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## JOHN WESLEY – “A MAN OF ONE BOOK”

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Engaging Scripture, as a witness to and setting of divine revelation, was central to John Wesley’s Christian life and to the spiritual communities that he helped gather and lead. The elderly Wesley stressed this point when reflecting on the early movement at Oxford University:

From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was *homo unius libri* – a man of one book. God taught them all to make his “Word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths.” They had one, and only one rule of judgment in regard to all their tempers, words, and actions, namely, the oracles of God.<sup>1</sup>

It is characteristic that Wesley’s primary focus in this quotation is on the Bible as the rule or guide for Christian practice—and a central means of grace evoking and sustaining that practice.<sup>2</sup> But he also valued it as the rule of Christian belief, insisting that he regulated his theological convictions by Scripture.<sup>3</sup> This role is a bit more prominent in the often-quoted passage from Wesley’s preface to the first volume of his *Sermons*, which begins:

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! ... Let me be *homo unius libri*. Here

then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.<sup>4</sup>

### **“A MAN OF ONE BOOK” — AND A THOUSAND BOOKS!**

Read in isolation, these quotes might suggest that Wesley relied solely on Scripture (and solely on his private reading of Scripture) in seeking spiritual nurture or considering theological issues. But elsewhere he responded to the claim of some of his lay preachers, “I read only the Bible,” with strong words: “This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul. He wanted others too.”<sup>5</sup> That Wesley did not put himself above St. Paul in this way is clear from the books that he owned, read, or consulted through his life.<sup>6</sup> They number well over a thousand volumes and cover the full range of topics in his day—from the history of early Christianity, to medicine, politics, poetry, and more. Significantly, Wesley assigned the same range of reading to his pastoral assistants and to both men and women participating in his Methodist movement!<sup>7</sup>

As Wesley described his practice more carefully in *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, to be *homo unius libri* is to be one who regards no book *comparatively* but the Bible.<sup>8</sup> This more precise formulation affirms the primacy of authority assigned to Scripture, without setting other books aside. It also hints at Wesley’s deep conviction that Scripture is understood most helpfully and faithfully when it is read *comparatively* and *in conference*. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate this conviction by sketching several aspects of Wesley’s practice of reading the Bible. As readers consider this practice, I hope that they will recognize not only Wesley’s formative impact on the traditions descended from his ministry, but also some elements of wisdom from his example for our present life and vocation. That is, the header for each section describing how Wesley *read* the Bible can also be taken as a suggestion for how to *read* it today.

### **READ THE ONE BOOK *COMPARATIVELY* IN ITS MANY EMBODIMENTS**

Consider first the question of the identity of the One Book to be read as Scripture. A clear possible answer for Wesley was the currently “authorized” English translation (commonly called the King James

Version [KJV]). He deeply appreciated this translation, quoting it throughout his life. But he did not confine himself to this embodiment of the One Book. Like his brother Charles, John Wesley studied other English translations as well as translations in German and French. This can be demonstrated most fully for Charles, because we have catalogue lists of Charles's personal library around 1765.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the KJV (1611), these lists include the New Testament in the English translation of Miles Coverdale, which was the first English version of the Bible authorized for the Church of England by Henry VIII in 1539 (often called the "Great Bible"). Charles also owned an English rendering of Theodore Beza's translation of the New Testament into German (in 1556), along with a German New Testament and the "Geneva Bible" (1560) in French. While much of John Wesley's personal library has been lost, his copy of Luther's German translation of the Bible survives at Wesley's house in London.<sup>10</sup>

Going a step further, the Wesley brothers valued the Bible in its original languages over all later translations. They inherited this emphasis from their father, who once described comparing different translations with the original languages as "the best commentary in the world," and encouraged pastors to use a polyglot Bible that included texts in Hebrew, Greek, Chaldean Aramaic, Syriac, Samaritan, Arabic, Ethiopic and Persian.<sup>11</sup> While there is little evidence of facility with the other languages, John and Charles were both proficient in Greek and Hebrew. They frequently appeal to these languages in suggesting alternatives to current English renderings of biblical words or phrases. And they equipped themselves to read in this comparative manner. Consulting again the more complete records in Charles's case, his personal library included a Hebrew Testament, two Hebrew psalters, a copy of the Septuagint (the Old Testament in Greek), and four different Greek versions of the New Testament.

