

## LITERACY AND BIBLICAL KNOWLEDGE: THE VICTORIAN AGE AND OUR OWN

TIMOTHY T. LARSEN\*

My area of expertise is nineteenth-century Britain, and the more I have studied it, the more I have come to realize that it would be hard to set any limit on the extent to which Victorian culture was shaped by a shared knowledge of the Bible. The Scriptures were a significant presence throughout people's entire lives. In the beginning was the Word. It was standard practice for Victorian children to learn to read on the Authorized Version (often called the King James Version in America) of the Bible. The Bible was the primary text in schools. Universal state education was not enacted until 1870. Before that time, many poor children received all the formal education they would ever have from a church. It must be borne in mind that Sunday schools originally really were schools. Children worked all week long and then learned to read by going to a church-run school on their one day off, Sunday. Not surprisingly, the Bible was central at Sunday schools. Some poor children were able to attend a proper, day school as well. The vast majority of these weekday schools was run by a denominational or non-denominational Christian charity, and also used the Bible as their main text. Moreover, if one moves beyond these Christian efforts which overwhelmingly dominated the educational landscape, Phil Gardner's research has revealed that even in independent, working-class schools the Bible was still the standard book used "for learning to read and for reading practice."<sup>1</sup>

Once state education was established, the Bible retained a place in the core curriculum during the nineteenth century. Even the scientist T. H. Huxley, the original agnostic who wrote polemical works attacking the Scriptures, insisted on "the use of the Bible as an instrument of popular education" when he was elected to the London School Board.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, while some ideologues did want a truly secular curriculum that was Bible-free, parents would not tolerate such schemes, but rather overwhelmingly insisted that their children study the Bible in state schools. Moving up the social scale, learning the Bible was also a prominent and essential part of elite education.

\* Timothy Larsen is McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, 501 College Ave., Wheaton, IL 60187-5593.

<sup>1</sup> Phil Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England: The People's Education*, London: Croom Helm, 1984, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas H. Huxley, *Essays Upon Some Controverted Questions* (London: Macmillan, 1892) 51. See also Adrian Desmond, *Huxley: From Devil's Disciple to Evolution's High Priest* (London: Penguin, 1997) 402–3.

If one went to Eton, Harrow, Rugby, or the like, then one studied the Bible with a master who was also an ordained clergyman in the Church of England. And going to university did not mean leaving scriptural education behind. For example, one could not gain a bachelor's degree in any subject from the University of Oxford without first passing an examination on Holy Scripture, the Gospels portion of which was on the original Greek text.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth illustrating this scriptural formation with a few individual case studies. Catherine Mumford (1829–1890) became well known as the co-founder of the Salvation Army under her married name of Catherine Booth. She was raised as an earnest evangelical Methodist. Not from a socially elite family, her father was a coach builder. Catherine did not receive any formal schooling until she had reached the age of twelve, and even then, it was all over within two years. Her home schooling, however, was centered on the Bible. She was already reading it by the age of five. Before she reached the age of twelve and was sent off to school, she had “read the sacred Book from cover to cover eight times through.”<sup>4</sup> Keep in mind that this was done with no other intention than general learning and piety. Her parents had no schemes for her to become a minister, nor did she harbor any such aspirations. In fact, by her own subsequent reckoning, she was not even converted yet. This continuous, energetic, systematic study of Scripture represents simply a normal course that the education of a precocious child might take in Victorian Britain. Nor did her voracious consumption of the Bible slacken as Catherine progressed through her teen years. Here is her primary New Year's resolution for 1848 when she was eighteen years old:

above all, I am determined to search the Scriptures more attentively, for in them I have eternal life. I have read my Bible through twice during the last sixteen months, but I must read it with more prayer for light and understanding. Oh, may it be my meat and drink! May I meditate on it day and night! And then I shall “bring forth fruit in season, my leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever I do shall prosper.” [Ps 1:2–3]<sup>5</sup>

The result, not unexpectedly, was that Catherine thoroughly appropriated the biblical text. To take a telling example, even when describing seaside Brighton as a teenager on holiday, she reached eccentrically to the OT to evoke the scene: “I have just returned from the beach. It is a lovely morning, but very rough and cold. The sea looks sublime. I never saw it so troubled. Its waters ‘cast up mire and dirt’ [Isa 57:20], and lash the shore with great violence.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Brian Harrison, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford: Volume VIII: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 110; Harry Parry Liddon, *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey* (4 vols.; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893) 1.235–36. The fact that this Oxford examination later descended into a farce should not obscure the rigors that it had in the early and mid-Victorian periods.

<sup>4</sup> F. de L. Booth-Tucker, *The Life of Catherine Booth: The Mother of The Salvation Army* (2 vols.; 3d ed.; London: Salvationist, 1924) 1.15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 1.52–53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 1.48. (I have added the reference in brackets.)

