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978-1-107-43604-6 - Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age

Yvonne Sherwood

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Two images are hanging in the entrance hall to this book: a page from the artist Tom Phillips's *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* and 'This is Not a Bible' courtesy of my colleague 'AKMA' Adam.<sup>1</sup> Adam's strategic adaptation of Magritte, worked up entirely independently, is a fortuitous companion piece to my chapter 'The exquisite fruit-corpse' where I superimpose work by the famous Belgian surrealist on the surreal visions of the Prophets. Adam's 'representation' of a book that stubbornly refuses to yield information about whether it is or is not a Bible teases us to think about what constitutes a Bible and to reflect on how the cultural and religious chimera of 'Bible' lines up with the words and images on the page. In the book that you are currently in the process of opening, I argue that the inside of Bibles is established less by opening and reading than by strong cultural convictions about what constitutes blasphemy against Bibles, content known in advance, sight unseen. This non-reading or un-reading is not merely, as is often lazily said, a symptom of impiety and encroaching secularism. As I go on to explore in the chapter 'The persistence of blasphemy', non-reading is also produced by a range of pieties and traditions: religious, cultural and disciplinary.

Closed and clearly 'old', Adam's selection of the kind of book that might feasibly convince us that it is a Bible anticipates two key themes of this book: the habitual association of the Bible with antiquity (an association perpetuated by biblical scholars with their institutional devotion to historical criticism) and the function of the Bible as a closed icon, cultural heavyweight, subject to processes of objectification and sanctification that are by no means confined to the inside of religious communities. To

<sup>1</sup> A. K. M. Adam, 'This is Not a Bible: Dispelling the Mystique of Words for the Future of Biblical Interpretation', in Robert Fowler, Edith Blumhofer and Fernando Segovia, *New Paradigms for Bible Study: the Bible in the Third Millennium* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 3–20; Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (4th edn; London: Thames & Hudson, 2005); see also: [www.humument.com](http://www.humument.com).

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my mind one of the most important discoveries of this collection is that polities that understand themselves as secular can be more reverential towards the Bible than religious cultures, particularly pre-modern religious cultures. In the opening chapter, 'The persistence of blasphemy', I explore how distinctly modern prohibitions and taboos result from the modern translation of 'reverence' as 'respect'.

The second image is a page torn from Tom Phillips's spectacular and sumptuous artwork *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, an obsessive reworking (now in its fourth edition of 367 pages) of a minor novel, W. H. Mallock's *A Human Document* of 1892. In spaces shaped like protozoa or cell membranes, tiny sparks of poetry, sibylline utterances, spots of gnomic wisdom, ribald eroticisms ('This is the crown of money'; 'The once and never people'; 'we doctor novels'; 'a certain part of the lover ... was rigid') and even a central 'character', Bill Toge, come to life from the gene-pool of letters in what was once (one imagines), a relatively grey and staid original text. The tiny word-fragments suggest the beginning of forms that are 'proverbial', 'surreal', 'revelatory', 'prophetic';<sup>2</sup> a 'text' at the early (primal?) stage of evolution. They float in a sea of colour, form a collage that makes words but minor players in the shapes of form and sense.

Unlike *A Human Document* – which was, before Phillips started pouring his devotions on it, simply obscure – the sacred text that forms the object of my labours is at once obscure, famous and infamous. But pages of *A Humument* seem to offer themselves as visual provocations for thinking about 'Bible' and what devotees, scholarly and otherwise, have made of the biblical text. For example, much of the energy of philological-historical biblical scholarship has relied on the dream of a lost original, obscured behind tantalising word-fragments. And like the *Humument*, the Bible-in-general or the Bible-as-icon functions as an overwhelming religious-cultural-political sensation, a sense of colour and form that has very little to do with text, or that relies on representation by certain reliably staid and moral ambassadorial texts. Were one to highlight different spools of text, or allow different provocations to grow, like amoebas on petri dishes, we could generate a very different sensation and impression of 'Bible'. But as Tom Phillips wrote at Christmas 2010 in response to my proposal to work up a couple of pages of Bible to coincide with the 2011 King James anniversary celebrations, the difficulty with treating Bible pages may be that they are 'too easy/so to speak ... a gift as it were/too

<sup>2</sup> Cf. William H. Gass, 'A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel, 1973' on [www.humument.com](http://www.humument.com).