We can identify at least four versions of the Greek New Testament which John Wesley owned as well.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly significant because John (who tutored Greek as part of his role as a fellow of Lincoln College) was very aware that there is no pristine Greek text handed down from the earliest church. Rather, we have multiple manuscripts, with numerous variant readings, which must be read comparatively in seeking the most reliable text. Among the versions that Wesley owned was John Mill's two-volume set, which gathered in footnotes the most complete list at the time of variant readings in these manuscripts.<sup>13</sup>

The Greek New Testament that John Wesley favored was that of Johann Albrecht Bengel (1734), which is agreed to be the best critical Greek text of his day. Bengel's text corrected the Textus Receptus (the Greek text used for the translation of the KJV) at numerous points. These corrections and other issues had led to a growing number of calls for a new English translation of the Bible, and scattered attempts to undertake this task. John Wesley owned a copy of one of the most thorough defenses of the need for a new English translation.<sup>14</sup> This may have encouraged him to venture out when preparing *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* in the 1750s. Drawing on his range of resources, Wesley offered his own translation of the Greek text that varies from the KJV in over twelve thousand instances.<sup>15</sup> Most of the variants were modernizations of the English or minor in nature, but some reflect text-critical decisions that remain standard in biblical scholarship. Wesley's translation as a whole reflects the fruit of a lifetime of reading the One Book *comparatively* in its many embodiments.

### **READ THE ONE BOOK *COMPARATIVELY* WITH SCHOLARLY TOOLS**

To study the Bible in its original languages, one needs more than just copies of both Testaments in these languages. Some scholarly tools are also essential. Thus we find Wesley citing or commending standard tools like Johann Buxtorf's Hebrew grammar (1609) and lexicon (1613), and Richard Busby's similar resources for Greek (1663). He even published abridged versions of these for use in the school for children that he started at Kingswood.<sup>16</sup>

Wesley's endorsement of these standard works is significant, because it took place in the midst of a debate over Hebrew language materials in particular. The earliest texts of the Hebrew Testament spell words using only their consonants (in part to save space). The oral rendering of the text (with the vowels) was passed down by tradition. During the medieval period these vowels were inserted into the written text as small marks (vowel points) under the consonant letters. Early in the eighteenth century John Hutchinson launched a vigorous attack upon use of these vowel points. His reasons were largely idiosyncratic, with little historical consideration or justification. In effect, he turned the Hebrew Testament into a "code book" of the secrets of the universe, by rendering the consonant stems into often

fanciful words/meanings. While Hutchinson's views were broadly challenged by biblical scholars, they gathered influential supporters among a few fellows at Oxford University of High Church persuasion—mainly because these fellows appreciated how Hutchinson used his approach to combat Isaac Newton's philosophy, with its apparent deistic implications.<sup>17</sup> John Wesley was acquainted with several Hutchinsonians, so he had to consider the debate. His conclusion was that Hutchinson's "whole hypothesis, philosophical and theological, is unsupported by any solid proof," and prone to encourage folk to read whatever they please into Scripture.<sup>18</sup>

Put in other terms, Wesley's concern was to avoid idiosyncratic reading of Scripture by reading it *comparatively* with the standards accepted in the community of scholarship on biblical languages. So he relied mainly on long-standard sources, though he was also happy to obtain newly published tools that advanced careful study of Hebrew grammar.<sup>19</sup>

If Wesley stood within the mainstream of his day in debates over linguistic and textual criticism of the Bible, what was his stance regarding the early forms of historical criticism that surfaced in the second half of seventeenth century? Writers like Thomas Hobbes, Jean Le Clerc, Richard Simon, and Benedict Spinoza began to apply forms of critical analysis used on other literary texts to the various books of the Bible, calling into question traditional assumptions about the authorship of some books, challenging the historical accuracy of certain biblical accounts, and highlighting human dynamics in the long process of canonization. Some advocates of this agenda appeared to reduce the Bible to a mere collection of antiquated human texts.

The response of the vast majority of eighteenth-century Anglican scholars and clergy to these developments was defensive, insisting on the historical uniqueness and accuracy of the biblical accounts.<sup>20</sup> John Wesley generally reflected this response. At the same time, he found that some studies of the customs of the ancient Israelites and the early Christians enriched his reading of the Bible—so much so that he published an abridgment of one study for his lay preachers.<sup>21</sup> This suggests a rudimentary appreciation for insights that can be gained from reading the Bible *comparatively* with its historical/cultural context.<sup>22</sup> That said, the comments that Wesley provides in his *Explanatory Notes* upon the Old and New Testaments almost never focus on clarifying the meaning of a

text in its original historical context. Rather, as he describes his goal, his comments are intended to give the “direct, literal meaning” and keep the reader’s eye “fixed on the naked Bible.”<sup>23</sup>

### **READ *COMPARATIVELY* THE MANY BOOKS IN THE ONE BOOK**

This might suggest that the meaning of any particular text in the “naked Bible” will always be clear to the faithful reader. As one who had been reading the One Book all of his life, Wesley knew that this is not the case! Returning to the preface for his first volume of *Sermons*:

I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? ... I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” I meditate thereon, with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable.<sup>24</sup>

Biblical passages are often ambiguous or unclear, and readers must labor to understand many passages. Wesley assumed that this laboring should include reading them *comparatively* with other passages. Those who follow his example will quickly confront the reality that the One Book is a collection of many books! They will likely also become aware that many Christians ignore, deprecate, or even reject certain books within the Book—reducing the range of any comparative reading that they do. What was Wesley’s practice in this regard?

