is found in features inherent in the narrative itself. Genesis 7 portrays a somewhat disjointed account of Noah and the flood with what appear to be contradictions and repetitions in the story. What do readers make of these textual features and how do they contribute to arguments surrounding the historicity of the events? How might 'contradictions' be understood considering the Bible is thought to not be able to contradict itself as God's Word? What does this mean about the human authorship of Genesis and the editorial history of these texts?

Many scholars make sense of this phenomenon by recognising two sources within the Noah text that have been edited together, designated 'J' and 'P' referring to the hypothesised Yahwist and Priestly sources respectively. J is considered the earliest source within the Pentateuch, and P as deriving from the time of the established Priesthood (both pre and post-exilic dates have been suggested). These two sources are put forward as an explanation for many of the repetitions and

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<sup>253</sup> Seely, 'Noah's Flood,' 311.

<sup>254</sup> Bailey, *Noah*, 11-13.

<sup>255</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 73.



contradictions that appear in the Noah narrative: the use of different names for God (7:1/7:9), the two instructions regarding animals (7:2/7:8), the double entry into the ark (7:7/7:13), the two different lengths of the rain/flood (7:4/7:24). etc.

Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann notes the thematic differences between J and P in the way in which they describe the flood and its effects.<sup>256</sup> P language is emotive and dramatic with multiple repetitions, placing 'emphasis on the majesty of God's judgement. The pervading sense is not one of horror but of awe.'<sup>257</sup> In contrast, the J source describes the flood as a natural event in 7:12; 'The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.' J places emphasis on the destruction of humanity, using the intense phrase 'blotted out' in 7:23 as opposed to P's emphasis on the majesty of God who destroys.

Brueggemann too, confidently upholds the multiple source theory for Noah, claiming that it is 'beyond dispute that this text conflates two strands of tradition'<sup>258</sup> but is clear to qualify that this should not detract from encountering the text as a whole. What can be gained from reading it as a unit, which was clearly intended by the redactor, should not be overlooked.

It is often a concern to protect the doctrine of Scripture that leads more conservative scholars to argue for the text being a seamless whole. Pleins however, expounds on the value of multiple sources in upholding a sacred view of Scripture. He equates belief in sources to a liberal view and belief in a seamless narrative to a fundamentalist view. Speaking of such 'liberals' he writes;

For those who find more than one flood story in the Genesis tale, these diverging stories set cheek by jowl are not simply "apparent contradictions" to be harmonized at all costs, as they are to the fundamentalist, but a sword of knowledge and the whetstone of truth that, when struck together, yield even sharper insights into the mystery of Israel's God.<sup>259</sup>

Pleins is keen to establish that the Bible's truthfulness can be found exactly where proponents of a seamless text claim it is absent – in the multiple, layering, and at times, contradictory voices of different sources. This is a really interesting way of reframing a typically evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Truth is still attributed to the text but with an appreciation that the truth of God is not necessarily easily captured and documented. Plein's view stands in direct contrast to commentators such as Belcher who reject multiple sources on the grounds of the traditional view that Moses was the author of Genesis.<sup>260</sup> To maintain that the book of Genesis is made up of sources from later than Moses' lifetime negates him as author and therefore the Priestly source must be rejected to uphold Mosaic authorship.

One of the most comprehensive defences of the Noah narrative being a seamless whole was put forward by Evangelical biblical scholar Gordon Wenham who sees a chiastic structure in the entirety of the narrative, with two halves mirroring one another around the turning point of 8:1, 'and God remembered Noah.'<sup>261</sup> Pleins however, criticises this structure and points out its

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<sup>256</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: a continental commentary* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1994), 438.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 75.

<sup>259</sup> Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened*, 41.

<sup>260</sup> Belcher, *Genesis*, 16-20.

<sup>261</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987).

omission of certain passages suggesting that Wenham is motivated by an agenda to protect the integrity of the text as a whole, rather than locate meaning in the way the sources interact.<sup>262</sup> Addressing the points of contradiction that fuel the two-source theory, American biblical scholar Victor Hamilton claims that they can be explained on their own terms and not as evidence of the existence of J and P. He follows Jewish Rabbi and biblical scholar Umberto Cassuto in arguing that the change in name for God is a textual device. YHWH is used when God features as a thematic participant in the narrative.<sup>263</sup> Hamilton explains that the pairs of animals are not to be considered as contradictory when read as plural in the first instruction followed by a more specific instruction – i.e. pairs are to be brought aboard, specifically seven pairs of clean and one pair of unclean animals.<sup>264</sup> Equally, the double entry into the ark, Hamilton argues, is an intentional literary device of resuming and summarising an earlier part of the narrative. There is a swinging back and forth between the flood and the entry into the ark.<sup>265</sup>

Taking a completely different approach, Dominican Priest and writer Thomas Brodie, argues that contradictions in the narrative are intentional as a reflection of its paradoxical content.<sup>266</sup> Rather than explain them away as Hamilton does, Brodie claims that the jarring repetitions and contradictions are a deliberate comment on the theological point of the narrative: that God's compassion and God's forgiveness requires contradiction.<sup>267</sup>

It is not expected that focus group participants will have knowledge or awareness of the various source theories regarding the Noah narrative, though this might be anticipated to be raised by the formal participants, if they have undertaken study of the Old Testament. Without such knowledge, this text will test how readers respond when faced with inconsistencies, repetitions and contradictions. Will these be noticed at all, and if they are, how will they be handled? What suggestions or solutions might be offered to the existence of these features in the text and to what extent are these methods driven by a particular ideology of the Bible as a whole? Will readers attempt to harmonise as Hamilton does? Or will they see such features of the text as essential to the message of the narratives as a whole?

#### 1.4. The Morality of God

Whilst Psalm 44, below, is the main measure of readers response to the theological challenge of God's 'immorality', Genesis 7 also provides insight into how readers deal with a God who does not appear to act benevolently towards creation. The narrative contains God's explicit action against his own creation and the death of all humankind at God's hand – how can a God of love cause such a thing to happen? Is this, aside from extrabiblical scientific evidence, grounds upon which the story is designated as myth or legend? Do readers attempt to absolve God, and if so, how do they do this?

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<sup>262</sup> Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened*, 26.

<sup>263</sup> Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990), 286-89.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*, 286.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, 291.

<sup>266</sup> Thomas Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: a literary, historical, & theological commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 168, Oxford Scholarship Online

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

Whilst perhaps characterised in culture as a story of wrath and divine punishment, there is a general tendency across Christian commentators to categorise the Noah narrative as a story about the heart and nature of a God who is not vengeful and ruthless but compassionate and invested. As Brueggemann writes,

As Israel moved beyond popular understandings, a serious exposition of the text today requires an abandonment of the stereotypes of the account held in most current popular understandings. In contrast to those understandings, we will suggest that the focus of the story is not on the flood but upon the change wrought in God which makes possible a new beginning for creation.<sup>268</sup>

This change in the nature of God is introduced in 6:6, 'And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.' This is prompted by the evil heart of humankind and Brueggemann points out this 'heart to heart' response; 'God is not angered but grieved. He is not enraged but saddened. God does not stand over against but with his creation.'<sup>269</sup> For Brueggemann, this is a God who has chosen to be so involved with creation that he is vulnerable to it. He also claims that the narrative of Noah provides an example of God's ability to not only change 'his mind' but also his commitment. The ending of the narrative with God's promise to Noah is seen as a new trajectory in the history of God's involvement with creation. This trajectory is characterised by a God who accepts the hurt that being committed to creation carries with it.