If choosing someone destined to become the Mother of the Salvation Army somehow seems like a rigged sample, Victorian Britain's most famous atheist leader might serve as a counterweight on the other end of the spectrum. Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891), the president of the National Secular Society, became a household name through his ultimately successful campaign to become the first Member of Parliament who was an avowed atheist. His beginnings were humble, however, being raised in a poor family in London.<sup>7</sup> His parents were nominally Anglican, but not regular churchgoers. Bradlaugh's formal schooling, begun when he was seven years old, ended before he had reached his eleventh birthday. This education was steeped in Scripture. Indeed, extraordinarily, everything that has survived of his school work is explicitly biblical, although these works were clearly retained merely as examples of his achievements rather than because of their theme. For his first year in school, when he was seven years old, his main, take-home piece was on the "The Life of Samuel" from 1 Samuel 3.<sup>8</sup> At nine years old he worked industriously on "The Death of Ahab,"<sup>9</sup> and the only other piece of his school work that was retained is his ten-year old effort on the "Death of Absalom" from 2 Samuel 18.<sup>10</sup> These pieces were clearly intended to demonstrate to his parents that he was learning to write with a clear hand. In other words, his penmanship lessons were scriptural ones. The point is not that it is ironic that the nation's preeminent atheist leader was raised on the Bible, but rather that it was well-nigh inevitable. For around a decade in the second half of the nineteenth century, the second most famous spokesperson for organized atheism after Bradlaugh was Annie Besant (1847–1933), a vice president of the National Secular Society and co-editor of the leading atheistic newspaper, the *National Reformer*. She was from a good family in social-standing terms, but her father, who was a religious skeptic, died when she was only five years old. Her mother was a spiritually easy-going, theologically liberal Anglican who sent Annie to a private, all-girls school to be educated. This schooling was so scriptural that even the teacher's idea of a game was a Bible quiz. Annie's schoolgirl achievements included memorizing the whole of the epistle of James.<sup>11</sup> And so one could go on with endless such examples.

In addition to standard patterns of general education, the biblical literacy of the Victorians was also buoyed up by mass exposure to Scripture as a component of pursuing a life of piety. The sermon was an enormously powerful presence in Victorian culture. Fashionable people, intellectuals, and cultural

<sup>7</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, *The Autobiography of Mr. Bradlaugh. A Page of his Life* (London: Austin and Co., 1873).

<sup>8</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, 18/B, "The Life of Samuel," 1840.

<sup>9</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, 8/C, "The Death of Ahab," 1842.

<sup>10</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, Bradlaugh 18/B, "Death of Absalom," 1843.

<sup>11</sup> Annie Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Freethought, 1885) 18–19.

critics—even those who possessed no strong religious convictions—went to hear celebrated preachers in the same dedicated way that people today might be determined to attend a concert by a pop star.<sup>12</sup> Sermons were often read as well as heard. They were even printed in full in newspapers as well as extensively circulated in separately published pamphlets and books. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that a sermon is normally preceded by the public reading of Scripture and is itself an exposition of a biblical text. Moreover, daily Bible readings in the home circle and as an individual were widespread practices. Today, meaty, expositional sermons and daily Bible reading are often thought of as evangelical traits. Evangelicalism did dominate Victorian culture, as David Bebbington has demonstrated.<sup>13</sup> And evangelicals did insist that to be a good Christian meant to follow a way of life that included reading the Bible every day. The Methodist minister, William Cooke, in the *Juvenile Instructor*, for example, insisted that youths must never shirk this duty. He helpfully recommended that on particularly busy days, although they could not cut their Bible reading, they were free to decide to spend less time eating or sleeping.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that these religious practices were pursued across the Christian spectrum in the nineteenth century. E. B. Pusey, for example, was so much in the forefront of the High Church movement to make Anglicanism more catholic that it was sometimes called Puseyism. Still, Pusey's sermons were often an hour and a half long, and it was taken for granted in his family that everyone would read Holy Scripture every day. Indeed, even his wife read the NT in Greek on a daily basis. Likewise, the poet Christina Rossetti was an Anglo-Catholic who did volunteer work in conjunction with an Anglican sisterhood. She had private devotions daily and in addition to whatever Bible reading she did then, she also read portions of Scripture aloud in both the morning and evening as part of household, corporate religious exercises.<sup>15</sup> Broad Church or theological liberal Anglicans also shared these values. One of the fathers of the movement, Thomas Arnold, headmaster at Rugby, "spoke strongly to the boys on the necessity of each reading some part of the Bible every day."<sup>16</sup> He personally read to them from both Testaments every night. Florence Nightingale was such a theologically liberal Anglican that she did not believe in the virgin birth, miracles, perfection, substitutionary atonement, resurrection, or deity of

<sup>12</sup> For the Victorians and the sermon, see Robert H. Ellison, *The Victorian Pulpit: Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> William Cooke, *Explanations of Difficult Portions of Holy Scripture, &c., in 565 Queries and Answers* (Reprinted from the *Juvenile Instructor*; London: Henry Webber, 1866) 12.

<sup>15</sup> Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London: Thomas Burleigh, 1898) 162–65.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D.D.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d. [originally in 1844 as two volumes]) 160. For Arnold as a father of the Broad Church movement, see Tod E. Jones, *The Broad Church: A Biography of a Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003) 51–128.