The first point to make concerns the scope of the “canon” or official list of books that belong in the One Book. The KJV, as published through Wesley’s lifetime, included the sixteen books commonly called the “apocrypha.” Article VI of the Anglican Articles of Religion affirmed these works as worthy to read “for example of life and instruction of manners,” though not as authorities for doctrine. Wesley’s father specifically encouraged reading the apocryphal books as aids for understanding the more authoritative books in the canon.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is not surprising to find scattered citations from or allusions to the apocrypha in Wesley’s writings.<sup>26</sup> In keeping with the Articles, these are never presented as warrant in doctrinal debate; they typically support appropriate Christian “manners,” such as the exhortation in his *Journal* for Christians to “honor the physician, for God hath appointed

him” (Sir 38:1–2).<sup>27</sup> More significantly, Wesley eventually adopted a more stridently Protestant stance on the apocrypha than that of his father or his Anglican standards. This was stated most sharply in 1779: “We cannot but reject them. We dare not receive them as part of the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>28</sup> Five years later, when he abridged the Anglican Articles of Religion, to provide doctrinal standards for The Methodist Episcopal Church that was organizing in the newly formed United States of America, Wesley deleted all reference to the apocrypha from the Article on Scripture.

Whatever difference he may have had concerning the apocrypha, Wesley clearly shared, and had been deeply shaped by, the Anglican commitment to reading the *whole* Bible. The *Book of Common Prayer* prescribed a pattern of daily readings that covered the Old Testament once and the New Testament (except Revelation) three times a year. Wesley passed this expectation on to his Methodist followers, encouraging them to read a portion of *both* testaments each morning and evening.<sup>29</sup> Lest children avoid the Old Testament, because of its size, Wesley prepared a special abridgment for them.<sup>30</sup>

Wesley’s pastoral practice reflects his commitment to the theological and spiritual value of the whole Bible. For example, he left behind records of his biblical texts for sermons through much of his ministry. These demonstrate extensive preaching in both Testaments. Indeed, we can document Wesley preaching on texts from every book in the Protestant canon except Esther, Song of Songs, Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Philemon, and the third epistle of John.<sup>31</sup>

Among the significant features embedded in Wesley’s pastoral practice is a firm rejection of the tendency for Christians (tracing back at least to Marcion in the early church) to ignore or even excise the Old Testament.<sup>32</sup> Most specifically, Wesley refused any suggestion that the emphasis on grace and forgiveness in the New Testament should be posed against the emphasis on living by God’s law in the Old Testament.<sup>33</sup> Rather, as Wesley liked to put it, every moral command in *both* Testaments should be read as a “covered promise” —a promise both that the basic intent of the law is our well-being and that God will graciously enable our obedience.<sup>34</sup> This conviction allowed him to read the Old Testament as an authoritative unfolding of *Christian* truth, while affirming the New Testament as the *final standard* of Christian faith and practice.<sup>35</sup>

In short, for Wesley an adequate understanding of any particular passage of Scripture should include *comparative* reading with other relevant texts throughout the Protestant canon.

### **READ *COMPARATIVELY* IN LIGHT OF GOD'S CENTRAL PURPOSE**

Wesley was equally concerned to read the entire canon with attention to those themes and emphases that emerge repeatedly:

Every truth which is revealed in the oracles of God is undoubtedly of great importance. Yet it may be allowed that some of those which are revealed therein are of greater importance than others as being more immediately conducive to the grand end of all, the eternal salvation of [humanity]. And we may judge of their importance even from this circumstance, that they are not mentioned only once in the sacred writings, but are repeated over and over.<sup>36</sup>

Notice Wesley's identification of the grand end of God's revelatory work in Scripture as the eternal salvation of humanity. We will see below that he came to recognize that God's saving concern reached beyond humanity to embrace the whole creation. The key in this passage is that Wesley focused the purpose and truthfulness of Scripture around its function as a witness to and means of God's saving concern. This point comes through as well in the elderly Wesley's "Thoughts upon Methodism":

What is their fundamental doctrine? That the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice. Hence they learned: (1) That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ; or in other words, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. (2) That this can never be wrought in us but by the power of the Holy Ghost. (3) That we receive this and every other blessing merely for the sake of Christ; and, (4) that whosoever hath the mind that was in Christ, the same is our brother, and sister, and mother.<sup>37</sup>