This view is shared by Lutheran Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim, who sees the main purpose of the flood story as re-characterising God's commitment to the world.<sup>270</sup> He sums up the view of God this narrative affords;

God expresses sorrow and regret; God judges, but does not want to; God goes beyond justice and decides to save some, including animals; God commits to the future of a less than perfect world; God is open to change and do things in new ways in view of new experience with the world; and God promises never to do this again. Not your typical description of God!<sup>271</sup>

It is somewhat ironic that this less than typical description should result from a very famous and traditional Bible story that might be more readily used to uphold a very different idea of God. This demonstrates what difference critical scholarship can bring to the main themes and ideas of a narrative.

Along similar lines, Anglican and former Bishop David Atkinson holds together two opposing strands in the character of God demonstrated through the Noah narrative: sovereignty and intimacy. The former is characterised by God's power in the reversal of creation and allusion to Psalm 29:10 that describes God 'enthroned over the flood.' The latter is seen in God's grieving

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<sup>268</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 73.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>270</sup> Fretheim, 'The God for the Flood Story and Natural Disasters,' 27.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

already discussed, his personal instruction and the smelling of the sacrifice in 8:21.<sup>272</sup> Additionally, Atkinson points out that mercy and judgement are also held together in the character of God by grace. Water, as the means of judgement, also becomes the means of salvation.<sup>273</sup> By holding both the flood and Noah together, these contrasting notions can be held in dynamic tension within the character of God.

This dimension of the text may well be missed by focus group participants as a consequence of them reading only chapter 7. This misses out God's grief and re-commitment which are central elements to building up the full picture of God's character described here. Will the focus of the formal and informal groups be on justifying the judgement of God, or on the grace of God in his action to Noah? This is a good test case of doctrines coming into conflict with one another, in this case, the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Scripture. The Bible must be true, but so is God's character – will one of these have to bend to accommodate the other or will participants follow scholarship in holding up both the character of God and the integrity of the story?

### 1.5. Noah in the Canon

A challenge facing Evangelicals whenever they read the Bible is how they understand the text at hand in the light of the entire biblical canon. Are other passages used to help understand and interpret the events in Genesis 7? What results does this produce? The Noah narrative is referenced throughout Scripture, posing the challenge of the extent to which these references inform an interpretation and understanding of the text.

Most commentators note the parallels between the account of Noah and that of creation and the fall. Biblical scholar Robert Alter sees the Noah narrative as a reversal of what was achieved at creation, noting that the same verb used in the creation narrative for humans to 'increase' (1:28) is used in 7:17 of the waters which will be the method of destroying humanity.<sup>274</sup> Belcher comments on the reversion to chaos, as was in the beginning<sup>275</sup> and Hamilton parallels the safety of the ark with that of the garden of Eden.<sup>276</sup> Rather than seeing the Noah narrative as an undoing or reversion of the creation narrative, Brodie characterises it as a retelling of the creation story, in continuity with Genesis 1-3. He argues that the three levels of the ark are mirrored by the three dimensions of creation – sky, land and water.<sup>277</sup> He is also unique in connecting the Noah and creation narratives with the themes of covenant and marriage, with the implication being that both at creation and the remaking of creation, stable monogamy remains the ideal.<sup>278</sup>

Brueggemann points out parallels with prophetic literature noting a similar movement from God's judgement to compassion in the Noah narrative and Hosea 11:1-9.<sup>279</sup> Brueggemann also places the Noah narrative alongside Ezekiel 14:12-20 and concludes; 'In Ezekiel, God acts *for himself*. In the Genesis text, God acts not for himself but *for his troubled creation*. The good news is that because of his person, this God acts most fully for himself when he acts for the world he created

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<sup>272</sup> David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11: the dawn of creation* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1990), 136.

<sup>273</sup> Fretheim, 'The God of the flood story,' 138.

<sup>274</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis* (London: Norton, 1996), 32-3.

<sup>275</sup> Belcher, *Genesis*, 95.

<sup>276</sup> Alter, *Genesis*, 33.

<sup>277</sup> Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 172.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>279</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 79.

and loved.<sup>280</sup> What these passages demonstrate together is a commitment to creation that stands at the heart of who God is, discussed above. This is corroborated by Isaiah 54:9-17 which speaks of God's commitment to Israel as more reliable than creation itself.<sup>281</sup>

The Noah narrative is frequently linked to the sacrament of baptism because of 1 Peter 3:20-21 which states that the waters of Noah prefigure those of baptism. There is a mirroring of the passing from death to life symbolised in water which represents the internal transformation of those now belonging 'in Christ.'<sup>282</sup> Some commentators emphasise this parallel linking baptism, the resurrection and the call to die to oneself. Atkinson writes of Noah, 'He had to forsake his world in order to find it again. There is life only through death. There is resurrection only by way of the cross.'<sup>283</sup> The soteriological theme within the Noah narrative is placed alongside that of the passion and resurrection, which is mirrored in the sacrament of baptism to create a modern Christological application for contemporary readers.

The flood is also referenced by Jesus in two of the gospels<sup>284</sup> in the context of final judgement and the return of Christ. The point Jesus makes is the unexpected nature of judgement (in Noah's case, the flood) and the clear separation it brings between those who are saved and unsaved. This emphasis on judgement is particularly significant considering many scholars who see the heart of the narrative as one of compassion and God's commitment, discussed above in 1.4.

What the references in the gospels and 1 Peter (and Hebrews 11:7) demonstrate is that the Noah narrative, whilst reinterpreted in the light of the present, was understood as a historical and unique event by the New Testament writers. Young argues that this is demonstrated through the different terminology used for the Noachic flood (*kataklysmos*) and all other floods (*potamos*). For conservative evangelical commentators, this underscores their claim that the Noah narrative should be read as a literal historical occurrence.

It might be expected that participants will be aware of some of these references within the Bible and this may inform their readings of the text at hand. It will be particularly interesting to note if any of the New Testament references contribute to a determination of historicity. This would be a typically evangelical practice – adopting the hermeneutical approach demonstrated by Jesus and the New Testament authors. Similarly, it will also be note-worthy whether readers take a Christological line of interpretation, typical of evangelicals, and link the narrative to baptism on the basis of 1 Peter. As with all intra-biblical references, what will be most important to gauge is what links are made between texts and why these are brought up. Does it help to illuminate where the text feels obscure or difficult to understand? Or does it bolster a particular interpretation one already brings to the text?

Summary: The key issues involved in reading Genesis 7 today include the genre of Genesis, how to handle extrabiblical knowledge, as well as repetition and contradiction in the text, the morality of God and how Noah is read in relation to the rest of the canon. I have presented how scholars and writers of all denominations have attempted to overcome these issues and offered my anticipation of how different focus groups may respond to these challenges.

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>282</sup> Belcher, *Genesis*, 96-7.

<sup>283</sup> Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened*, 141.

<sup>284</sup> Matthew 24:28, Luke 17:26

## 2. Psalm 44

This Psalm was chosen for discussion and interpretation by focus groups predominantly because of the theological dilemma it poses regarding God. It appears that completely unwarrantedly, God has abandoned his people. The charge is not that God has actively construed the defeat and suffering the community are experiencing, but rather that his lack of action has meant they were not protected and safeguarded from such a defeat. Whilst this might be explainable or justifiable on the grounds that the community have turned away from God, their profession of innocence makes the challenge of this Psalm that of theodicy – why does a good and loving God let the innocent suffer? For the evangelical, and any other Christian for that matter, the doctrine of God as loving, faithful and loyal to his people is challenged in Psalm 44. The challenge for the reader is how to make sense of the tension this Psalm presents, and what interpretative moves are made in order to do so.