Jesus Christ. Despite also denying that the Bible was a special revelation from God, she nonetheless read it earnestly every day, both by herself and aloud to her servants.<sup>17</sup> One can find these habits across the denominations. As a young newlywed, the Quaker Elizabeth Fry was timid about imposing her religious practices on others. She found, however, that even with house-guests who were her elders, her conscience would not give her rest unless she insisted that they listen to daily Bible readings first thing in the morning.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Victorian Unitarians often prided themselves on being more biblical than their orthodox co-religionists.<sup>19</sup> The eminent Unitarian minister Lant Carpenter not only wrote works with titles such as *Comparative View of the Scriptural Evidence for Unitarianism and Trinitarianism* and *Unitarianism: The Doctrine of the Gospel—A View of the Scriptural Grounds of Unitarianism*, but he was even so biblicalist that his chief work was a harmony of the four Gospels.<sup>20</sup> His daughter, the Unitarian social reformer, Mary Carpenter, likewise compiled a devotional book of daily morning and evening meditations on texts of Scripture.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, figures such as Christina Rossetti, Thomas Arnold, Elizabeth Fry, and Mary Carpenter represent best practice, but the point is that Victorians across the denominational and theological spectrum agreed that this was best practice, and there was a mass culture of aspiring to attain to it across the traditions. If someone suspects that this is a distorted picture, I would encourage them to do their own soundings in Victorian waters and see what they discover.

#### I. THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

The Bible, therefore, was the common cultural currency of the Victorians. There are only two kinds of eminent Victorian authors: the kind who have had a whole book written about their use of Scripture and the kind who are ripe for such attention. The making of such books was begun by the Victorians themselves. For example, the influential art critic John Ruskin, although he did not hold dogmatic religious views, nonetheless warranted a 303-page work entitled *The Bible References of John Ruskin* (1898).<sup>22</sup> Extraordinarily, this is an exploration of his work in the genre of a Bible dictionary. The first entry is “Aaron, Death of,” and the last one is “Zedekiah.” An appendix arranges this

<sup>17</sup> Lynn McDonald, ed., *Florence Nightingale: An Introduction to Her Life and Family* (The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale 1; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001) 703.

<sup>18</sup> Susanna Conder, *Life of Elizabeth Fry. Compiled from her Journal* (London: W. & F. G. Cash, 1853) 83–84.

<sup>19</sup> Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Martineau, 1690–1900* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 267.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Lant Carpenter, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Lant Carpenter, LL.D.* (Bristol: Philp and Evans, 1842).

<sup>21</sup> Mary Carpenter, ed., *Morning and Evening Meditations, For Every Day in A Month* (Boston: Wm. Crosby, 1847).

<sup>22</sup> Mary and Ellen Gibbs, *The Bible References of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1898).

material in canonical order by chapter from the 14 references in Ruskin's works to Genesis chapter 1 to the 9 references to Revelation chapter 22. Christina Rossetti is one of the most celebrated poets of the Victorian age. A scholar has produced a 256-page concordance of biblical allusions in her poetry.<sup>23</sup> Such a concordance could profitably be compiled for any Victorian poet, I suspect. The poet P. B. Shelley was one of the first public atheists in Victorian elite culture. Irreligion and biblical illiteracy, however, do not correlate in this period, and therefore there is an Oxford monograph entitled *Shelley and Scripture*.<sup>24</sup> Just this year, my colleague Jeff Barbeau has published a book on the poet and philosopher S. T. Coleridge's use of Scripture.<sup>25</sup> There is, of course, a book on the Bible and the most famous Victorian writer, Charles Dickens.<sup>26</sup> This premier Victorian novelist took his religion in his stride, disliked zealous and dogmatic Christians, and left his wife for a mistress. Nevertheless, Dickens so assumed that every Victorian should know the contents of the Bible that he even wrote his own harmony of the four Gospels as a tool for the education of his own children.<sup>27</sup> Pick up an annotated edition of any Victorian novel, and the notes will include biblical allusions that it never occurred to the author would ever need elucidating.

The content of the Scriptures also loomed large in the visual arts. The older school of Academy painters was comprised of artists who pursued biblical subjects as part of their work such as Charles Lock Eastlake's *Hagar and Ishmael* or William Dyce's *Joash shooting the Arrow of Deliverance*. The most significant new school of painting was the quintessentially Victorian art of the Pre-Raphaelites. Iconoclasts that they were in other ways, the Pre-Raphaelites were even more biblical than their predecessors.<sup>28</sup> Not content with merely a biblical theme and title, Holman Hunt even had the frames of his paintings inscribed with scriptural texts. *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* has Mal 3:1, "And the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his Temple," written out in the painting itself in both Hebrew and Latin, while the frame adds the NT reading, Luke 2:48–49, in English. *The Scapegoat* has Isa 53:4 written out on the top of the frame, balanced by Lev 16:22 on the bottom. The third version of his most famous painting, *The Light of the World*, designed for St. Paul's Cathedral, has Rev 3:20 in capital letters at its base: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

<sup>23</sup> Nilda Jiménez, comp., *The Bible and the Poetry of Christina Rossetti* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1979).

<sup>24</sup> Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Janet L. Larson, *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985). See also Robert C. Hanna, *The Dickens Christian Reader: A Collection of New Testament Teachings and Biblical References from the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York: AMS, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord* (London: Associated Newspapers Ltd., 1934).