Wesley is following here the lead of 2 Timothy 3:16–17, where the inspiration of Scripture is related to its role of instructing in Christian belief and training in lives of righteousness. He frequently cites this text in teaching sermons, affirming the Bible as "infallibly true" on these matters.<sup>38</sup> In scattered other settings Wesley insists that there are no



“errors” in Scripture.<sup>39</sup> Some interpreters have taken these quotes to indicate that Wesley would align with the modern model of biblical inerrancy, which insists that the Bible is accurate in every detail, including historical allusions and descriptions on the natural world. I believe that consideration of the range of his comments on Scripture and his central theological convictions places him instead within the long tradition of Christian interpreters who focus the authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice.<sup>40</sup>

If Wesley stands within this long tradition, he is also a striking example of distinctive emphases within the tradition. While Christians share the same Bible, from the beginning we have found ourselves gathering into various traditions within the broader family. Several factors have contributed to this. One crucial factor is differing judgments about which aspects within the rich tapestry of Scripture provide the dominant motif, in light of which to appreciate the other aspects. Christian history makes clear that, as finite creatures, readers of Scripture soon adopt a “working canon,” a group of texts to which they appeal most often, as presenting most clearly the dominant motif in light of which to read the rest of Scripture. Wesley was aware of this fact: “We know, ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ and is therefore true and right concerning all things. But we know likewise that there are some Scriptures which more immediately commend themselves to every [person’s] conscience.”<sup>41</sup>

So what was Wesley’s “working canon”? In the quote just given he went on to say “In this rank we may place the passage before us,” namely, 1 Corinthians 13. He also highly prized the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. But the biblical book that Wesley prized most highly was the first Epistle of John. He referred to this epistle as “the deepest part of Scripture” and a “compendium of all the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>42</sup> Most tellingly, he used the first Epistle of John for his sermon text and alluded to it within sermons much more frequently (relative to the number of verses in the book) than any other biblical book.<sup>43</sup>

Wesley privileged the first Epistle of John because of some of its key emphases: that our love for God is a *response* to knowing God’s pardoning love for us (4:19); that the goal of God’s pardoning love is to *heal* and *transform* our lives; and that God’s goal is to make us *perfect in love* both of God and neighbor (4:7–18). When you add to these the insistence that God’s love is *universal*, offering pardon and healing to all who will respond (which Wesley most frequently affirmed invoking

Psalm 145:9, “His mercy is over all his works” BCP psalter), you have the most central motif about God’s saving purpose that Wesley was convinced ran through the whole of Scripture. His privileging of 1 John was a reflection of his commitment to reading all of Scripture *comparatively*, in light of this motif of God’s universal prevenient transforming love.

**READ THE ONE BOOK IN CONFERENCE (OR CON-SPIRACY)  
WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT**

While more could be said about Wesley’s concern to read the One Book *comparatively*, it is essential to consider as well his related—and equally deep—concern that individual readers engage Scripture *in conference*. The place to start in developing this concern is the section elided (...) in the middle of the second extract above from Wesley’s preface to *Sermons*. This section contains one of Wesley’s deepest convictions about Christian life in general and study of Scripture in particular. Here is the extract with the missing material:

Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of lights: “Lord, is it not thy Word, ‘If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God’? Thou ‘givest liberally and upbraidest not’. Thou has said, ‘If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.’ I am willing to do, let me know, thy will.” I then search after and consider parallel passages ....<sup>44</sup>

Wesley’s emphasis on the role of the “inspiration of the Spirit” in all of Christian life is reflected here. His typical use of this phrase is broader than considerations of the production of the Bible. In the *Complete English Dictionary* (1753) that Wesley published to help his followers read Scripture and other writings, he defined “inspiration” as the influence of the Holy Spirit that enables persons to love and serve God. This broad use of the word trades on the meaning of the Latin original, *inspirare*: to breathe into, animate, excite, or inflame. The broader understanding is evident even when Wesley uses “inspiration” in relation to the Bible, as in his comments in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* on 2 Timothy 3:16. He affirms God’s guidance of the original authors, but his focal emphasis is encouraging current readers to seek the Spirit’s inspiring assistance in reading Scripture! As he put it elsewhere (quoting Thomas à Kempis), “we need the same Spirit to *understand* the Scripture which enabled the holy men of old to *write* it.”<sup>45</sup>

While Wesley clearly was encouraging readers to confer with the Spirit for guidance in understanding Scripture, his fundamental concern was personal *embrace* of the saving truth in Scripture. He recognized that such embrace, such “true, living Christian faith . . . is not only an assent, an act of the understanding, but a disposition which *God hath wrought* in the heart.”<sup>46</sup> So he laid particular stress on the Spirit’s *inspiring* presence that enables this embrace, inviting us to “breathe back” (or con-spire) what is graciously offered.<sup>47</sup>

### **READ THE ONE BOOK IN CONFERENCE WITH OTHER READERS**

Bearing in mind this foundational dependence upon the Spirit’s empowering and guiding presence, let me draw attention once more to Wesley’s preface to *Sermons*. After encouraging his readers to pray for help and stressing the need to compare scripture with scripture, Wesley continues, “If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God, and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak.”<sup>48</sup> The crucial concern to note in this concluding line is not just that an individual might turn to other books to help understand the one Book, but that we as individuals need to read the Bible in conference with other readers!