Before discussing this central challenge to morality and theology that the Psalm poses, I will look at a broader more fundamental challenge that underpins all readings of the Psalm – genre. This was another reason this passage was chosen over other more obviously theologically challenging passages of the Bible, such as genocide in Joshua. The fact that the Psalms are a form of poetry or creative expression offers a certain degree of flexibility when it comes to interpretation – the plain reading is not always the most straightforward when hyperbole, simile and metaphor are involved. Will this genre see particular interpretative strategies employed that are not elsewhere? With the challenge of genre in mind, I will then turn to look at the core issue of theodicy in this Psalm. Do readers try and justify God's inaction on the basis of a previously held doctrine of God? Will this lead them to dismiss the community's claims of innocence? Or will the tension of the Psalm win out, with readers unsure what this means for the character of God?

A third challenge this text poses is its lack of historical moorings that anchor it to a specific event in the life of Israel. Does it matter that there is no clear context for this Psalm? Does that make interpretation easier or harder? Do readers try to suggest a historical event that prompted this Psalm in an attempt to handle the tension of the text?

A fourth challenge, as with all evangelical reading, is how this Psalm is read in the context of Scripture as a whole. In order to understand and navigate the moral dilemma this Psalm poses, are certain passages in Scripture put in contrast or similarity with this Psalm in order to understand it better? Is the tension of the Psalm resolved by appeal to other texts? Where this text is challenging and perhaps uncertain, are other texts considered normative and, in some senses, more fundamental?

### 2.1. Genre

Before discussing this central challenge to morality and theology that the Psalm poses, I will look at a broader more fundamental challenge that underpins all readings of the Psalm – genre. The unique nature of the Psalms for believers who hold to an evangelical doctrine of Scripture is found in their dual nature of being human utterances to God, i.e. prayers, that due to their incorporation into Scripture, are equally considered to be God's utterances to humanity. This creates an interesting dynamic for application and interpretation – are all Psalmic utterances to be taken as truth and fact given they're in God's Word? Or can and should some be dismissed on the grounds

that they represent the view of the Psalter and do not represent reality? In the case of Psalm 44, has God really abandoned his people as they profess? Can their claims to innocence be trusted? When the poetic nature of the Psalm is taken into account, the picture is complicated further by metaphorical language. Is God really understood to be sleeping, or is that simply an expression of inactivity? This type of language in the context of poetry, rather than narrative or an epistle, creates an ambiguity of meaning such that interpretative options are often broader and harder to discern between.

Regardless of Christian denomination or evangelical identification, all commentaries take seriously the claims of the Psalmist and do not question the community's assertion of innocence. Whether this is because they are simply taking the text as it stands or because they are unwilling to question the claims of Scripture as God's Word is not made explicit.

What is given attention, particularly as a consequence of genre, is the Psalm's structure and the patterns this produces. Commentators make note of the basic turn that occurs in the Psalm, from recollection of God's faithfulness in the past to God's current faithlessness experienced by the community. All commentators agree on the stark and transitional 'yet' of verse 9 that takes the Psalm into complaint followed by the striking repetition of the accusatory 'you' to begin each sentence of verses 9-14.<sup>285</sup> This 'yet' serves as the hinge for various oppositions that occur within the Psalm. For example, Bruggemann points out, 'It is exactly YHWH's *military effectiveness* that is celebrated in verses 1-8 and YHWH's *military failure* that is voiced in verses 9-16.'<sup>286</sup> This central section of complaint introduced by 'yet' forms the centre of a suggested chiasmic structure. Psalm scholar, Loren D. Crow puts forward the following pattern:

- A – (1-3) Hymnic description of God's past aid
- B – (4-8) Present community's faithful trust in God
- C – (9-16) God's violence against this community
- B – (17-22) Community's innocent contrast with God's action
- A – (23-26) Petition that God aid in the present

Characterisation of the sub-genres of each section of the Psalm is also made difficult as a consequence of genre. Poetry leaves open the possibility of tone and meaning so that commentators vary between designating the first section of remembrance as either invocation or praise. The practice of recalling God's past deeds is commonplace in the Psalms and is easily seen as praise,<sup>287</sup> but the Psalm in its entirety suggests that this act of remembrance is one of invocation rather than praise. The author is not calling upon events from the past for the purpose of *delighting* in God's goodness, but rather in *proving* the existence of God's goodness. This is the common Greek rhetorical practice of *hypomnesis* – reciting past action as a reminder of the expectation for the present, it serves as a means to persuade God into action.<sup>288</sup> Old Testament scholar James Mays puts it succinctly;

The recollection of the past and the confession in the present are ways of actualising and activating the reality of their content, a liturgical invocation

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<sup>285</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger, *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 209.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> Dalit Rom-Shiloni, 'Psalm 44: The Powers of Protest,' *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2008): 686.

<sup>288</sup> Loren Crow, 'The Rhetoric of Psalm 44,' *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 103, no. 3 (1992), 295.

of the work of God that is in such bitter and bewildering contrast with the present.<sup>289</sup>

This is why 'praise' is not the best characterisation of this section of discourse. This also sets Psalm 44 apart from other lament Psalms commonly structured as a movement from lament to petition to praise, or according to Bruggemann's cognitive pattern: orientation, disorientation and reorientation. Yet Psalm 44 fails to reach reorientation and fails to end with praise.<sup>290</sup>

Whilst some of these challenges amongst scholars regarding structure and sub-genre are not obvious ones for the general reader, they highlight the complicated nature of poetry, which presents a multiplicity of interpretations and readings. As has already been mentioned, when the doctrine of Scripture plays a part in this dynamic, the waters become even murkier. As God's Word, the Psalm speaks truth, but as human poetry, the Psalm demonstrates textual practices that mean its truth might be more difficult to discern.

A good example of this is verse 23 which accuses God of sleeping – 'why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake!' An evangelical doctrine of God would affirm that God does not sleep as God is not human and bound to the necessities this entails. God *not* sleeping is attested to in Psalm 121; 'He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep' (121:4). What is to be made of this apparent contradiction? In order to preserve the consistency and divinity of Scripture, as well as the doctrine of God, Evangelical commentaries suggest that Psalm 44:23 is idiomatic, as a call to action and not a reflection of God's actual state.<sup>291</sup> Psalm 121's affirmation of God's vigilance is taken as normative, rendering Psalm 44 as metaphorical in order to be consistent. It is particularly interesting that these contradictory statements are both Psalms and therefore poetry, yet one is understood as being a factual statement determining the other as metaphor despite the fact that their genre does not indicate that one is necessarily more 'true' than the other. This is evidence of the way in which doctrine controls reading, in this instance, the doctrine of God. Because God is believed not to sleep, Psalm 121 is a straightforward statement of fact and Psalm 44 is a metaphor.

Will participants appeal to genre as a validation for their interpretation of metaphor? Will genre give cause to question the truthfulness of the Psalmist's statements? Or perhaps in an entirely different mode of thought, will participants be less inclined to bring resolution to the Psalm because of its genre – seeing beauty, creativity and artistry in the tension it poses as a result of the type of text it is?

