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17 The Bible and Literature

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Many new images have been offered in recent scholarship to describe the relationship between the Bible and literature. Rather than connecting with the more traditional relationships based on time or power (earlier/later; strong/weak; respect/parody), some of these new images are spatial in nature. The biblical text might be described as "nomadic"[1] within literature, or as a "city"[2] to inhabit, with literature offering a way to navigate through.[3] These images are important and thought-provoking and will be discussed here, as will the notion of both biblical and later literary texts as means of transport for understanding or something deeper. I will draw on the reflections of those who have pondered the connection between biblical and later literary texts and consider ways in which reading literature and reading the Bible might be complementary. Moving beyond the notion of the Bible in literature, this chapter will explore some of the imaginative ways to conceive of the Bible and literature.

RECEPTION HISTORY IN BIBLICAL AND LITERARY STUDIES

Traditional biblical reception history tends to take a fixed view of the nature and direction of the relationship between a biblical text and its appearance in a later literary text. In David B. Gowler's *The Parables*

[1] Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

[2] Luke Timothy Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 165–80.

[3] Ben Quash, "Community, Imagination and the Bible," in *The Bible: Culture, Community, Society*, ed. Angus Paddison and Neil Messer (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 99–121.

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after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia,[4] it is in the interaction between a parable and its later manifestation in literature, art, or music that truth emerges for the reader. But it is a truth related to the parable rather than the later media, and there is an underlying assumption that there is a quality to the parable that limits the range of acceptable interpretations: "Even dialogic narratives like parables provide buoys in the channel of interpretation that encourage interpreters to navigate within certain boundaries of readings."[5] Engaging, in this case diachronically, with allusions to the biblical text "can make one's own interpretations [of the Bible] more cogent and more comprehensive."[6]

In literary studies, the relationship between a biblical and a later text tends to be viewed rather differently. In Geoffrey S. Proehl's *Coming Home Again: American Drama and the Figure of the Prodigal*,[7] the parable of the Prodigal Son is read as a recurring paradigm in American twentieth-century drama, offering a shared vocabulary with which to explore universal themes of wholeness and rupture, independence and homecoming. The parable is not read as demanding a limited range of responses but is an archetype which is open-ended and historically contingent:

> My argument is that American domestic drama traditionally wants to find a way to end with some version of 'Home, Sweet Home', but that this music cannot quite drown out what has gone before. Although we try to fix the family, something is not quite working in the way it should: even though the prodigal son comes home, life in that household will never quite be the same.[8]

In these dramas, the parable appears with "naïve persistence" but with a "complexity of forms," and the interpreter's role is "to use an awareness of conventionality to read against the naturalizing, self-affirming, truth claims of realism and autobiography so central to American theatre."[9] In a reading such as this, the significance of the biblical text is asserted at the same time as its generative, multidirectional power is explored in

4 David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus: Their Imaginative Receptions across Two Millennia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2017).
5 Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus*, 4.
6 Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus*, 4.
7 Geoffrey S. Proehl, *Coming Home Again: American Drama and the Figure of the Prodigal* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1997).
8 Proehl, *Coming Home Again*, 81.
9 Proehl, *Coming Home Again*, 176.

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specific categories of literature and, importantly, their readers. We might note that, in his monograph, Proehl makes reference to only a handful of texts from the field of biblical studies, and biblical commentators on the parables such as Klyne Snodgrass[10] and Gowler make no reference to his work in theirs. A closer, and truly interdisciplinary, dialogue between the fields of biblical and literary studies around specific texts and themes remains somewhat peripheral in both.[11]

More fluid ways to conceive of the relationship between biblical and later literary texts are to be found in biblical studies, however, and Brennan W. Breed's approach is perhaps closest to that which we find in literary studies such as Proehl's. Breed offers a way to take seriously the permeable boundaries between the original text and the later text, with "drift" as an "essential characteristic of text" rather than deliberate and fixed paths of connection. Specific phrases in texts may be understood in many ways, and by exploring these singularities in particular contexts, new contours of meaning may be discerned. These contours of meaning avoid the stale, fixed categories of readings that are defined as Jewish, Christian, or contemporary. How the different aspects of the text function becomes more important than what "the text" might mean. The guiding metaphor is of the biblical text as a nomad rather than an exile or a migrant, with no fixed point of "home" in view. The interpreter's task is to "follow the tracks through the steppe and watch for patterns of movement and action that always change over times and space," as the nomad interacts with the found environment and takes on new identities.[12]