Several dimensions of this need deserve highlighting. Note first that Wesley identifies consulting particularly those “more experienced in the things of God.” His focal concern is not scholarly expertise (though he is not dismissing this), but the contribution of mature Christian character and discernment to interpreting the Bible. Where does one find such folk whose lives and understanding are less distorted by sin? One of Wesley’s most central convictions was that authentic Christian character and discernment are the fruit of the Spirit, nurtured within the witness, worship, support, and accountability of Christian community. This is the point of his often (mis-)quoted line that there is “no holiness but social holiness.” As he later clarified, “I mean not only that [holiness] cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all without society, without living and conversing with [other people].”<sup>49</sup> While the class and band meetings that Wesley designed to embody this principle were not devoted primarily to bible study, they helped form persons who were more inclined to read Scripture, and to read it in keeping with its central purposes.

I hasten to add, secondly, that Wesley's emphasis on the value of reading the Bible in conference with others was not limited to considerations of relative Christian maturity. It was grounded in his recognition of the limits of *all* human understanding, even that of spiritually mature persons. He was convinced that, as finite creatures, our human understandings of our experience, of Christian precedent, and of Scripture itself are "opinions" or interpretations of their subject matter.<sup>50</sup> God may know these things with absolute clarity; we see them "through a glass darkly." Wesley underlined the implication of this in his sermon on a "Catholic Spirit."

Although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true, is the same thing as not to hold it); yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions, taken together, are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*: "To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity."<sup>51</sup>

Wesley went on in the sermon to commend a spirit of openness in conferring with others, where we are clear in our commitment to the main branches of Christian doctrine, while always ready to hear and weigh whatever can be offered against our current understanding of matters of belief or practice (or the meaning of a particular text). His goal for this commended conferring is clear—to seek together *more adequate* understandings of the topic being considered.

The final dimension to highlight about Wesley's call for reading the Bible in conference with others should be obvious: it is vital that we do not limit our conferring to those who are most like us, or those with whom we already agree. We should remain open to, and at times seek out, those who hold differing understandings. Otherwise, we are not likely to identify places where our understanding of something in Scripture (usually shared with those closest to us) might be wrong! That is why Wesley specifically invited any who believed that he presented mistaken readings of the Bible in his first volume of *Sermons* to be in touch, so that they could confer together over Scripture.<sup>52</sup>

**READ THE ONE BOOK *IN CONFERENCE*  
WITH CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

Among those outside of his circle of associates and followers whom Wesley was committed to including in conference over the meaning of Scripture were Christians of earlier generations. As he noted, our primary means of hearing their voice is through their writings.

It is widely recognized that John Wesley valued the writings of the first three centuries of the church. He specifically defended consulting early Christian authors in a published letter to Conyers Middleton. Middleton had argued that such consultation was not necessary because Scripture is both complete and clear in its teachings. Wesley responded, “The Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice; and they are clear in all necessary points. And yet their clearness does not prove that they need not be explained, nor their completeness that they need not be enforced.”<sup>53</sup> He went on to insist that consultation with early Christian writings had helped many avoid dangerous errors in their interpretation of Scripture, while the neglect of these writings would surely leave one captive to current reigning misunderstandings.

One specific conviction that early Christian writers emphasized was the need to read unclear or ambiguous passages in the Bible in light of the “rule of faith.” This term referred to what was most central and unifying in Christian faith, as found in the “more open parts of Scripture” and early baptismal creeds and related catechetical materials.<sup>54</sup> The topic of the “rule of faith” became a battleground during the Reformation. Some teachings and practices had been advanced on the authority of the church through the medieval period that the Reformers judged lacking in biblical support or contrary to clear biblical teaching. In response they championed “Scripture alone” as the rule of faith. But for most Protestants this did not mean rejecting the value of consulting some communally-shared sense of the central and unifying themes in Scripture when trying to interpret particular passages. They changed the name for this shared sense to the “analogy of faith,” but typically defended under this label the practice of consulting at least the Apostles’ Creed when seeking to interpret Scripture correctly.