<sup>28</sup> Michaela Giebelhausen, *Painting the Bible: Representation and Belief in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

I am confident that one could dive at random into any sources left by the Victorians and find that they contain biblical allusions which assume their audience possessed a scriptural knowledge base. This would hold true from the sublime to the mundane, from the religious to the anti-religious to the purely secular in the sense of given over exclusively to the practical issues of life. The recorded speech of any event would do—a trade union conference, or a session of Parliament, or a murder trial. I tried such a random sounding myself once. In an idle moment in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, the thought occurred to me that the international industrial show, the Great Exhibition of 1851, was such an iconic Victorian moment that I wondered if it reflected the culture's biblical saturation. I looked up the official Great Exhibition catalogue, but did not even need to open it: on the cover were written out the words of Ps 24:1.<sup>29</sup> If the reader is not yet convinced, I would encourage them to make any such experiment themselves: "Seek and ye shall find."

## II. THE BACKLASH AGAINST THE PREVALENCE OF THE BIBLE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

With biblical literacy so pervasive in Victorian popular culture, it is perhaps unsurprising that there was a snobbish backlash by certain members of the social and intellectual elite. This response was most thoroughly articulated by the poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) in his influential book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Arnold exuded disdain for the hordes of Bible-toting Baptists and Congregationalists whose influence in Victorian society was waxing strong. Arnold posits that an ideal culture is one that balances what he labels "Hebraism" and "Hellenism." Hebraism is the earnest, biblicist Christianity of the evangelical, Nonconformist middle classes. One needs a certain amount of that, of course, in order to sustain sound morality. Victorian society had too much of it, however, which meant that it was squeezing out Hellenism, a high culture sensibility that revels in the most exquisite human achievements as exemplified in the philosophical, literary, and artistic accomplishments of ancient Greece and Rome. Arnold offers this thought experiment: imagine Virgil on the Mayflower.<sup>30</sup> It is apparent that this cultured soul would not have found his Puritan fellow-travelers diverting company, ergo, there is something wrong with the Puritan spirit—a spirit which Arnold finds thriving in his own day, with the evangelical Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon serving as a readily identifiable embodiment of it.<sup>31</sup> The specific weakness of the Hebraists is there inordinate attachment to Scripture: "The book which contains this invaluable

<sup>29</sup> *Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851* (By Authority of the Royal Commission; London: Spicer Brothers, 1851).

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1897 [1869]) 19.

<sup>31</sup> For his identification of Spurgeon as a one of the Hebraizers see Arnold, *Culture* 131.

law they call the Word of God, and attribute to it, as I have said, and as, indeed, is perfectly well known, a reach and sufficiency co-extensive with all the wants of human nature.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, Arnold assumed that if people were not attending to their Bibles so much they would be reading more Plato, Virgil, and Shakespeare, and thereby have a richer culture. Arnold occasionally even lets slip his disdain for the Bible itself: at one point he refers to it as “the voice” of an “Oriental and polygamous nation” (however, if I had wished to commend Greco-Roman literature over the Bible to a Victorian audience I personally would not have attempted to build a case based on their comparative sexual mores).<sup>33</sup> The most telling quotation, however, is the following one which begins with his mockery of the Scripture-lover who praises:

A man’s sticking to the one thing needful,—*he knows*, says Hebraism, *his Bible!*—whenever we hear this said, we may, without any elaborate defence of culture, content ourselves with answering simply: “No one, who knows nothing else, knows even his Bible.”<sup>34</sup>

Arnold’s dictum echoes down the decades to the present. In this literary tradition, biblical knowledge is actually a way of signaling that a character is ignorant. The quintessential representation of this move is *Inherit the Wind*, a 1955 Broadway play that became in 1960 an influential, award-winning film, and has since often been staged as well as generating three additional film versions (1965, 1988, and 1999). In *Inherit the Wind*, Matthew Harrison Brady represents the ignorance of the biblically literate, although even he is portrayed as a cut above the real grassroots Bible-thumpers. The dramatic center of this courtroom play is the cross examination of Brady done by Henry Drummond, the latter representing Hellenism in Matthew Arnold’s terms. This scene begins:

Drummond: Am I correct sir, in calling on you as an authority on the Bible?

Brady: I believe it is not boastful to say that I have studied the Bible as much as any layman. And I have tried to live according to its precepts.

Drummond: Bully for you. Now, I suppose you can quote me chapter and verse right straight through the King James Version, can’t you?

Brady: There are many portions of the Holy Bible that I have committed to memory.

Drummond: I don’t suppose you’ve memorized many passages from the *Origin of the Species*?

Brady: I am not in the least interested in the pagan hypotheses of that book.

Drummond: Never read it?

Brady: And I never will.

Drummond: Then how in perdition do you have the gall to whoop up this holy war against something you don’t know anything about? How can you be so cocksure that the body of scientific knowledge systematized in the writings

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 142.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

of Charles Darwin is, in any way, irreconcilable with the spirit of the Book of Genesis?