There is an expansive aspect to this approach that calls on the reception critic to map, from a variety of perspectives, the ways readings of aspects of the text vary over time. This mapping is organized according to the similarities of specific readings rather than externally imposed categories. As Breed comments, "a single determination of a text reveals merely a fraction of a text's contour."[13] We are encouraged to think of texts as "tigers on the loose or as spandrels, not anchors"[14] and, to change the metaphor somewhat, to read the unfolding of their

[10] Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

[11] Although journals such as *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*, *Literature and Theology*, and *Christianity and Literature* have sought to address this.

[12] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 203.

[13] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 206.

[14] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 109.

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"significatory, transmutational and nonsemantic powers"[15] as the plot of their textual process. Proehl's mapping of instances of Prodigal Son motifs such as rupture and wholeness in a wide and diverse range of twentieth-century American dramas may be read as creating a similarly new narrative of meaning, developed from the dramas up.

From a different perspective, Anthony Swindell also explicitly uses the spatial image of mapping the literary territory in his discussion of the role of biblical stories in contemporary fiction.[16] His aim is to provide some routes through the terrain of the novels to help the reader better understand their interpretations of particular biblical texts. His examples are drawn from literary hypertexts that consciously signal their relationship to a biblical pretext, often in the title or through the use of biblical names. Despite making reference to a "carnivalesque" relationship between the two, echoing the freedom of nomadic wandering, Swindell is sometimes drawn to make value judgments about the appropriateness of what he finds on the ground. He asks, for example, if Oscar Wilde's *Salome* is a "degenerate version of a theme from Heine or a rich development?"[17] – shifting from topographer to arbiter of taste and standards, which, it might be argued, works against the expansive and accepting drive of the spatial image.

There is a different use of metaphors drawn from geography in the work of Ben Quash,[18] as he reflects on the thought experiment of Luke Timothy Johnson.[19] Johnson imagines the Bible as a city to inhabit as a citizen rather than merely to visit as a tourist or excavate as an archaeologist. Here the Bible has a fixed, physical form and it is literature that is understood as the map to enable the reader to find a home there. The image of a city signals the complexity and layers of historical activity "beneath" the Bible, and the associated images of the resident and the tourist indicate the difference between those who have a lifelong knowledge of the Bible and those whose knowledge is incomplete. Quash reads literature as "an exercise in habituation of the Bible" and cites writers such as Milton and Bunyan as true "citizens" whose literary works exist within the world of the Bible.[20] For modern readers who regard the Bible as a tourist destination or an archaeological site if they

[15] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 140.
[16] Anthony C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible: The Literary Reception-History of Fourteen Biblical Stories* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 10.
[17] Swindell, *Reworking the Bible*, 7.
[18] Quash, "Community, Imagination and the Bible," 99–121.
[19] Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines," 165–80.
[20] Quash, "Community, Imagination and the Bible," 106.

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regard it at all, literature (and other artistic endeavors) may offer a way to experience living there in a creative and imaginative way. Quash suggests that modern Passion plays may operate in this way, but he makes a more general point too about the role of the artistic imagination: "Biblical literacy is all very well, but not enough to make *citizens* unless it is married with some of the insights that artists can bring. For they have a wisdom to offer about how the human imagination is engaged, and this is a wisdom which the Church needs."[21] Here the perspective is firmly rooted in the belief that the relationship between the Bible and later literature may be of spiritual benefit to the contemporary reader and that the Bible is a "place" where readers of literature should feel at home. Many would challenge both of those assumptions but would still want to explore the relationship between literature and the Bible. In order to take this further, I turn now to a different set of spatial images for texts and their relationship to their readers, which is offered to us by the poet Emily Dickinson.