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frank in sense and golden of opportunity/he murmured'. Indeed, yes. It is not simply a case of 'disturbing old books' in the sense of making colour, mischief and provocation from a pallid, grey Bible. The disturbances are, in many respects, self-generating. Our modern sense of the Bible is so limited, so closed, so pious, that it will inevitably be blasphemed against from within the Bible itself. Nor are these effects of inner-biblical profanation simply accidents of time, collisions of expectation between the ancient and the modern. If we examine how biblical words and genres self-consciously objectify and aestheticise themselves, we find that while some words present themselves as tokens of sociability, beautiful forms, 'apples of gold in settings of silver' (Prov. 25.11) with no other aim than to delight, to inculcate morality and conserve social forms, other words have more destructive, iconoclastic and blasphemous intentions. Ironically anticipating their domestication and anodyne packaging in a book now seen as a placid cultural foundation, shocking and acerbic words in the Prophets see praise and pleasure as signs of *failure*. They aspire to detonate shock, splinter convention, consume expectation and ravage through the pages of tradition like devouring fire.<sup>3</sup>

In this book I attempt to nudge the Bible out of its usual loci – pulpit, lectern, Museum of the Ancient Near East or the Graeco-Roman world – and stage some alternative biblical exhibitions or displays of biblical exhibitionism. As I put it in an earlier book, I attempt to 'pick ... at the tangled web of relations between the contemporary and the ancient and the secular and the sacred, without assuming that these categories will be antithetical', and 'hurl ... all kinds of contemporary idioms/preoccupations – all kinds of ropes of analogy – onto the shores of the ancient text in the hope that they will form some kind of attachment and in the process rearrange and reanimate the over-familiarised [or under-read, iconic], text'.<sup>4</sup> The impression of Bible here is, like all Bibles, represented synecdochically through selected passages – though not, in this case, the usual suspects. The set texts in our collective Bible study include the beautiful and bathetic concluding poem in Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 12.1–8) and the almost-sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) which, aesthetically, can be seen as a carefully crafted human construction, even as its content pulls in the opposite direction towards scandal and destruction. But I also pick up the detritus and offcuts from the polished, shiny, public face

<sup>3</sup> See the chapters 'John Donne and the baroque prophets' and 'Prophetic scatology'.

<sup>4</sup> Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 291.

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of Bible – passages that are pedestrian and bureaucratic like Jeremiah 36, or sweepings from the Prophets that are violent and altogether ‘too frank in sense’.

In treating these pages of Bible, I experiment with forms of writing that transgress against the ‘epistemological decorum’<sup>5</sup> of the discipline of Biblical Studies with its detached commentary-prose (see, for example, the chapter ‘A recently discovered letter from Isaac to Abraham (annotated)’). I read them as if they could tell us something about what it means to mourn, to save, to submit, to love, to relate, to be disappointed, to be critical – topics deemed too nebulous, vague and intimate for biblical scholarship proper; questions consigned to the outlands and dreamlands of Literature or Continental Philosophy – from whence, largely through the mediation of ‘Theory’, they are beginning to return, slowly and sheepishly, to the biblical text.<sup>6</sup> In a sense I *am* trying to make the Bible into a ‘humument’: to ‘read the Bible humanly’ as a book for ‘poor existing individuals’ as Søren Kierkegaard put it.<sup>7</sup> But this treatment of the Bible is different from the usual polar alternatives for translating the Bible into human terms. On one hand I am deliberately resisting the easy pieties and blandishments of what Jonathan Sheehan terms the Enlightenment Bible – that is, the translation of the Bible as a pinnacle of human achievement (to be valued and valorised by all) – and what I call the Liberal Bible, the vague modern chimera of Bible where the Bible conveniently and usefully becomes a vague container for morality (the religious translated into practical, universal and utilitarian terms), the civil, the democratic and the humane.<sup>8</sup> But on the other hand I am also resisting that equal and opposite mode of translating the Bible into the human: the reflex of secular demystification, the exposé of the Bible as ordinary, vulgar, human or sub-human, the dirty work of human hands. Unlike the fake gospels and pseudepigraphic works printed and distributed in the

<sup>5</sup> See Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 193–242, as discussed in the chapter ‘The persistence of blasphemy’.

<sup>6</sup> For a more in-depth study of the recent histories of theory in Biblical Studies, see Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection* (trans. with introduction Alastair Hannay; London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 136, 343.

<sup>8</sup> See Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2004), the chapter ‘On the genesis of the alliance between the Bible and rights’, in this volume, and Yvonne Sherwood, ‘The God of Abraham and Exceptional States, or the Early Modern Rise of the Whig/Liberal Bible’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76.2 (2008), pp. 312–43.

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eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, my fake letter from 'Isaac' is not intended to simply subvert the truth and authenticity of the biblical text. Deliberately dodging the either-or identitarian categories of modernity, the essays in this book fail to conform to the profile of believer or atheist or 'deist'. Like Giorgio Agamben, I am engaged in a study and practice of profanation that attempts to be something other than a reinforcement of secularisation.<sup>9</sup> To explore blasphemy and profanation is, by definition, to be interested in and invested in the sacred and, relatedly, questions of proximity and distance, fidelity and faith.