Brady: Would you state that question again, please?<sup>35</sup>

In this exchange, Brady's knowledge of the Bible is presented as the visible and outward sign of his inner, fundamental ignorance. The key words of Drummond's final question in this excerpt are "you don't know anything" which are immediately validated by Brady's inability even to comprehend the question and which has already been signaled by his confession of having memorized many passages from the Scriptures. The play is depicting the Scopes Trial, and Brady is a fictionalized version of William Jennings Bryan. In reality, Bryan had studied thoroughly the text of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* but, marching on from Matthew Arnold, the impression is given that study of the Bible means having no general knowledge or wider culture so the play has Brady boastful about his ignorance of Darwin's writings. When Drummond's probing questions push Brady to think, the strain is so great that he breaks under it, the sign that he has lost control of his reasoning faculties being that he starts chanting the names of books of the Bible. This display of biblical memorization amply reveals that nothing further can be learned in such a Scripture-infested environment, and the judge has no alternative but to adjourn the court.<sup>36</sup>

The dissemination of this trope may be witnessed in what became the most popular show on television just a couple years after *Inherit the Wind* was released as a feature film, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Winning eleven Emmys and setting a new ratings record, this TV sitcom ran for almost a decade (1962–1971) and has never been decommissioned from re-run land. A running joke throughout the series is that these hillbillies have scant formal education, do not read, fail to appreciate or even understand high culture, and are usually literally illiterate. This, once again, is signaled by a display of biblical knowledge. The hillbillies often use the word "victuals," for example, which has an archaic ring in contemporary speech, but sounds natural to them because it is used throughout the King James Version of the Bible (from Gen 14:11 to Luke 9:12). In a *non sequitur*, this biblical vocabulary indicates that the hillbillies are ignorant or unsophisticated. Likewise, the two male members of the family are named Jedidiah and Jethro. These names reflect such a depth of familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures that I am confident that nine out of ten literary critics today would not be able to trace these allusions back to their source from memory. In a strangely twisted way, the careful scrutiny of an ancient text that these name choices reveal are intended as shorthand for the fact that these are uncultured, illiterate, and ignorant people.

### III. THE BIBLE AS THE GATEWAY TO GENERAL LITERACY

My own dictum is the inversion of Matthew Arnold's. You will recall that he asserted: "No one, who knows nothing else, knows even his Bible." I would

<sup>35</sup> Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, *Inherit the Wind* (New York: Bantam, 1965) 76–77.

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence and Lee, *Inherit* 90–91.

like to submit for investigation the following thesis: “A western culture where people don’t read their Bibles is one in which they probably don’t read much else either.” I will not belabor the most obvious sense in which this is true, namely that the illustrious literary and artistic inheritance of western culture assumes scriptural knowledge and becomes progressively more obscure, incomprehensible, and inaccessible the less biblical literacy one has. Northrop Frye observed that the Bible is “the Great Code” for understanding English literature.<sup>37</sup> Frye discovered this when he tried to teach undergraduates the poetry of John Milton and of William Blake: “I soon realized that a student of English literature who does not know the Bible does not understand a good deal of what is going on in what he reads: the most conscientious student will be continually misconstruing the implications, even the meaning.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise, many of the most celebrated visual artists of the western tradition—Michelangelo and Rembrandt, for example—count on viewers being familiar with the biblical subject matter that they are depicting. I remember an art historian relaying the response of his British university students when he brought them on a trip to the Uffizi Gallery. They decided that Italian parents did not value daughters because although they were fond of depicting mothers, the baby was always a boy. Rather than this specific advantage of biblical literacy—that it decodes our own cultural inheritance—what I want to explore in this article is a much more sweeping claim. My argument is that Bible reading serves as the gateway—arguably the indispensable gateway—to advanced literacy and high literary culture for a western society.

#### IV. BIBLICAL LITERACY IN THE VICTORIAN AGE AND IN OUR OWN

First, however, we need briefly to contrast our own times with those of the Victorian age in terms of biblical literacy. I personally would rather live now than at any time in the past, not least the Victorian age. This article is not intended to present it as an ideal time, or even as the good old days. Much has improved since then, not only in other spheres such as gender equality and medicine advances, but even in the specific areas of universal education, mass basic literacy, access to books, and admirable spiritual sensibilities. The biblical knowledge of the Victorians is simply evoked as a standard that a culture can attain and one that has significant consequences for literacy in the widest and deepest senses of that word.

The difference in general levels of biblical literacy between my lifetime and the Victorian age may be illustrated by an emblematic moment. In 1985, perhaps the most collaborative project to date in the history of the American pop music industry occurred as a charity fundraiser for African famine relief, the recording of the specially written song “We Are the World.”<sup>39</sup> This hit

<sup>37</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* xii.

<sup>39</sup> David Breskin, *We Are the World* (New York: Perigree, 1985).

sold millions of copies and won Grammy awards for Song of the Year, Best Pop Performance by a Group, and Record of the Year. No telling how many people were involved in this project behind the scenes, but over forty celebrity singers and musicians took part including Bob Dylan, Diana Ross, Billy Joel, Tina Turner, Paul Simon, Kenny Rogers, Stevie Wonder, Willie Nelson, Dionne Warwick, Ray Charles, Bruce Springsteen, and Bette Midler. Nevertheless, the lyrics of the song (written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie) exemplify basic biblical illiteracy, containing as they do this line: “As God has shown us by turning stones to bread.”<sup>40</sup> The Bible, of course, shows the exact opposite: Jesus *resisted* the Satanic temptation to turn stones into bread (Matt 4:3–4). This mistake is particularly egregious as the Gospels are the most well-known books of the Bible. It is inconceivable that any group of Victorians—however personally irreligious they all might have been—could have let a project go forward without noticing and correcting such an elementary error in biblical knowledge. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that biblical literacy has continued to decline yet further since 1985. Gallup polls have tracked this descent to a current “record low.” Not even able to get started with the canon in either Testament, most Americans now cannot name the first book of the Bible and half cannot name even one of the four Gospels.<sup>41</sup> Stephen Prothero, professor of religion, Boston University, highlighted this in a 2007 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, which was bluntly entitled “We live in the land of biblical idiots.”<sup>42</sup>