## 2.2. Theodicy

Having overviewed some of the scholarly and reading challenges posed by the genre of Psalm 44, I can now turn to the crux of the text's moral dilemma – how can God let suffering happen to the innocent? Do readers try and justify God's inaction on the basis of a previously held doctrine of God? Will this lead them to dismiss the community's claims of innocence? Or will the tension of the Psalm win out, with readers unsure what this means for the character of God?

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<sup>289</sup> James Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 177.

<sup>290</sup> Rom-Shiloni, 'Psalm 44,' 689.

<sup>291</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 178; Eric Lane, *Psalms 1-89* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2006), 204; Bruce Waltke, James Houston and Erica Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2014), 180.



According to traditional covenantal theology, the current situation of the Psalmist should not have happened; faithfulness results in blessing and favour, not defeat and humiliation. This is the paradigm that is set out in the first 8 verses – God uproots other nations but plants his own people. Had the community been disobedient or idolatrous, God’s negligence could perhaps be rationalised and understood. Yet no such get-out clause exists because the people have been faithful, and it is God who has not been. Similarities with Deuteronomy impress this sense even more as Evangelical Biblical Scholar Peter Craigie points out;

The nature of the defeat was particularly puzzling, for the words describing it are reminiscent of the curses of defeat that would come upon Israel if the nation was unfaithful to the covenant stipulations (e.g. Deut 28:15-69).<sup>292</sup>

According to the law, what the Psalmists community are experiencing is the consequence and punishment for a crime they have not committed.

One suggestion by some commentators to ease this tension and injustice is to point to the paradox of the protest within the Psalm. The fact that the God who has just been criticised is still called upon and appealed to, reveals a fundamental belief in both the power of prayer and the character of God. Jewish biblical scholar Dalit Rom-Shiloni captures this best, writing, ‘Protest reaches its height *because* of the unresolved dissonance between the circumstance of crisis and accepted doctrinal conventions’.<sup>293</sup> The fact that God’s loyalty has seemingly wavered and prompted such a petition, attests to God’s loyalty in the first place. That God is a character who can be still be called upon even in the midst of such circumstances, shows a faith that goes beyond expected theological paradigms. Craigie describes the character of this faith displayed by the lamenting community;

The faith also went beyond theology, which implied that God’s actions could always be anticipated, if not predicted, strictly in terms of covenant theology; the faith recognised a mystery in God’s ways, beyond both reason and theology, which made prayer worthwhile even in a time of crisis that was both military and theological in its proportions.<sup>294</sup>

Ultimately this focus on petition is a comment on the nature of prayer. The tension of the Psalm is not resolved but the option to pray, and to do so openly and unreservedly, points towards resolution. In the midst of God’s mystery there is still something that can be *done*.

For Evangelical commentators who prioritise application as an outcome of Bible reading, the importance and nature of prayer is something that is focused on to apply to contemporary life. In the face of the unresolved tension of theodicy, prayer is made the central take-away from this Psalm. As such, Evangelical writer Eric Lane ends his commentary with a devotional question about the urgency of prayer and its connection to present realities.<sup>295</sup> Evangelical biblical scholar

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<sup>292</sup> Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 333.

<sup>293</sup> Rom-Shiloni, ‘Psalm 44,’ 698.

<sup>294</sup> Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 335.

<sup>295</sup> Lane, *Psalms 1-89*, 204.

Nancy deClaisse-Walford further notes the character of such prayer affirming that God can be cried out to and honestly held to account.<sup>296</sup>

However, whilst many scholars uphold the tension of the Psalm and point to the prayer of petition as the seed of resolution, other interpretative moves are made to make sense of the theodicy of Psalm 44. Lane, in a typically Evangelical hermeneutical approach, sees allusions to the sufferings of Christ in verses 15 and 16 and close similarities with Psalm 69 which has traditionally been associated with Christ on the cross. By making a Christological comparison, the suffering of the Psalmist and their community is justified in the light of divine suffering and the salvation this offers. Of course, this does not answer the question of why defeat has happened, but it does place suffering into a larger soteriological narrative which relativises present pain in the light of future salvation. This is a unique interpretation to evangelical scholars and exemplifies the evangelical tendency to read in the context of the whole Bible, and therefore the whole of salvation history, as well as to make Christological connections under the supposition that the Old Testament points towards the coming of Jesus.

### 2.3. Historical Context

A third challenge this text poses is its lack of historical moorings that anchor it to a specific event in the life of Israel. Does it matter that there is no clear context for this Psalm? Does that make interpretation easier or harder? Do readers try to suggest a historical event that prompted this Psalm in an attempt to handle the tension of the text?

Scholars and readers alike are faced with the question of what the historical context may be, how this might be uncovered and how important this is for understanding the Psalm.

Lane proposes that the Psalm refers to the events of the Babylonian captivity on account of verses 11-12 referring to the 'scattering of the nations'. He suggests that, 'the psalmist represents the faithful remnant who had gone into captivity with the rest.'<sup>297</sup> Yet this does not marry with the assertion of the community's innocence as biblical tradition attributes the Babylonian exile as punishment for Israel's idolatry and faithlessness. If this historical context is to be upheld then the Psalmist's claims of innocence would have to be understood as false, a problem that raises significant interpretative issues for the trustworthiness of the Psalm's author. Lane does not consider the implications of this in his commentary.

Other contexts have been suggested. In rabbinic tradition Psalm 44 is placed in the context of persecution under the Greek Emperor Antiochus IV Euphianes in 163-4 BCE and the Catholic Lectionary places the Psalm alongside 1 Samuel 4 which recounts the capturing of the ark by the Philistines.<sup>298</sup>

Many scholars however, maintain that there is not enough internal evidence within the Psalm to pin it definitively to a particular historical event. As Alter writes; 'Ancient Israel in all periods had no lack of powerful adversaries, and there is nothing in the language of the poem to enable a confident dating.'<sup>299</sup> Whilst there are evangelical scholars who hold to this view, it is interesting that evangelical publications do tend to push towards attributing the Psalm to an event in Israel's

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<sup>296</sup> Nancy deClaisse-Walford, 'Psalm 44; O God, Why Do You Hide Your Face?' *Review and Expositor* 104 (2007): 757.

<sup>297</sup> Lane, *Psalms 1-89*, 201.

<sup>298</sup> Nancy deClaisse-Walford, 'Psalm 44,' 755-6.

<sup>299</sup> Robert Alter, *The book of Psalms: a translation with commentary* (New York, NY: Norton, 2007), 156.

history.<sup>300</sup> One can only conjecture as to why this might be the case. It may stem from an over-vigilance to pay heed to historical context, or simply be a case of following various strands of tradition that have located the Psalm in a particular historical occurrence. On the other hand, given the nature of the Psalm and the tension it holds with regards to the character and covenant of God discussed above, it might be an attempt to ease such conflict by locating the Psalm in a situation where the outcome is known. This way, reading the Psalm through the lens of the Babylonian exile and return, for example, redeems God's character because the traumatic situation felt so keenly by the Psalmist is known to be resolved by the present reader. It will be interesting to note to what extent the historicity of the events of the Psalm is of concern for the focus group participants and why this is so. Will they want to know the context of the lament in order to frame it in the knowledge of its resolution? Perhaps context will be sought to verify the Psalmist's claims to innocence? Or will the drive for application actually do the opposite so that participants can more readily apply the Psalm to their own lives given that it is not connected to a particular instance?