TEXTS AS BEARERS OF THE SOUL

My starting point and guiding metaphor is Emily Dickinson's famous poem about reading, written in a letter to a friend in 1873:

> There is no frigate like a book
> To take us lands away,
> Nor any coursers like a page
> Of prancing poetry.
> This traverse may the poorest take
> Without oppress of toll;
> How frugal is the chariot
> That bears a human soul![22]

This is one of Dickinson's most accessible poems, frequently anthologized, its final two lines available as a logo on a range of merchandise designed to extol the virtues of reading. Its tightly constructed use of images repays deeper study. It refers to a "frigate" rather than a steamboat, "coursers" rather than ponies, a "chariot" rather than a carriage or a stagecoach. The word choice lends an exotic air to the image of the book or the poem as a mode of human transport. "Prancing poetry" has

[21] Quash, "Community, Imagination and the Bible," 121.
[22] *Emily Dickinson: Poems*, ed. Mabel Loomis Todd (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1896), 29. Public Domain CC0.

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the literary text take on the nature of the equine coursers, playfully and proudly. The phrase "Without oppress of toll" contrasts the egalitarian nature of the availability of the written word with the economic barriers presented by physical travel, with almost revolutionary significance. In another key contrast, the contained, spare, unshowy frugality of the literary text is in the metaphorical world of the poem a "chariot," the bearer of emperors and heroes. Here this text/chariot is the carrier of nothing less than the "human soul": not the imagination or the mind, or the site of entertainment, but the very soul of the person. Scholars of Dickinson's life and work might note the contrast between the expansive nature of the metaphorical world of the text created here and the restricted world of the poet, for whom literature may in a very real way have been a passport to places and experiences beyond the confines of the house in which she chose to stay.

In this chapter, I aim to explore the implications of taking Dickinson's image of the text as a pared down but still magnificent bearer of the human soul seriously for both literary and biblical critics. The move is predicated on trusting Emily Dickinson as a literary critic, a reader and interpreter of texts, from whom we might all learn. It also depends on our willingness to read the Bible as being analogous in some way to later literary texts.

Of course, reading the Bible as literature in some sense, which this thought experiment presupposes, has a long history and has influenced the way literature, particularly the novel and poetry, has been read as much as it has influenced the reading of the Bible. The nineteenth-century Scottish minister, George Gilfillan, was a hugely influential figure in promoting the view that the Bible was to be read as poetry, as Charles LaPorte has argued.[23] Indeed, Gilfillan's popular *The Bards of the Bible*[24] (published in 1851) regards the biblical writers as poets first and foremost, at least in terms of their sentiment or impulse rather than in the form of their writing. In light of Dickinson's poem, we might say the biblical writers are regarded by Gilfillan in terms of the powerful and affecting way they seek to transport their readers from one place to another, more exalted position. Well aware of the formal work of Lowth on biblical poetics, and of the threat and challenge of the Higher Criticism of the Bible, Gilfillan slices through those arguments with a

[23] Charles LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), ix–x.

[24] George Gilfillan, *The Bards of the Bible* (Edinburgh: James Hogg; London: Richard Groombridge, 1851).

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deep commitment to the shared power of both the Bible and poetry to move people. He writes that while there have been recent attempts by academics and church people to both defend and critique the authority of scripture and the divine inspiration behind it, "the majority seem, in search of mistakes, or in search of mysteries, to have forgotten that the Bible is a poem at all."[25]

We should be quite clear what Gilfillan is doing here. He is aware that Lowth had connected poetry with the verse form of Hebrew Psalms and so on, but he wants to extend the range of the poetic when it relates to the Bible. He wants to avoid "degrading" to what he calls "dusty prose" key narrative biblical passages such as the creation stories and the golden rule of Christ, which are not presented in the form of the poetic as usually understood. Gilfillan is sitting firmly in a tradition that finds a close association, if not an axiomatic connection, between a belief in the Bible as God's word for all eternity and the language of poetry. For Gilfillan, as LaPorte explains, the Bible is poetry because poetry is "the only speech which has in it the power of permanent impression."[26] Religious truth and poetry are given equal status: and this is demonstrated further in the examples Gilfillan offers of analogies, however weak, of scriptural beauty to be found in the literature of his time. He draws almost exclusively on the poetic work of Milton and Blake, Shelley and Byron, rather than the novels of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen.