Nor should we fail to face how much this impoverishes us. Great American orators such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. drew on the rich storehouse of Scripture in the confidence that their hearers would grasp the resonant allusions they were making. What common cultural resources could an American orator today draw on with confidence that her hearers would understand? Are these resources too shallow or trivial to bear the weight of speaking profoundly to vital matters of state and society?

#### V. MARKS OF BIBLICAL LITERACY AND THE CONTEMPORARY DECLINE IN GENERAL LITERACY

So what do I mean by the claim that mass Bible reading serves as the gateway to a society marked by advanced literacy? To begin at the most fundamental level, *first, the habit of daily Bible reading creates a culture in which people read regularly*. In reports issued in 2004 and 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts provided alarming statistical evidence to demonstrate that Americans are losing the habit of regular reading.<sup>43</sup> 43.4% of adults

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. (There is no pagination in this volume, but the lyrics are printed in it.)

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 30.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Prothero, “We live in the land of biblical idiots,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 14, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (Research Division Report 46; Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004); *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (Research Report 47; Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).

reported that they did not read a single book in the entire previous year.<sup>44</sup> Positively, these reports correlate regular, voluntary reading with other vital outcomes including achieving as a student and employee and contributing constructively as a citizen and member of society. I am putting forward the hypothesis that one of the factors that is sustaining a culture of readers in society today is religious motivation that results in a way of life which includes reading the Bible. It is suggestive that the book industry has observed in recent years that although the population at large is reading fewer books, the market for religious books is actually growing.<sup>45</sup> I think it is likely that what this is reflecting is that while many other people are losing the reading habit, a segment of religious people are maintaining it through a culture of Scripture reading. What is needed is a reading survey which also asks questions about religious beliefs and practices. The National Endowment for the Arts tracked numerous factors—including race, income, education, and gender—and correlated them with reading habits. This study ignored religion, however. Still, it might be possible to discern religion as a factor behind some of its findings. Notably, the NEA's study found a "strong link" between adults who read and those who volunteer or do charity work. It seems reasonable to posit that religious motivation might be a causal factor that is fostering both of these outcomes.

Certainly, Victorians who were raised on the Bible often caught the reading habit more generally. This is brilliantly revealed in Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. Rose shows that the deeply evangelical and biblicist chapel culture of Wales also created a community of avid readers. Welsh coal miners even had their own libraries. A study of the records of one them revealed that the number of books checked out equaled 86 annually for each miner who was a member. This culture of reading was so strong that these tough, working-class men would boast to one another that they had read every book in the library.<sup>46</sup>

*Second, the practice of Bible reading creates a culture in which people read proficiently.* There is a crisis of the level of reading capability in our culture today. A 2003 study revealed that "only 5% of high school graduates are proficient readers." For those with a bachelor's degree, the statistic is 31%.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the bar for proficiency is not high. In this study, a person was considered a proficient reader if he or she could successfully perform such tasks as comparing the viewpoints in two different newspaper editorials or infer what the purpose of an event described in a magazine article was.<sup>48</sup> Anyone who reads the Bible and has learned to comprehend it could approach such a test with complete confidence. I have no doubt that Catherine Booth could have passed it at the age of eleven, making her a more skilled reader before she had ever gone to school than most college graduates are today. Victorian

<sup>44</sup> *Reading at Risk* 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Book Industry Trends 2007* (New York: Book Industry Study Group, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale, 2001) 251.

<sup>47</sup> *To Read or Not to Read* 61, 65.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

newspapers assumed that their readership possessed a higher reading level than newspapers today do. In short, a society of Bible-readers is also a society of proficient readers.

*Third, the practice of Bible reading creates a culture in which people are able to read books from a variety of different genres.* The Bible is a collection of scores of different documents reflecting a variety of different genres. Sometimes even within the same book of the Bible there is more than one genre. These genres include history, law, poetry, drama, lament, proverbs, epistles, royal records, genealogies, parables, stories, speeches, and songs, not to mention more explicitly religious genres such as prophecies and apocalyptic writings. Americans are also losing the habit of reading across genres. Only 12% reported that they had read any poetry at all during the previous year.<sup>49</sup> The Victorians would have been flummoxed by the twenty-first-century category of literate people who can assert flatly, “I don’t read poetry.” The Victorian mass reading public avidly consumed books in a range of genres, including novels, poetry, philosophy, and history. I am positing a connection. As one old coal miner and wide reader reminisced in the mid-twentieth century:

It is true that our fathers, in Wales, taught us a religion of cast-iron dogma, which, according to all the theories, should have made us obscurantists, inhabiting a very small world. But it did not. . . . I defy any child of ordinary intelligence to read the Bible constantly (in the Authorized Version) without acquiring a genuine literary taste, a sense of style, and at least a feeling for the beauty of words. Before I was twelve I had developed an appreciation of good prose, and the Bible created in me a zest for literature.<sup>50</sup>

*Fourth, the practice of Bible reading creates a culture in which people are able to read ancient texts despite the otherness of the past.* In addition to losing the habit of reading across genres, we are also losing the habit of reading across time. In 2007, the British charity World Book Day conducted a survey of the books “the nation cannot live without.”<sup>51</sup> It released the list of the top 100. With the sole exceptions of Shakespeare and the Bible itself, the oldest items were all from the nineteenth century, and the majority of the books on the list were written in living memory, including such instant classics as *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Notes From a Small Island*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and *His Dark Materials*. (Beside the Bible and Shakespeare, the genre range is minute as well—no poetry, philosophy, or history.) In short, Britain has developed a reading culture that apparently can essentially reach no further into the past than to Jane Austen.

Likewise, on a recent visit to my local public library in Wheaton, Illinois, I noticed on the reference desk a pile of hand-outs for patrons which offered a list entitled “100 Best English Language Books” as selected by the Modern Library Board. The English-language restriction makes one wonder why works in translation were not to be commended to American readers, but

<sup>49</sup> *Reading at Risk* 3.

<sup>50</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life* 239–40.

<sup>51</sup> Their website is [www.worldbookday.com](http://www.worldbookday.com).

at least that limitation is acknowledged. More fundamentally, the list is actually an attempt to identify the best English-language *novels* published since 1900. The Modern Library Board reveals these restrictions on a separate page on its website, but the prominent list itself is simply entitled “100 Best Novels,” thereby trading the English-language disclosure for a genre one and continuing to hide the chronological one.<sup>52</sup> There is no fine print disclosure on the list from my library: it is a sign of the times that a public library could not notice something odd about a purported list of “100 Best English Language Books” that did not even include Shakespeare. Indeed, perhaps even much of the twentieth century is now considered too remote. Anne Trubek, a professor of English at Oberlin College, has recently recommended that her colleagues stop assigning *The Catcher in the Rye*. When asked for a rationale, she said nothing at all about the literary merits or demerits of this novel, but rather observed, “It was published in 1951 and it’s not so contemporary anymore.”<sup>53</sup>

This can be contrasted with the list of the 100 best books compiled by Sir John Lubbock which working-class Victorians used to guide their reading choices. It began, of course, with the Bible and was followed by the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Aristotle’s Ethics, and Analects of Confucius.<sup>54</sup> It is a stunning list. Genres and authors include poetry (Bryon, Burns, Milton), history (Gibbon, Carlyle, Plutarch, Herodotus, Tacitus, Livy), philosophy (Plato, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Locke), science (Bacon, Darwin), essays (Emerson, Burke), drama (Sophocles, Aeschylus, Shakespeare), and novels (Dickens, George Eliot, Cervantes)—and all these example names in parentheses are merely representative rather than exhaustive. While the stereotype is that we have only recently broken away from an all-western canon, Lubbock’s list is more ambitious in this regard than the required reading lists given at most schools today, including, as it does, the Koran, Confucius, the Arabian Nights, Ramayana, Maha Bharata, and the Shahnameh. In terms of the point at hand, however, while Lubbock did not neglect works from his own lifetime, one is struck by the way the list ranges freely across the centuries, offering not only a very heavy diet of works from ancient Greece and Rome, but also medieval ones such as Thomas a Kempis, Dante, Chaucer, and even the Nibelungenlied.

Once again, Matthew Arnold should be inverted. If the masses do not read their Bibles, it is not at all likely that they will read Aristotle or Horace instead. On the other hand, someone who has mastered the Bible is far less likely to be overwhelmed by other ancient texts: they have learned to swim in the otherness of the past. The Victorians’ love of classics was actually nurtured by their love of the Bible. This connection is explicit in nineteenth-century lives across the social spectrum all the way from the prime minister,

<sup>52</sup> Their website is [www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary](http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary).

<sup>53</sup> Cory Franklin, “Let’s not turn our YouTubing backs on the classics,” *Chicago Tribune* (September 15, 2008, Section 1) 23.

<sup>54</sup> John Lubbock, *The Pleasures of Life* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1899) 89–93.

William Gladstone, down to the Welsh miners.<sup>55</sup> Arnold might have been right that Virgil would not have appreciated the company of the Pilgrim fathers, but he was certainly wrong if he assumed that these Puritans would not have appreciated the works of this classical Roman poet. There is no surviving list of what few books the Mayflower Pilgrims were able to take with them in the limited space they had, but we know that one of them was Caesar's *Commentaries*, and if they had come across a copy of the *Aeneid* stowed away below deck they would certainly have thanked the Almighty for this blessed boon.<sup>56</sup> This is no less true for Arnold's representative contemporary "Puritan," Charles Spurgeon. Although he never attended college, this populist evangelist learned both Greek and Latin, built up a personal library of over 12,000 volumes, and gave this advice to earnest, plebeian evangelicals who aspired to preach the Gospel with power: "The acquisition of another language affords a fine drilling for the practice of extempore speech. . . . I know of no better exercise than to translate with as much rapidity as possible a portion of Virgil or Tacitus, and then with deliberation to amend one's mistakes. Persons who know no better, think all time thrown away which is spent upon the classics."<sup>57</sup>