#### 2.4. Psalm 44 in the Canon

A fourth challenge, as with all evangelical reading, is how this Psalm is read in the context of Scripture as a whole. In order to understand and navigate the moral dilemma this Psalm poses, are certain passages in Scripture put in contrast or similarity with this Psalm in order to understand it better? Is the tension of the Psalm resolved by appeal to other texts? Where this text is challenging and perhaps uncertain, are other texts considered normative and, in some senses, more fundamental?

The issue of the sleeping deity has already provided an instance of disparate biblical passages read together in order to pinpoint meaning, demonstrating the challenge of reading a scriptural text in the context of Scripture as a whole, which for evangelicals, cannot be contradictory.

Commentators point out further canonical connections, noting Psalm 44's theological similarities with the book of Job in wrestling with the issue of theodicy and God's covenantal obligations. It has been pointed out that Psalm 44 places on a communal or national level what Job explores on an individual level.<sup>301</sup> Whereas the book of Job is concluded with the revelation of God and a restoration of what was lost, Psalm 44 concludes at the height of despair, calling upon God to bring about change that the Psalmist, and therefore the reader, is yet to see fulfilled. This brings both a challenge and a resolution to the Psalm. The conclusion of Job suggests that we are only reading half of the story – this is not the only occasion where God's inaction cannot be rationalised and in the instance of Job, restoration is achieved, suggesting such an end could be in store for the Psalmist. Yet if a historical context is not identified then there is no assurance that this was the case, and even if such restoration were to occur – it does not nullify the question of the allowance of suffering and God's failure to meet his covenantal obligations.

Whilst various *theological* comparisons within Scripture are made, scholarship also emphasises *textual* similarities between Psalm 44 and other parts of Scripture, such as Psalm 37, focused on by

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<sup>300</sup> For examples connecting Psalm 44 with Psalm 60's defeat by the Edomites see: Warren Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009) and Bruce Waltke et al, *The Psalms as Christian Lament*, 170. It should be noted however that this is not unique to evangelicals – the early church fathers associated Psalm 44 with the Maccabean wars.

<sup>301</sup> DeClaissé-Walford et al, *The Book of Psalms*, 408.

Rom-Shiloni.<sup>302</sup> Other textual connections are made with Psalm 60, referenced above, leading some scholars to the conclusion that the defeat being referenced is at the hand of the Edomites. Reference to being 'rejected' in 44:9 is linked with 60:1/10 as well as to God's failure to accompany the armies in battle.

In the New Testament, the famous phrasing 'like sheep for slaughter', rich in sacrificial imagery linked to the atonement, is used by Paul in Romans 8:36. The wording is significantly altered, so that, rather than describing themselves as having been *made* sheep for slaughter *by God*, they are describing themselves as having *chosen* to be sheep for slaughter *for God*. As Evangelicals tend to be more familiar with the New Testament than the Old Testament, it will be interesting to note whether any participants make this connection and how this Pauline reference might alter the way in which the Psalm is read and understood. The practice of reading Christologically might also be seen, where suffering is seen in the context of Christ's suffering and salvation history as a whole.

Summary: The key issues involved in reading Psalm 44 today include how the genre of poetry effects interpretation, how to make sense of the problem of theodicy, what the historical context of the Psalm is and how Psalm 44 relates to Scripture as a whole. I have presented both academic and devotional responses to these issues and suggested how focus group participants may or may not align with these answers.

### 3. Ephesians 5:21-6:9

I chose this passage to be discussed in focus groups predominantly because it makes an apt test case for the evangelical concern of relevance and application – the practice of applying a biblical text so as to determine and define the pragmatic choices, attitudes and behaviour with which life is approached and conducted. Evangelicals are concerned to follow the Bible's ordinances as they are considered to be from God, but the way in which to do this given the cultural distance between the time of writing and the reader is contested. In the case of Ephesians, how is application navigated across three different relationships, one of which (slaves and masters) simply does not apply to modern day readers? This is the interpretative challenge which I shall discuss first and at most length, the challenge of the cultural distance between text and reader. As a specific example of this first challenge I shall second, turn to a discussion of two key concepts from the husband and wife section, submission and headship, which provide a particular challenge for evangelicals because of the pejorative connotations contemporary society attaches to them. How should submission and headship be understood? What do they mean, and what do they mean for the conducting of life today? In a post-modern western culture that champions gender-equality, these concepts provide a specific example of the general discussion regarding the cultural gap.

The third significant challenge of this text that I shall set out is the text's acceptance and upholding of the institution of slavery. Considering Christian leaders were a significant driving force behind the abolition of the slave trade it is troubling for some readers that the Ephesians passage condones slavery and does not question its practice. Again, this is a specific example of the cultural gap between the world of the reader and that of the text. If slavery is inherently wrong and against the principles of Christian faith, then how can support for it be in God's own Word?

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<sup>302</sup> Rom-Shiloni, 'Psalm 44,' 694.

Moving away from the cultural issues surrounding the Ephesians text is the issue of the author and audience of Ephesians. This is the fourth challenge of the text I shall discuss. Whether the text was written by Paul or not becomes an issue of immense importance when apostolic authorship is connected to biblical authority. How do evangelicals respond to the authorial challenge of the text and does this effect the way they interpret?

The final challenge the text poses, as with Genesis 7 and Psalm 44, is how it stands in relation to other passages of Scripture, including those quoted within it. Might there be contradiction across the canon, or might other passages be brought to bear on Ephesians so as to elucidate particular meanings?

### 3.1. The Cultural Gap

As has been said, the main reason I chose this text to be discussed by focus group participants is to see how they attempt to 'apply' it to their lives today despite the cultural difference between the world of the text and that of the reader. The key point to observe is not that application occurs but both *how* application is made across the 'gap' and also how *consistent* this method is across the passage.

In general, evangelical approaches to application can be divided into two different methods: 'direct', where the text is taken as it stands applying directly to the current day, and 'indirect', where underlying principles are taken from the text and then applied to a contemporary context. These underlying principles are those that are believed to transcend culture, time and geography and therefore close the gap between the world of the text and that of the reader. So, for example, egalitarian Evangelical writer Lisa Baumert writes,

Thus, the interpretive task for us as Christians in the twenty- first century is to understand and determine what Paul was telling the Christians in first-century Ephesus, why his message was significant at that time, and how we might appropriate the meaning of his commands in our own lives.<sup>303</sup>

This form of indirect application becomes 'appropriation' or the task of 'cultural translation'; trying to retain the integrity and sense of what the author was conveying but in a different context and environment.

With the direct approach, the text's instructions are transplanted into a contemporary context, so Reformed Presbyterian Pastor R. C. Sproul affirms that as head of his wife, a husband has more authority, and this should be exercised and respected in modern marriages.<sup>304</sup>

These two approaches tend to correspond to two different focuses when it comes to the practice of interpretation. The direct approach pays close attention to the text, elucidating the precise meaning of particular words and making sure to fully grasp the intended meaning of the author. The indirect approach pays close attention to the culture and context of the text, often involving extrabiblical knowledge about thinking, behaviour and action during the time and place from which the text was written, in order to grasp the 'principle' of what is being conveyed. It makes

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<sup>303</sup> Lisa Baumert, 'Biblical Interpretation and the Epistle to the Ephesians,' *Priscilla Papers* 31, no. 4 (2017): 29.