Most modern readers would balk at following Gilfillan down the route of canonizing poetry at the same time as poeticizing the Bible. However, we should note that many literary critics have traced the rise of their discipline as having been enabled, galvanized, and authorized by the academic study of the Bible. The relation of the two disciplines has deep roots, as scholars as diverse as Stephen Prickett, Northrop Frye, David Jasper and Stephen Moore have all demonstrated.[27] Put simply, an argument may be made for the genesis of literary criticism as we know it to lie in the belief that literature matters in the same way that

[25] Gilfillan, *The Bards of the Bible*, 31, quoted in LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, ix.

[26] LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, ix.

[27] Stephen Prickett's chapter on "The Bible in Literature and Art" in the previous edition of the *Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 160–78, is an erudite exploration of this reciprocal relationship, in which the perception of both biblical and literary texts is mutually transformed through time.

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scripture matters, and both demand, even deserve, to be studied with care and attention.

It is not just poetry that has a connection with the Bible, of course. Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman's *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700–2000* explores the ongoing relationship between the Bible and literature through the genre of the novel. In their introduction, they define the Bible as a metanarrative of society that continues to be reworked, whether seriously or playfully, in literary texts and particularly in novels in the tradition of realism. They define the biblical sacred not as the miraculous and extraordinary but as the "natural seen in its ultimate depth" and they suggest that "from this perspective, realism may even prove the preferred option for the expression of biblical categories of the sacred in fiction, provided it is a realism conceived in sufficient depth and openness."[28] They warn that "it would be a mistake to underestimate the resilience and fascination of religious ideas and images" even in an age when the Bible is apparently less well-known, and they celebrate the "degree of common ground between the Word of religion and the words penned by novelists." As they go on to argue, the diversity and openness of the biblical texts mirrors the multiple ways these texts appear and are variously interpreted in particular novels from different contexts. Exploring this plurality in its expression in literature might encourage biblical scholars to avoid the temptation to think the meaning of their text may only travel in one direction and can only be plotted along a single line.

In this same volume, Stephen Prickett comprehensively demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between the rise of the novel and the narrative turn in the reading of the Bible in the nineteenth century.[29] He charts the way in which a growing interest in the features of plot, character, and narrative so important in the novel encouraged a fresh appreciation of these features across the individual literary units of the Bible. At the same time, at the heart of the development of the novel was a distinctively Western reading of many of the books of the Bible, which stressed the characters of the multiple individuals in each narrative and their identities rather than their role in a purely typological reading.

[28] Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman, "The Word in the Word: An Introduction," in *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700–2000*, ed. Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 1–12, at 5.

[29] Stephen Prickett, "From Novel to Bible," in *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700–2000*, ed. Knight and Woodman, 13–23.

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I have been presenting examples of readers who have approached the Bible as literature and the effect this has had on the reading of secular literature: suggesting that the two share features in common that mean they should and may be read together as "chariots of the human soul." I now turn briefly to the world of the writers of literature, to suggest that some at least understand their role to be visionary in expanding the horizon of the reader, particularly through their presentation of character. A good example is the late Ursula Le Guin, for whom "the function of art … is to find the truth, and express it as clearly and beautifully as possible."[30] Le Guin argues that "the science-fictioneer imitates the Creation": their work strives to "reflect, and so to clarify, perhaps to glorify" the real objective world in all its complexity and beauty.[31] For her, it is key that it is literature that takes on this task, rather than an essay or a documentary or a sociological treatise. Why should novelists write novels to find and express truth, she asks rhetorically? Her answer focuses on what makes fiction writers different from essayists and educationalists: "They say what it is they have to say through a character – not a mouthpiece, but a fully realized creation. The character is primary …. The writers are not interested in what things do, but in how things are. Their subject is the subject, that which cannot be other than subject: ourselves. Human beings."[32] Literature, for Le Guin, uniquely finds and expresses truth for its readers through the embodiment of character, the very stuff of narrative. It is literature that brings readers to a new understanding of truth in a way that no other medium is able to do. That sort of claim is not so far from similar assertions made by those who focus on the significance of narrative and character in biblical texts, such as the story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel or of Jesus in the Gospels.[33]