Wesley inherited through his Anglican standards this Protestant commitment to Scripture as the “rule of faith,” interpreted in light of the “analogy of faith.”<sup>55</sup> His specific commitment to reading the Bible

in light of the Trinitarian (and other) themes affirmed in the Apostles' Creed is embodied in his advice: "In order to be well acquainted with the doctrines of Christianity you need but one book (besides the New Testament) — Bishop Pearson *On the Creed*."<sup>56</sup> John Pearson's volume was an exposition of the Apostles' Creed, which had been commended to Wesley by both of his parents and was used as a text during his study at Christ Church in Oxford. It was the theological text that Wesley himself most often assigned to his assistants and recommended to his correspondents.

**READ THE BOOK OF SCRIPTURE IN CONFERENCE  
WITH THE BOOK OF NATURE**

Another commitment that Wesley imbibed through his Anglican upbringing was stronger emphasis than in most Protestant circles on the value of studying God's revelation in the natural world (the "book of nature") alongside of studying the book of Scripture. Thus, in the midst of publishing *Explanatory Notes* upon the New Testament (1755) and the Old Testament (1765) for his followers, Wesley took time to provide them as well with his *Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation* (first edn., 1763).

Wesley's *Survey*, which grew to five volumes in length, is devoted to an overview of the natural world—beginning with the human body; moving to other animals; then to plants, fossils, and the physical elements of earth, fire, and water; and finally turning toward the heavens, considering air, meteors, and cosmology.<sup>57</sup> It distills some standard works in natural philosophy (what we now would call the "natural sciences") of his day. Wesley interlaced the description with periodic theological reflections (again, often drawn from others) on the significance of what we see in the natural world.

Comparison of *Survey* with the sources that Wesley read and used makes clear that he carefully resisted three alternative tendencies. First, he removed from his extracts of other writers their reflection of the growing Enlightenment agenda of basing religious teachings solely on universal empirically-based observation, an agenda that effectively shifted authority from the book of Scripture to the book of Nature. Second, while he was aware of prominent "concordist" writers, like Thomas Burnet, who tried to explain Scriptural accounts of creation, the flood, and the future cataclysm in terms of current science, Wesley brought no such accounts into *Survey*.<sup>58</sup> Third, as noted earlier, Wesley rejected Hutcheson's "reverse-concordist" claim that

the Bible taught (when properly read without the Hebrew vowel points) its own physics, biology, and the like—with the implication that any alternative in current science should be rejected.

These moves on Wesley's part are consistent with his sense of the focus of Scripture's authority in matters of faith and practice. They also evidence that his primary concern for bringing the book of Scripture into conference with the book of nature was not to *prove* the reliability of Scripture or provide a *foundation* for belief in God. He understood that authentic faith is born of the Spirit, through the Word. At the same time, if God the creator is evident in some way through the creation, as Scripture affirms, then consideration of the creation might appropriately serve to *strengthen* the faith, reverence, and love awakened by the Spirit. This was Wesley's primary purpose in distilling recent treatises in natural philosophy for his followers.

### **WESLEY'S PRECEDENT OF "HONORING CONFERENCE" IN READING SCRIPTURE**

Wesley's engagement with current studies of the natural world also proved helpful in reconsidering some of his inherited interpretations of Scripture. We have time to consider only one example, which can be introduced by returning one last time to the preface of the first volume of *Sermons*.

In that preface Wesley opined "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore." This way of expressing his longing reflects a long development in Christian history. Although Scripture speaks of God's ultimate goal in salvation as the "new heavens and earth," a variety of influences led Christians through the first millennium to assume increasingly that our final state is "heaven above." The latter was seen as a realm where human spirits, dwelling in ethereal bodies, join eternally with all other spiritual beings (a category that did not include animals) in continuous worship of God. By contrast, they assumed that the physical universe, which we abandon at death, would eventually be annihilated. Wesley imbibed this understanding of our final state in his upbringing, and through much of his ministry it was presented as obvious and unproblematic.

This makes it all the more striking when, in the last decade of his life, Wesley reclaimed boldly the biblical imagery of God's renewal of the whole universe, specifically championing the notion that animals

participate in final salvation.<sup>59</sup> A major factor in this change was the study he undertook, in his sixties, of some current works in natural philosophy that utilized the model of the “chain of beings.” Central to this model is the assumption that the loss of any type of “being” in creation would call into question the perfection of the Creator. Prodded by this emphasis in the study of nature, Wesley began to reconsider his long-standing interpretation of Scripture, taking more seriously the biblical insistence that God desires to redeem the whole creation.<sup>60</sup>

This example hints at the dynamic of “honoring conference” that characterized Wesley’s theological reflection at its best. Confronted by an apparent conflict between current human accounts of the natural world and his current (human) understanding of Scripture, Wesley did not simply debate which was more authoritative. He reconsidered his interpretations of *each*, seeking an understanding that *honored both*. In this way he upheld the authority of the One Book, while embracing the contribution of broad conferencing to understanding that Book!