<sup>304</sup> Robert Sproul, *Ephesians* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1994), 139.

sense therefore that those who are acutely aware of the vastness of the 'gap' tend to pay heed to ways in which this may be overcome whereas those who hold to a strong doctrine of Scripture that understands the text to be God's Words tend to believe this ultimately transcends the problem of the cultural gap. Of course, this is a general tendency as many scholars and writers give due attention to both these aspects and acknowledge that different material requires different approaches, but a loose trend sees direct application coming from more conservative thinkers, and indirect application from more liberal thinkers.<sup>305</sup>

As such, Pentecostal biblical scholar Gordon Fee, writing for an evangelical publication, gives extensive attention to the household culture of the anticipated recipients of the letter and points out the underlying first-century milieu of honour and shame, kinship and patronage.<sup>306</sup> Focusing on the sociology of the Greco-Roman world and the makeup of the typical 'house', as well as the general attitude towards slaves and wives, he concludes that the Ephesians instructions do not support the authority of husbands over their wives today. 'In the end, the structures are immaterial since they are predicated altogether on cultural givens that are simply not ours.'<sup>307</sup>

On the other hand, is Sproul's line of argument which minimises the cultural gap between the text and the reader by appealing to the nature of the text as divine revelation. As Ephesians is God's Word through the Apostle Paul, the text is protected from any cultural infiltration that would render the instructions not directly applicable today. However, this somewhat falls down when it comes to slavery. Sproul argues that the text still stands as being applicable to any form of employment today<sup>308</sup> but does not address how such clearly culturally-incited instructions square with the text being universal revelation. Sproul provides an excellent example of the way in which an overarching doctrine of Scripture determines interpretation of the text. By minimising the cultural gap, closer attention is paid to the text itself, providing much more specific and concrete instructions for the reader because they can be lifted from the text as it stands – the element of 'translation' is limited.

When it comes to the consistency with which direct and indirect approaches are taken within the same passage, evangelical Anglican minister John Stott makes a distinction between a principle and the application of a principle. Principles are non-negotiable, but their application can be. For example, Jesus' washing of the disciple's feet demonstrates the principles of humility and servant-hearted love. These principles are to be emulated by the reader, but not necessarily the application of the principle, the washing of feet, which is culturally strange in contemporary western society. For Stott, male headship is a foundational principle and cannot be dismissed as cultural, whereas the practice of slavery is an applicatory context for foundational principles of integrity in work and impartiality before God.<sup>309</sup> Stott's argument is that male headship is based on the order of creation and is universally binding because it is inherent to God's structure for the world and not a product of Greco-Roman society and culture. This argument is based predominantly on passages outside of Ephesians, such as 1 Corinthians 11:3-12 and 1 Timothy

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<sup>305</sup> With regards to Christian debate about gender-roles relevant for this passage, typically the two sides referred to are 'complementarian' and 'egalitarian', which correspond in general to a more conservative or liberal attitude, respectively. This however, is not a given and I shall not use such terms which can often carry a pejorative sense with them.

<sup>306</sup> Gordon Fee, 'The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18-6:9,' *Priscilla Papers* 31. no. 4 (2017)

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>308</sup> Sproul, *Ephesians*, 147.

<sup>309</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's new society* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 220-21.

2:11-13 which cite Genesis 2. This is his justification for the inconsistency of application across the three relationships;

This is also why we should reject the facile argument that since slavery has been abolished, the wife's submission should by analogy be abolished too. If this were the case, then why not complete the trio and abolish a child's obedience as well? No, the parallels are inexact. Slavery is a dehumanizing institution, with no justification in any biblical doctrine. A husband's headship, however, is rooted in creation.<sup>310</sup>

Stott goes on to include several biological arguments to bolster his argument for patriarchy as a natural universal phenomenon, evidence of male headship as God's design for the world.<sup>311</sup> A key outcome of the focus group discussion will be noting whether individuals take a direct or indirect approach to application of this text and whether this is consistent across the three relationships in the passage. Whilst Stott can provide a comprehensive justification of his different interpretative strategies between the first two relationships and the last, I expect focus group participants, certainly in the informal group, will not be able to offer such an explanation and anticipate that alternatives may be proffered. That is assuming the inconsistency of their application is even acknowledged. This might be expected more in the formal group discussions who might have a heightened awareness of their interpretative strategies and why they are deemed appropriate.

### 3.2. Submission and Headship

As a specific example of the first challenge I have considered, I turn to a discussion of two key concepts from the husband-and-wife section, submission and headship, which provide a particular challenge for evangelicals because of the pejorative connotations contemporary society attaches to them. How should submission and headship be understood? What do they mean, and what do they mean for the conducting of life today? In a post-modern western culture that champions gender-equality, these concepts provide a specific example of the general discussion regarding the cultural gap.

Amongst most Christian commentators, submission is emphasised as positive and part of God's design for marriage and family life. Catholic academic Ralph Martin concentrates on the dignity of submission in its voluntary nature reflecting the relationship between Christ and the Father, noting that submission is modified by the addition 'in the Lord.'<sup>312</sup> Stott too, emphasises the dignity of submission due to its voluntary nature that recognises the wife as 'a moral free agent'<sup>313</sup> but places greater emphasis on dignity in submission as a consequence of its being divinely ordained.<sup>314</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum are more totalitarian expressions of submission, with emphasis being placed on its binding force. Sproul writes in this vein,

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid, 222-23.

<sup>312</sup> Ralph Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1991), 70.

<sup>313</sup> Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 232-3.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

the general principle is that a woman is to bend over backwards to defer to the leadership and authority of her husband. She is not free to disobey simply because she disagrees or because she finds herself inconvenienced by what the husband requires.<sup>315</sup>

Sproul treats submission and obedience as synonymous, which is problematic considering that the verb 'obey' is used explicitly in the child and parent passage, but not in the husband and wife passage, suggesting they have different meanings. With such stress placed on following the call to submission, the question of exceptions becomes important, and this is dealt with solely by Evangelical writers. Both Stott and Sproul conclude that submission is to be expected in all circumstances where it would not lead to disobedience to God. What and how exactly 'disobedience to God' is determined, particularly in areas that do not have a clear biblical mandate, is not discussed. This is an addition to the text, believed to be implied by both authors, though it is not expressed explicitly. Sproul goes further and clarifies that the injunctions to submit and love are not conditional upon one another; submission is still required when love is absent, and vice versa. Again, this is not explicit in the text but presumed to be implied by Sproul. One key translation issue with regards to the concept of submission raised by almost all commentators is how to position verse 21, 'submit to one another', within the text – is it connected to the preceding or following passage and what does this mean regarding submission? Various grammatical arguments, concisely summarised by Benjamin Merkle, are put forward to argue where the natural break occurs, whether verse 21 belongs to the preceding section or is the start of a new section.<sup>316</sup> Does the instruction to 'submit to one another' relativise and frame the following instructions for wives to submit to their husbands, in the light of 'mutual submission'? Baumert argues that this is the case; 'the command for wives to submit to their husbands is directly dependent upon the command for everyone within the Christian community to submit to each other.'<sup>317</sup>

More conservative commentators however, are keen to draw a distinction between verse 21 and what follows so as to safeguard the gender-based obligations of submission and love. For example, Sproul writes that verse 21 is a general introduction 'and does not make subjection apply to men as well as women,'<sup>318</sup> and evangelical conservative biblical scholar F. F. Bruce writes 'while the household code is introduced by a plea for mutual submissiveness, the submissiveness enjoined in the code itself is not mutual.'<sup>319</sup>

Alternatively, there are scholars who hold the middle ground, seeing the verse as a form of 'bridge' that both points forwards and backwards to the preceding and following sections. It functions as a hinge, both concluding how believers manifest the Holy Spirit begun in 4:34

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<sup>315</sup> Sproul, *Ephesians*, 140.