[30] I am indebted to my former PhD student, Jaime Wright, for sharing this understanding of Ursula Le Guin's work with me. The quotation is from Susan Wood's Introduction to Ursula Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood (New York: Putnam, 1979), 18.

[31] Le Guin, "Do-It-Yourself Cosmology," in *The Language of the Night*, 121–25, at 123.

[32] Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown," in *The Language of the Night*, 101–19, at 108–9.

[33] For example, David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie claim that at least the first readers of Mark's Gospel "undoubtedly were engaged by the drama of the story, experienced the tension of the conflicts, identified with the characters, and felt suspense about the outcome. Emerging from the experience of Mark's story world, they were perhaps able to see the world around them in a new way and to have new possibilities awakened in them." David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 4.

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I have attempted to argue in various ways, historically, theoretically, creatively, that it might be legitimate (and that it has been considered legitimate) to read literature and at least some of the books of the Bible as narrative texts with analogous origins, purposes, and rhetorical force. The reason for this is to establish that both literary and biblical texts may fruitfully be compared metaphorically to "frigates," "coursers," and "chariot[s]" of the "human soul," in Dickinson's terms. We turn now to consider ways in which the poet or novelist him or herself might be considered an insightful reader of biblical texts: how they might offer companionship on the journey to readers of biblical texts, whether their interest in the Bible is scholarly, religious, or literary.

CREATIVE WRITERS AS INTERPRETERS OF THE BIBLE

For the literary critic Terry Wright, some modern novelists at least may be read as biblical interpreters, who attempt to find meaning in the Bible even as they "have difficulty in giving imaginative substance to the concept of God."[34] The Bible, argues Wright, continues to be a strong source of inspiration in these writers' attempt to find significance. His approach is based on an assumption that these novelists are to a greater or lesser degree self-consciously following the example of rabbinic midrashists as they reappropriate, in this case, the narratives in the book of Genesis. Biblical texts such as Genesis have strong narrative threads and are imaginatively playful but offer little or no explanation or psychological detail. Creative writers, influenced by the biblical criticism of their time, share in the calling of the midrashist to rewrite this open, inviting Bible text with imaginative and creative freedom. In their work, Wright argues that "at best, like the rabbis responsible for midrash, these novelists succeed in opening up the biblical texts creatively, posing new and difficult questions of the text which may point towards new answers to the 'big' questions of our lives."[35] Wright includes Jeanette Winterson on the Flood narrative here, in *Boating for Beginners* (1985), John Steinbeck on the story of Cain and Abel (*East of Eden* [1952]), and Anita Dimant and the story of Rachel and her sisters, through the eyes of Dinah in *The Red Tent* (2005). Each, for him, brings new interpretations of the biblical texts that lie behind,

[34] Terry Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), xii.

[35] Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction*, xii.

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within, or underneath the literary creations, although the relationship between the two may be one of defiance rather than respect.[36]

There are, of course, many questions begged by Wright's work, not least the use of the rabbinic category "midrash" to describe contemporary literary endeavor. The decision to include only the rather limited number of writers who might be said to be writing in this tradition self-consciously is also a debateable point: some would want to extend the understanding of midrashic, literary readings of the Bible further.[37] Others would reject it completely or want to modify it.[38] But it highlights that there is a strong thread of literary criticism that takes the Bible and its significance to influence, move, or affect the reader seriously. For Wright, literature may highlight the power of biblical story, its areas of difficulty for interpretation, and counteract more fundamentalist readings at the same time as it reworks some aspect of the mystery indicated by the word "God." For at least some biblical critics, these are shared interests, and we might learn from each other.