## NOTES

1. Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," I.1 (quoting Ps. 119:105), *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-) 3:504. Cited hereafter as *Works*.
2. See Kenneth J. Collins, "Scripture as a Means of Grace," ch. 2, below.
3. See his letters to William Dodd on 5 Feb. 1756 & 12 Mar. 1756, in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Epworth, 1931), 3:157–58, 167. Hereafter cited as *Letters* (Telford).
4. *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:104–6.
5. 1766 *Minutes*, Q. 30, *Works*, 10:340; also as "Large Minutes," Q. 34, *Works*, 10:887.
6. We can document Wesley's reading from his diaries, scattered lists in his manuscripts, his published *Journal*, his publication of extracts in the *Christian Library* and the *Arminian Magazine*, and the surviving volumes of his personal library. The most reliable list currently of Wesley's reading during his Oxford years is an appendix in Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists" (Duke University Ph.D. thesis, 1972). For Wesley's surviving library, see Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Book Collection at Wesley's House, London," *Methodist History* 41.3 (2003): 118–33. Cf. Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Kingswood School Archives," *Methodist History* 41.2 (2003): 49–67; and Maddox, "Remnants of John Wesley's Personal Library," *Methodist History* 42.2 (2004): 122–28. Frank Baker began work on a comprehensive list of Wesley's reading that will appear in its completeness under the auspices of the Wesley *Works* project.

7. See the reading suggested for his lay “assistants” in Minutes (August 3, 1745), Q. 13, *Works*, 10:161–68; and similar recommendations in a Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:249, that were later published as “A Female Course of Study,” *Arminian Magazine* 3 (1780): 602–4.
8. *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §10, in Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 11:373. Cited hereafter as *Works* (Jackson).
9. There are four overlapping lists, in manuscript notebooks at the Methodist Archive and Research Centre, The John Rylands University Library. For a combined catalogue of these lists, see Randy L. Maddox, “Charles Wesley’s Personal Library, ca. 1765,” *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society* 14 (2010): 73–103.
10. See Maddox, “John Wesley’s Reading ... London,” 124.
11. See Samuel Wesley, *Advice to a Young Clergyman* (London: C. Rivington & J. Roberts, [1735]), 26–28; quote on p. 26. This was originally a letter Samuel wrote to a curate in his charge; John Wesley published the volume and added the preface. The specific text Samuel Wesley commended was *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta* (London, 1657).
12. See the two editions of Bengel and the editions published by Stephan and Redmayne in Maddox, “Wesley’s Reading, London”; as well as the edition by John Mill mentioned next.
13. John Mill, *Novum Testamentum. Cum lectionibus variantibus mss. exemplarium, versionum, editionum, ss. patrum & scriptom ecclesiasticorum; & in easdem notis*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre, 1707). Wesley records owning this work on the inside cover of his first Oxford diary.
14. Charles Le Cène, *An Essay for a New Translation of the Bible* (London: John Nutt, 1702).
15. Wesley also issued this English translation separately (without his notes) as one of his last publications: *The New Testament* (London: New Chapel, 1790). Cf. George Croft Cell, *John Wesley’s New Testament Compared with the Authorized Version* (London: Lutterworth, 1938)
16. These are reproduced in *Works* (Jackson), 14:78–160.
17. See David S. Katz, “The Hutchinsonians and Hebraic Fundamentalism in Eighteenth-Century England,” in D. Katz & J. Israel (eds.), *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 237–55.
18. Wesley, *Journal* (Feb. 13, 1770), *Works* 22:215–16. See also his Letter to Dean D. (1785), *Letters* (Telford), 7:251–52.
19. See, for example, the Hebrew grammars by Bayley (1782) and Robertson (1783) in Maddox, “John Wesley’s Reading ... London.”
20. See Justin Champion, “‘Directions for the Profitable Reading of the Holy Scriptures’: Biblical Criticism, Clerical Learning and Lay Readers, c. 1650–1720,” in *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, eds. A. Hessayon & N. Keene (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 208–30; and Thomas R. Preston, “Biblical Criticism, Literature, and the Eighteenth-Century Reader,” in *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Isabel Rivers (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1982), 97–126.
21. *The Manners of the Antient Christians* (Bristol: Farley, 1749); an abridged