<sup>316</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, 'The Start of Instruction to Wives and Husbands - Ephesians 5:21 or 5:22?', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174 (2017): 179-92.

<sup>317</sup> Baumert, 'Biblical Interpretation,' 30.

<sup>318</sup> Sproul, *Ephesians*, 138.

<sup>319</sup> Frederick F. Bruce, *The epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1984), 383.



and introducing the theme of the next section, 5:22-6:9.<sup>320</sup> This seems the most logical explanation, though what this implies theologically is unclear.

Connected to the issue and characterisation of the nature of submission is interpretation of the term 'head' (*kephalē*) to describe the husband as head of the wife. A split can be seen again between conservative and liberal commentators, the latter of whom tend towards interpreting 'head' as 'source' and the former of whom tend towards interpreting head as meaning 'authority over'. For example, Baumert claims that head as source suggests dependence and unity rather than leadership or authority and adds that the use of *kephalē* rather than *archē* is significant, 'the latter of which would have been expected from a hierarchical marriage.'<sup>321</sup>

In contrast, evangelical military Chaplain David Park claims that head means 'one entrusted with superior rank, authority and power.'<sup>322</sup> Park draws upon a variety of extrabiblical sources to examine the same usage of 'head' to conclude that this is the meaning with which it is employed in the Ephesians passage, pointing to parallel instances in Judges, 2 Samuel and 1 Corinthians to elucidate such meaning. Though opting for the authoritarian interpretation of 'head', Park goes on to argue that 'the hierarchical model depicted by 'head' and 'submission' merely served Paul as the only available framework he knew upon which to append his discussion of 'love' and 'respect.'<sup>323</sup> This argument claims that combining traditional authoritarian language with the analogy of Christ and the church transforms its meaning to be much more egalitarian than hierarchical. However, the exact reverse argument is made by fellow Evangelical Bruce, who claims that 'head' is to be understood as source or origin in reference to Genesis 2 but that the analogy to Christ and the Church is what imputes the concept of authority.<sup>324</sup>

How submission and headship is understood and what validations will be made for such understandings will be interesting to observe across formal and informal focus group participants. A constant challenge for Evangelicals, particularly of younger generations, is the extent to which contemporary values can or cannot be harmonised with what the biblical text says. In the west, where the feminist movement is applauded in the public sphere, the call to submission can jar. Will participants move towards more palatable understandings of headship and submission because this fits their cultural values, or because they believe it to be in-keeping with Christian and gospel values? Or will participants reject cultural values in favour of the gender dynamics proposed in the text?

### 3.3. Slavery

The third significant challenge of this text that I shall set out is the text's acceptance and upholding of the institution of slavery. Considering Christian leaders were a significant driving force behind the abolition of the slave trade it is troubling for some readers that the Ephesians passage condones slavery and does not question its practice. Again, this is a specific example of the

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<sup>320</sup> Martin, *Ephesians*, 67; Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: being a Christian, at home and in the cosmos* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 181; Stott, *Ephesians*, 215.

<sup>321</sup> Baumert, "Biblical Interpretation": 31.

<sup>322</sup> David M. Park, 'The Structure of Authority in Marriage: An Examination of Hupotasso and Kephale in Ephesians 5:21-33,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (1987): 119.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid*, 124.

<sup>324</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 384.

cultural gap between the world of the reader and that of the text. If slavery is inherently wrong and against the principles of Christian faith, then how can support for it be in God's own Word? As has already been noted, no Christian commentators take the injunctions to slaves and masters as binding today. There are two interesting responses to the challenge posed by the existence of slavery in Ephesians: the first is to explain and justify why it's there in the first place, and the second is to appropriate by indirect application what these verses teach readers today and what it is asking them to do in the absence of the existence of slaves and masters.

To start with the first issue, most scholars comment on the positive nature of the instructions given, particularly the command for masters to 'do the same to them.' (6:9) As Bruce writes, 'There is no word of abolishing the institution of slavery, but where masters and slaves are fellow-members of a Christian household their relationship should be mutually helpful.'<sup>325</sup> The fact that slaves are addressed at all (as well as children) gives insight into the church congregation dynamics anticipated by the author. The author of Ephesians clearly expected slaves to be part of the church and they are addressed as independent human beings which many scholars pinpoint as a sign of the transformative nature of the Christian household where the traditionally inferior members are treated with dignity and respect.<sup>326</sup> It is such treatment that leads Sproul to conclude that the instructions 'contained the seeds of the dissolution of slavery.'<sup>327</sup> Whilst this does not explain why the early Christians were not against the practice of slavery, it does go some way to showing how faith has transformed this institution. Stott offers further justifications for the existence of slavery, putting forward three suggestions as to why the abolition of slavery was not proposed by early Christians.<sup>328</sup> The first is that Christians were politically powerless at this time to create change and that slavery was too deeply entrenched in the economy of society so that its abolition would result in the disintegration of Roman civilisation. The second is that, unlike the racially motivated slave trade prominent in America, the slaves of the first century Greco-Roman world were frequently set free and could often rise to positions superior to their original patrons. His third and final suggestion is that first century Roman legislation had already greatly bettered the conditions of slaves, so that it was not as inhumane a situation as can be often imagined.

Turning to the issue of how the slavery passage is indirectly applied, some scholars respond by making the instructions transferable to any form of work so that it should be considered as 'rendering service... unto the Lord' (6:7).<sup>329</sup> The underlying principle is that of integrity, having outward activity mirrored by an inward disposition,<sup>330</sup> which is transferable to any contemporary relationship.

Whether any participants have the knowledge to put forward any of Stott's justifications will be a point to measure across the formal and informal groups, where it might be expected that education would play a part in such knowledge.

### 3.4. Authorship and Audience

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid, 401.

<sup>326</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016); Stott, *Ephesians*, 252.

<sup>327</sup> Sproul, *Ephesians*, 146.

<sup>328</sup> Stott, *Ephesians*, 257-59.

<sup>329</sup> Sproul, *Ephesians*, 147.

<sup>330</sup> Merkle, *Ephesians*, 204.

Moving away from the cultural issues surrounding the Ephesians text is the issue of the author and audience of Ephesians. Whether the text was written by Paul or not becomes an issue of immense importance when apostolic authorship is connected to biblical authority. How do evangelicals respond to the authorial challenge of the text and does this effect the way they interpret?