Thomas Gardner, in his *John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination*,[39] offers a nuanced exploration of the way literature, and specifically poetry, "reads" John's Gospel. For Gardner, John the Gospel writer presents Jesus as a character whose enigmatic words the reader must confront and struggle with in order to understand. For him, poets who engage with the Gospel do this in a particularly focused way, with a particular intuition. They "dramatize what hearing [Jesus'] words look like. Poets are our best readers, and it is no surprise that each of them responds in a similar way – hearing themselves addressed, they each work out, through their own experiences, ways of approaching and considering his words."[40] Gardner argues that poets respond to the progression of the narrative and the complex internal connections within John's portrayal of Jesus that Gardner has identified in his reading of the Gospel. He suggests that later readers

[36] We might note that analogous discussions about the relationship between texts such as the Temple Scroll and the Torah are to be found in studies of Second Temple Judaism, and cover similar issues about the status of appropriation versus respectful re-writing.

[37] See, for example, Stephen Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[38] See, for example, Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation, and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible*, LHBOTS 486 (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

[39] Thomas Gardner, *John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011).

[40] Gardner, *John in the Company of Poets*, 2.

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might be guided to do the same through approaching these poets' work. He focuses on the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, among others. Bishop's poem "Squatter's Children,"[41] he suggests, is her reading of Jesus' promise in John 14:2 that there is room for all God's children within God's dwelling places. The poem is set in rural Brazil. From a distance, the speaker watches homeless children play and then be called in to their parents' house, a "soluble/unwarrantable ark," as a violent thunderstorm approaches. Bishop seems to search for a way to describe the promise of a better future she longs to offer them. The image that comes to her is Jesus' promise to his disciples that "there are many mansions in my father's house" (John 14:2). It is a promise that still waits to be fulfilled and has to be accepted on trust. Bishop asserts that the children are standing among the unseen mansions of a "bigger house" than they are able to imagine, even as the storm looms. All nature is theirs by right: it is a dwelling for them in which they are not to be thought of as "squatters." The promise is not a conventionally religious one but anchored in the human and natural world. And the promise she holds out is not perfect and pristine but "soggy" and already melting away "in rooms of falling rain." Nevertheless, she has appropriated for them the words of John's Jesus with logical and poetic precision.

From the start, the children and their house are tiny against the giant landscape; the tool they are playing with is broken but even in the harshness of their world they are playing and laughing. Their laughter is "weak flashes of inquiry," like, for Gardner, the anxious questioning of the disciples of Jesus as he prepares to leave them in the closing chapters of John's Gospel. But the children receive no reply. The mother's voice is "ugly as sin" as she is aware of the broken world in which they live and the vulnerability of her children to its threats.

Like Jesus' address, "little children," at the beginning of the farewell discourses, Bishop's speaker addresses them, "Children." She offers them the insight that the storm is the house that is inviting them to enter, its "threshold" appearing miraculously. She urges them to enter nature, her and their father's house, where there are more mansions than they can imagine. They are in fact standing among the mansions from which they are free to choose, filled with wonder as they are, wet and beguiled. The whole natural world is theirs, legally and eternally. For Gardner, Bishop is attempting to adopt the tone of Jesus here, reassuring and commanding: even the disintegrating documents of wind

[41] First published in Elizabeth Bishop, *Questions of Travel* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1965).

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and rain tell the children that they do indeed have rights in this world. As Gardner explains, "they are not squatters but are at home on this earth, known and loved and cared for."[42]

Gardner argues that Bishop expresses what Jesus' words in John 14:2 aim to allay in the reader: a fear of being orphaned and a longing to hear the words that will calm those very real fears. She offers the children words of natural grace rather than theological grace, and these are based on insubstantial pieces of paper rather than the Word of John's Gospel. She cannot get past her own "weak flashes of inquiry." But if the poem is taken as a reading of John's portrayal of Jesus, it prompts us to ask similar questions as the fearful disciples, and as Bishop of the children, and perhaps to hear different answers. If we return to our guiding metaphor, we might say that the poet, via the interpretation of the literary critic, has taken our reading of the Gospel into the world of Emily Dickinson's transported "human soul[s]." We may choose not to climb into that chariot or onto that courser, of course. There is no coercion. But new directions are at least on the map when biblical critics hear what poets have to say, in this case with the guidance of literary critics such as Gardner.