Victorian laborers raised on the Bible did not know that they were supposed to find Homer and Pliny difficult, irrelevant, and distastefully high-brow, so they eagerly bought the penny editions which publishers produced for folks of their limited means and consumed them delightedly.<sup>58</sup> Once again, standing Arnold on his head, I believe if a scientific survey were done today, it would show a clear correlation between students of Greco-Roman classics and Bible readers. The vast majority of Americans today who read classical Greek authors in the original language undoubtedly initially learned Greek from a desire to read the NT. Latin, of course, has an important place in the life of the Roman Catholic Church, but readers might not be aware of a fascinating commitment to it among evangelical Protestants. It is positively trendy for evangelical Protestant children who are being homeschooled to learn Latin (as well as to read texts from across the centuries and genres). This commitment has moved into private evangelical Protestant schools as well. My children all attend our local public schools and are thus far innocent of ancient languages, but if I were to prioritize them learning Latin I could have them tutored by some of the homeschooled evangelical teenagers in our town who I know have become competent in that language. Or I could send them to nearby Naperville Christian Academy. This is "an independent, non-denominational classical Christian school" (kindergarten through eighth grade) which is committed to graduating students who are "biblically-literate"

<sup>55</sup> For the interaction between Gladstone's study of the Bible and his study of classics, see David Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Azel Ames, *May-Flower and Her Log* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1901) 217.

<sup>57</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (First Series; London: Passmore and Alaabaster, 1875) 160.

<sup>58</sup> Rose, *Intellectual Life* 400.

and which teaches Latin as part of the core curriculum. It is a member of the Association of Classical and Christian Schools.<sup>59</sup>

It might be objected that I am presenting an idealized picture, that Bible reading does not typically yield such fruits. The stereotype of the ignorant fundamentalist cannot be so easily dispelled. My argument, however, is not that Bible reading always produces such results, but only that Bible reading does a far better job of producing these fruits in mass western culture than is and perhaps can be done without it. In the national consciousness, the Scopes Trail essentially pitted the level of learned culture of the poor folks of Rhea County, Tennessee, against that of the journalists and critics of our cosmopolitan centers. This is always the way: the Beverly Hillbillies contrasted poor, uneducated southerners with elite and privileged west coast families; Matthew Arnold put his Oxford education up against that of men of trade who had never had the opportunity to go to a university. My point is that I am confident that if you took ordinary people from the same geographical area who have the same level of education and wealth and work the same jobs, the Bible readers will be significantly more likely to be proficient and literary readers than those who are not. Their co-workers on the factory line who do not read the Bible are not electing to read Dante or Plato instead, but rather are more apt to watch *Sex in the City* or play *Grand Theft Auto*. Those who do study Scripture, however, are far better equipped to read the *Divine Comedy* or Plato's *Republic* than those who do not, and would be more likely actually to do so and would be much easier encouraged to do so. Wallace Shawn, in his play *The Designated Mourner*, gloomily imagines a time in the near future when there is no one left on earth "who could read John Donne."<sup>60</sup> As long as there is a subculture of committed Bible readers in the world, that fate need not be feared.

## VI. CONCLUSION

I have now presented the main argument I wanted to make in this article. It could be developed in other directions as well. For example, arguably the Victorians readily memorized poems and soliloquies because they were taught as a spiritual discipline to learn Holy Scripture by heart, and perhaps a mass culture of literary memorization cannot be sustained without this religious practice. The decline in literacy in recent decades is generally attributed to the rise of television, computer games, the internet, and other forms of entertainment and electronic media. This connection is obviously correct, but it is not necessary to assume that our culture is powerless in the face of such forces. The National Endowment for the Arts is alarmed by the decline in literacy, but it is not defeatist. Rather, it has issued a "call to action."<sup>61</sup> Stephen Prothero recommends reversing our society's religious illiteracy through re-

<sup>59</sup> Their website is [www.ncaclassical.org](http://www.ncaclassical.org).

<sup>60</sup> Wallace Shawn, *The Designated Mourner* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 53.

<sup>61</sup> *To Read or Not to Read* 6.

quired courses in schools and colleges.<sup>62</sup> This proposal has merit, but the NEA study makes a compelling case for the claim that school requirements are insufficient and only the habit of voluntary reading can produce a culture of proficient readers.<sup>63</sup> What would it take to reverse the decline in regular reading? Religious motivation is something that is powerful enough to mobilize ordinary people to make a habit of serious reading even in an image-driven age. Perhaps there is no other motivation that could create a mass culture of reading ancient texts today—or even a mass culture of proficient or literary reading. If you care about the future of literacy, reading proficiency, high culture, and knowledge of the literary treasures of past ages, you just might want to think about writing a well-crafted thank you note to someone you know who is helping to socialize ordinary people into the habit of regular Bible reading. And feel free to throw in a classical allusion if you wish.

<sup>62</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy* 126–48.

<sup>63</sup> *To Read or Not to Read* 55–66.