The matter of authorship is significant for Evangelicals for whom Pauline authorship is the basis for claiming a text has apostolic authority and is therefore defined *as Scripture*. For those readers, to suggest that Paul was not the author of Ephesians is to question its fundamental designation as Scripture. As Catholic biblical scholar Stephen Fowl points out, for upholders of biblical inerrancy; 'the truthfulness of any of the text's assertions - and therefore its theological authority - depends on the truthfulness of the assertion of Pauline authorship.'<sup>331</sup>

It is for this reason, and a context pre-critical scholarship, that 'Ephesians' was traditionally thought to have been written by Paul to the church in Ephesus, as the letter itself attests in 1:1. Generally speaking, this is still the view taken amongst more conservative Evangelical commentators, whilst more critical or liberal commentators claim the book is pseudonymous. For all the reasons proffered as to why this is the case, there are counter-arguments refuting such claims: the impersonal tone that suggests Paul was not the author can be accounted for by its being intended as a circular letter. The predominantly unique language and style not found in Paul's other writings and therefore suggestive of a pseudonymous author cannot be adequately established given how small the undisputed Pauline corpus is. The close literary relationship to Colossians does not mean it is necessarily the work of a separate author using Colossians for reference. The theological differences present in the text and elsewhere in Paul's writing can be explained. etc.

Stott settles the authorship issue in a particularly evangelical fashion by appealing to what the Bible claims for itself. The Bible's self-attestation with regards to its own nature is a typically evangelical approach to the doctrine of Scripture. When applied to the issue of the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, Stott looks to 1:1 and comments;

For we must regard [Ephesian's] author... as 'an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God', and therefore as a teacher whose authority is precisely the authority of Jesus Christ himself, in whose name and by whose inspiration he writes.<sup>332</sup>

Stott is concerned to demonstrate the divine quality of the text which is attached to apostolicity. Whether this is Paul or not becomes a secondary question as to whether the author is an apostle or not, and this is what the text claims about its author and is therefore to be believed.

Responses to the authorship issue that are unconcerned with apostolic authority focus on the cultural practice of pseudepigraphy. For example, Fowl claims that the linking of authority with authorship reflects a modern concern, and that pseudepigraphy was an accepted practice in the first century and did not carry the connotations of deception we can attach to it today.<sup>333</sup>

Similarly, Martin also suggests that the author of Ephesians was not Paul but a well-known disciple

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<sup>331</sup> Fowl, *Ephesians*, 10.

<sup>332</sup> Stott, *Ephesians*, 21.

<sup>333</sup> Fowl, *Ephesians*, 10.

and companion of Paul who intended to summarise his teaching on the Church and Christian living for new Pagan converts.<sup>334</sup>

The audience of the letter is a less contentious challenge for evangelicals. Many scholars affirm that due to the fact that reference to 'Ephesus' in verse 1 is missing in many manuscripts and that the letter does not include personal greetings, it was intended for a wider audience than that of the city Ephesus.<sup>335</sup> Considering the letter's close affinity with Colossians, it is suggested that the region of Asia-Minor was intended for the circulation of this letter. Instances where interpretation of the text is based on extrabiblical knowledge of the city of Ephesus might be problematic for exegetes here.

What will be revealing on these two points when it comes to the interpretation of focus group participants is what assumed knowledge they will bring to the text regarding its historical context. I would anticipate that most informal participants would have been taught in church or other bible studies that Paul is the author of Ephesians and this will be largely unquestioned. If there was to be any question over authorship, I would expect it to come from the formal groups. Whether this is raised and why will be of note. Will uncertainty over authorship be used as validation for interpreting the text in a certain way? Or will it simply be flagged simply for the sake of awareness but not alter approaches to the passage?

### 3.5. Ephesians in the Canon

The final challenge the text poses, as with Genesis 7 and Psalm 44, is how it stands in relation to other passages of Scripture, including those quoted within it. Might there be contradiction across the canon, or might other passages be brought to bear on Ephesians so as to elucidate particular meanings?

Amongst commentators, the description of Christ's sanctification of the Church in verses 26 and 27 is linked with Ezekial 16, though no explicit reference is made. It might be expected that if this link were to be made by focus groups participants, it would be by the formal group who presumably have a more detailed knowledge of the Bible.

Other canonical references amongst commentators are raised in terms of their consistency. Galatians 3:28, which declares the eradication of gender and position in the light of Christ, is often brought in contention with Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Sproul is keen to emphasise that they are not contradictory, claiming that the point of Galatians is to show how faith levels all believers regarding salvation and does not mean that gender-difference is to be ignored amongst believers.<sup>336</sup> Stott too, is keen to not let Paul contradict himself, claiming 'to do this in biblical exegesis is a counsel of despair.'<sup>337</sup> The doctrine of Scripture that guides such readings can be seen here, where there is a clear concern to protect the integrity of both passages and the consistency of Scripture as God's divine revelation, which cannot contradict itself. It will be interesting to see if any participants bring this verse to bear on the readings of submission and headship to argue for an egalitarian interpretation, much in the same vein of reading through the lens of the opening verse 21 (discussed in 3.2).

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<sup>334</sup> Martin, *Ephesians*, 4.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>336</sup> Sproul, *Ephesians*, 137-38.

<sup>337</sup> Stott, *Ephesians*, 216.

The declaration in 6:2 that ‘honour your father and mother’ is the first commandment with a promise, also receives some attention from scholars on account of the second commandment promising ‘steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.’<sup>338</sup> Fowl suggests that this is simply a statement of the logical consequence of faithfulness to God, rather than a specific promise.<sup>339</sup> Stott similarly argues that the second commandment is a declaration of God’s character but then asks why, if this is the case, the author of Ephesians refers to the ‘first’ promise, and not the ‘only’ promise? He suggests this is either because Paul has the whole of the law in mind, not just the decalogue, or that ‘first’ means rank, rather than order, and references the importance of the promise.<sup>340</sup> Furthermore, it is noted that the Exodus quotation is adapted by the author of Ephesians to refer to the ‘earth’, expanding its implication beyond the land of Canaan.<sup>341</sup> Again, the doctrine of Scripture can be assumed to undergird these interpretive efforts. Paul, as an apostle and conveyor of divine revelation, cannot be simply ‘wrong’ in his declaration of the fifth commandment as the first with a promise and therefore his intention must be expounded. Good knowledge of the Old Testament is required in order to pick up on this interpretative challenge, and if this issue is raised, I would suspect it would be solely in the formal group discussions.

As has already been mentioned, Ephesians’ similarity with Colossians has been noted by various scholars and points of departure from one another are raised from time to time to emphasise the particular slant of Ephesians. For example, Bruce points out that in Colossians 3:25 it is the wrongdoer who will be ‘paid back for whatever wrong has been done’, but in Ephesians 6:8 it is good deeds that are rewarded.<sup>342</sup>

Whether these canonical references will be pointed out by the formal and informal focus groups will be a good indicator of what knowledge and attitude towards the biblical text these readers hold, and how theological education might affect such knowledge and level of intertextual connections made. It will also be interesting to note, as with Genesis and Psalms, the extent to which other Scriptural passages determine the interpretation of the one at hand. This has already been seen amongst commentators – Stott’s argument concerning headship is based on passages outside Ephesians – will readers follow suit?

Summary: The main exegetical challenges facing readers of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 are the problem of the cultural gap between the time of the writer and modern reader, how to correctly understand the concepts of submission and headship, what to make of the acceptance of the practice of slavery, how to determine the author and audience of Ephesians and what impact this has, and how to read Ephesians in relation to the rest of the Bible. As with Genesis 7 and Psalm 44, I have provided a range of responses to these issues from a variety of perspectives and suggested where focus group participants might be expected to agree or disagree with such views.

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<sup>338</sup> Exodus 20:6.

<sup>339</sup> Fowl, *Ephesians*, 181.

<sup>340</sup> Stott, *Ephesians*, 240-41.

<sup>341</sup> Merkle, *Ephesians*, 33.

<sup>342</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 401.