We should note, of course, that other readings of Bishop's poem's interaction with John 14 have been offered that are less positive about the direction of travel suggested here. For some, the poem may be read as opening up an ironic distance between what the observer offers these squatters' children from her safe vantage point and what they really need. In this reading, practical help in the present is more pressing than promises of potential that the children have no way to access or accept. As Barbara Page comments, "in Bishop's natural mansions, the landlord (God) is absent,"[43] and the speaker's invoking of the words of the Johannine Jesus points out the inadequacy of putting faith in such absence. This too might be considered a critical perspective on the biblical text, which the poem has opened up for the contemporary reader.

To continue our reflection on poets as readers and interpreters of biblical texts, we might hear Seamus Heaney's reading of a Johannine passage in a poetic context.[44] In *The Government of the Tongue*,

[42] Gardner, *John in the Company of Poets*, 136.

[43] Barbara Page, "Home, Wherever That May Be: Poems and Prose of Brazil," in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Bishop*, ed. Angus Cleghorn and Jonathan Ellis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 124–40.

[44] Readers of modern translations of the Bible will be aware that the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8 does not appear in what are considered the most reliable

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written in 1986 in the midst of the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland and when he was being pushed to speak and write more openly on one side or another, Heaney appropriates the moment in John 8 when Jesus is being pressed to condemn the woman caught in adultery. While the clamor heightens, Jesus bends down and writes with his finger on the ground. Heaney admits that, in one sense, poetry makes no difference: "no lyric has ever stopped a tank." But, in another sense, it is "unlimited." Like Jesus' writing in the sand, it leaves accused and accusers "speechless and renewed":[45]

> The drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and marks time in every sense of the phrase. It does not say to the accusing crowd, "Now a solution will take place," it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the riff between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on itself.[46]

Poetry, like the writing of Jesus as described in John's Gospel (or a late version of the Gospel at least) is a liminal place, a diverting moment, a nonjudgmental space where the concentration of the reader may be refracted toward justice and mercy. The same story from John's Gospel had earlier been reinterpreted in Heaney's appalled and regretful poem from 1975, "Punishment." In the poem, he reflects on the punishment of a woman for her relationship with a British soldier, at the height of the Troubles, through his fascination with the image of a bog body.[47] He calls the woman "My poor scapegoat" but admits he "would have cast .... The stones of silence." He "would connive/In civilized outrage" at the punishment, at the same time as he could "understand the exact/And tribal, intimate revenge."

As Richard Rankin Russell has noted,[48] the poem was much revised, struggled with, as Heaney attempted to make sense of the

ancient manuscripts of the Gospel, but this does not enter into Heaney's discussion of the text.

45 Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978–1987* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 107.

46 Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, 108.

47 First published in Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

48 Richard Rankin Russell, *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 74–77.

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violence around him. The revisions show a gradual insertion of the first person of the poet into the poem, a placing of himself in a position of judgment and of being judged. In the poem, Heaney admits to having "stood dumb," but the poem, while asserting his apparent silence, is a lasting testament to the conflict he continues to seek to resolve. Russell argues that the naming of the woman/body "My poor scapegoat" directs the reader to the inadequacy of a tribal understanding of scapegoating to bring reconciliation at the same time as it points to the efficacious sacrifice of the one whose pause to write saved the woman caught in adultery. For Russell, "punishment offers a hidden narrative of writing as a generative answer to violence. Art is not a solution to conflict, but it is a response that will eventually enable the conditions for human flourishing, even love."[49] The poem offers a powerful, transformative reading of that strange episode in a contested Gospel story. When it is read alongside Heaney's much later reflections on the relationship between poetry and that biblical story, the poem highlights the potential for literature in its broadest sense to offer a moment of self-critical pause. Like Dickinson, Heaney leaves open the possibility that the written word may take us as readers to a new place of understanding, and one of his means of transport is the Bible.