- translation of Claude Fleury, *Les mœurs des Chrétiens* (Paris: Clouzier, 1682).
22. See Joel B. Green, “Wesley as Interpreter of Scripture and the Emergence of ‘History’ in Biblical Interpretation,” ch. 4, below
  23. *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, Preface, §15, *Works* (Jackson), 14:252.
  24. *Sermons*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:106. Quoting 1 Cor. 2:13.
  25. Cf. Samuel Wesley, *Advice*, 29–30. Samuel also encourages reading some extra-canonical works from the period of the early church.
  26. The most ambitious attempt to identify instances is James H. Charlesworth, “The Wesleys and the Canon: an Unperceived Openness,” *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society* 3 (1996): 63–88.
  27. *Journal* (Sept. 30, 1786), *Works*, 23:420.
  28. *Popery Calmly Considered*, I.4, *Works* (Jackson), 10:141. Wesley is drawing on a book by John Williams for this tract, but this particular claim is in his own words.
  29. See, for example, his Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:247; and *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, Preface, §18, *Works* (Jackson), 14:253.
  30. His four-part *Lessons for Children* (1746–54) is simply an abridgment of the KJV Old Testament. It is “lessons” in the sense of assigned readings, not lectures about the readings.
  31. The records are not exhaustive. Even so, a list of all known sermon occasions, where we have the text, runs over 400 pages in length! This list was compiled by Wanda Willard Smith. It can be found on the website of the Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition (CSWT) at Duke:  
<http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/research-resources/register>.
  32. Cf. Matthew R. Schlimm, “Defending the Old Testament’s Worth: John Wesley’s Reaction to the Rebirth of Marcionism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 42.2 (2007): 28–51.
  33. See Sermon 34, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” *Works*, 2:4–19.
  34. Sermon 25, “Sermon on the Mount V,” II.3, *Works*, 1:554–55; and Sermon 76, “On Perfection,” II.1–8, *Works*, 3:77–80.
  35. See Sermon 67, “On Divine Providence,” §4, *Works*, 2:536; and Letter to Elizabeth Hardy (Apr 5, 1758), *Letters* (Telford), 4:11.
  36. Sermon 73, “Of Hell,” §1, *Works*, 3:31.
  37. “Thoughts Upon Methodism” §2, *Arminian Magazine* 10 (1787), *Works*, 9:527. See also *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §5, *Works* (Jackson), 11:366.
  38. See particularly Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” II.8, *Works*, 1:388; Sermon 12, “The Witness of Our Own Spirit,” §6, *Works*, 1:302–303; and Sermon 36, “The Law Established by Faith, II,” I.5, *Works*, 2:37.
  39. E.g., Letter to William Law (Jan. 6, 1756), *Letters* (Telford), 3:345–46; *Letter to Bishop of Gloucester* (1763), II.5, *Works*, 11:504; and *Journal* (July 24, 1776), *Works*, 23:25.
  40. For elaboration of this point, see Randy L. Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011), 9–13; at [www.methodistreview.org](http://www.methodistreview.org).
  41. Sermon 91, “On Charity,” proem, *Works*, 3:292

42. *Journal* (July 18, 1765), *Works*, 22:13; and *Journal* (Nov. 9, 1772), *Works*, 22:352.
43. For more details on this and the following paragraph, see Maddox, “Rule of Faith,” 26–30.
44. *Sermons*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:106.
45. *Letter to Bishop of Gloucester*, II.10, *Works*, 11:509.
46. See Sermon 18, “The Marks of the New Birth,” §3, *Works*, 1:418 (emphasis added).
47. See this image in Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God,” III.3, *Works*, 1:442.
48. *Sermons*, Vol. 1 (1746), Preface, §5, *Works*, 1:106.
49. See respectively, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, §§4–5, *Works* (Jackson) 14:321; and Sermon 24, “Sermon on the Mount IV,” §I.1, *Works*, 1:533–34.
50. For more on this see Randy L. Maddox, “Opinion, Religion, and ‘Catholic Spirit’: John Wesley on Theological Integrity,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 47.1 (1992): 63–87.
51. Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §I.4, *Works*, 2:84.
52. *Sermons*, Vol. 1, Preface, §§8–9, *Works*, 1:107.
53. *A Letter to the Reverend Dr. Conyers Middleton* (Jan. 4–24, 1749), *Letters* (Telford), 2:325.
54. See Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Book III, par. 2.
55. See Robert W. Wall, “Reading Scripture, the Literal Sense, and the Analogy of Faith,” ch. 3, below.
56. Letter to Cradock Glascott (May 13, 1764), *Letters* (Telford), 4:243; referring to John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* (London: John Williams, 1659).
57. For more details on this and the following paragraphs, see Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley’s Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44.1 (Spring 2009): 23–54.
58. See Thomas Burnet, *The Theory of the Earth* (London: Walter Kettilby, 1684–90). Wesley read Burnet as early as 1734 and reread while working on a later edition of *Survey* in 1770. See his comments in *Journal* (Jan. 17, 1770), *Works* 22:213–4; and Sermon 56, “God’s Approbation of His Works,” I.2, *Works*, 2:389.
59. See Sermon 60, “The General Deliverance,” *Works*, 2:437–50; and Sermon 64, “The New Creation,” *Works*, 2:500–10.
60. See the discussion in Randy L. Maddox, “Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission,” *Asbury Journal* 62 (2007): 49–66.