In this exploration of the applicability of Dickinson's image of texts as chariots for the human soul to both biblical and later literary texts, I have argued they both have a creative and transformative power to interact with each other and with their readers. Seamus Heaney offers further points of significant comparison in his reflection on the reception of poetry in the contemporary world. In his long conversation with Dennis O'Driscoll in 2008,[50] he answers a question about whether or not a larger audience for poetry may be encouraged. He notes that, on one hand, poetry is an "ad hoc reality: you can log-on, log-off, you don't need to know very much, just enter where you like, take what you want and go."[51] Much the same may be said about the Bible, whether it is read in a confessional setting or as a literary source or as a neat example of a moral point. But, Heaney goes on, "it's also a coherent inner system or order of understanding. So there's work to be done in creating an audience for poetry understood in the second way, and this, speaking in the largest sense, is the work of education, [in schools] but continues

[49] Russell, *Seamus Heaney*, 79.

[50] Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, conducted by Dennis O'Driscoll (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

[51] Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 458.

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later on through all kinds of dissemination, institutional and accidental."[52] The pick and mix model Heaney describes first only goes so far for the reading of both poetry and the Bible. In order to open up an appreciation of a potential "coherent inner system or order of understanding," the tendency to read on a surface level needs to be questioned, problematized, relativized. Perhaps those in biblical studies need to be more aware of creating an audience for biblical texts as understood in Heaney's second way, even if it means arguing that the Bible's inner system is not as coherent as sometimes assumed, although its smaller narrative units might be. As I have already argued, tracing the complex history of its reception in literature, the multiple directions of its travel, may result in a deeper awareness of the contours of its meaning and influence.

CONCLUSION: FINDING MEANING IN THE FRUGAL

A final aspect of Dickinson's poetic imagining of textuality around which readers of literature and the Bible might find common cause is the deep respect for the frugality she describes. Biblical interpreters in particular know what it means to have to deal in the detailed, the minute, the apparently of little significance. A Pauline scholar's "chariot" is very frugal indeed compared to a scholar of Dickens or even of the Metaphysical Poets. Interpreters of the Bible learn early on to read closely, with care and attention. That this might be an area of contention in literary studies is suggested in literary critic Eleanor Cook's introduction to her study, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*.[53] Cook writes that she decided to look closely at Bishop's collected poems, starting from "the basics of her art: diction . . . rhythm and meter . . . and so on."[54] She reflects that one might have thought this work had been done, as Bishop is well known for her care and perfectionism. But, Cook notes, "close reading fell out of fashion in the academy, even close reading of such rich and packed work as Bishop's. She paid close attention to details, and surely we should too."[55] In this chapter, I have offered ways in which interpreting literature might inform biblical interpretation, through the metaphors used to describe the relationship between the two, or reading in general. Here, Dickinson's highlighting of the

[52] Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 458.
[53] Eleanor Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
[54] Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 1.
[55] Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 2.

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meaningful "frugality" of texts that transport the reader is perhaps more familiar to the biblical interpreter than some readers of literary texts. But the comment Cook places in parenthesis might be directed to both: "(And since when did we not pay attention to details in anything that really matters to us?)."[56] Our exploration of the relationship between literature and the Bible, through metaphors for the reading of texts, has taken us back to the interpretations of Proehl, Breed, Quash, and Gilfillan as well as those of the poets Heaney and Bishop, for whom reading the Bible and reading literature may be transformative experiences.

When biblical and literary texts matter to us as readers, they have the potential to be even more buoyant than frigates to take us to lands away and are even more powerful than coursers to bear us playfully and with adventure, whatever our status or our wealth. When these literary and biblical texts matter to us, they may be the very chariots of our souls, driving us headlong to places we have not yet imagined.

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[56] Cook, *Elizabeth Bishop at Work*, 2.

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