An interesting game to play in this serious project of profanation is to ask which essays and experiments feel most transgressive – and why. Is it the moment where, plagiarising from the writer Frank Kuppner, 'Isaac' asks whether it might have been better to have appeared in a story called 'The sodomising of Isaac' rather than 'The sacrifice of Isaac' (a proposal that, in a personal interview, Kuppner confessed he felt frissons of blasphemy in making, even though he is not 'religious', as we moderns say, nor a public guardian of sacred texts)? Or is it the proposal in 'The exquisite fruit-corpse' that a book widely regarded as deeply serious and committed to content and clarity can, at times, glibly submit content to the whim and wind of words, following accidents of language as if they were signs from the heavens? Isn't it curiously shocking (and thus a clue to what we expect of Bibles) that biblical writers and visionaries can be led by the fact that the word קיץ (summer fruits) is very close to the word קץ (end) (see the chapter 'The exquisite fruit-corpse') or that 'everything' (הכל) can become 'nothing' (הבל) with just a casual flick of the pen?<sup>10</sup>

The ideas in this book may well be at their most potentially blasphemous when they offend not just against the Bible, but against all those sacred cultural, political and religious modern forms to which the Bible is intimately connected, for the sacrality of the biblical is always bound up with sacrality in a far more loose and diffuse sense. Western modernity has its own sacred sites – distinct notions of personhood, freedom, morality, democracy, rights, identity and respect/reverence for identities – which are often vaguely related back to Christianity and the Bible, as if these were the key enabling conditions for the discovery of these distinctly modern and distinctly 'Western' goods. The chapter 'On the genesis of the alliance between the Bible and rights' may be more shocking, potentially,

<sup>9</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (trans. Jeff Fort; New York: Zone, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See John Jarick 'The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on הכל הכל and לכל זמן in Ecclesiastes', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 90 (2000), pp. 79–99 and the chapter 'Not with a bang but a whimper', in this volume.

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than the discovery of blood and excrement on the pages of the Prophets in the chapter 'Prophetic scatology', because the thesis that the 'Liberal Bible' is a relatively recent invention hits a raw nerve, a contemporary sacred truth. It is a truth if not universally, then widely, acknowledged – and crucial to the self-identity of Europe and North America – that the Christian Bible is far more tolerant and liberal than some other scriptures we could mention. It is important and expedient to equate the right kind of religious activity as embodied in the 'home' scriptures (so to speak) with good citizenship, and so perpetuate the belief that the Bible and the modern state are, *loosely speaking, on the same page*. Similarly, when I risk alternative descriptions of 'biblical literature' as a massive dramatisation of human subjection to forces that exceed and precede us without our knowing (as in the chapter 'Passion-binding-passion'), I offend against cherished modern notions of what it means to be a subject and, relatedly, that subdivision of the Enlightenment Bible project known as 'the Bible as literature' – a project that tends to smooth over potential tensions between the Bible and modernity by stressing agency, choice, freedom, and superlative acts of human craft. It is no accident that this book keeps circling around sacrifice and crucifixion, for it is here that we find the most stark offences against modern subjecthood and rights.

The discovery within the Bible of forms of taboo sacrality that seem to profane modern values is potentially deeply disruptive, and not just for Jews and Christians, for long ago we learnt to place old things like theocracy and heteronomy – submission to the law of the divine other – outside the Bible and Euro-America, displacing them onto the Qur'an and the 'veil'. For good and important reasons we need to break out of this anodyne modernisation and humanisation of the Bible and explore the clashes between forms of religious and modern dreaming within our 'home' scriptures. The purpose of this collection is to restore the surplus that got lost when the Bible was modernised, domesticated and turned into a 'Humument' in the sense of a monument to human achievement and vision at its very best.

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PART I

*The persistence of blasphemy*

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## CHAPTER I

*The persistence of blasphemy: the Bible  
as a public edifice in the 'secular' state*

you are bold to tackle blasphemy  
 a subject so replete with paradox and irony  
 i can't get my head round it  
 ie how can one blaspheme against something  
 one doesn't think exists?  
 what is the sell by date of a challengeable god?  
 ishtar off the list yet? wotan?(except in bayreuth)  
 and english law tells me i think  
 that i am allowed only to blaspheme  
 against the god that i am supposed to believe in  
 which sort of makes sense as a working paradox  
 but i should be careful when talking about the jedi knights  
 so i am glad you are sorting all this out

(Tom Phillips<sup>1</sup>)THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE BIBLE  
IN A PERSPEX CASE

In the summer of 2009, Glasgow Museum of Modern Art (henceforth GOMA) staged the exhibition *sh[OUT]: Contemporary Art and Human Rights*, showcasing work by lesbian, gay, bi, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) artists. A subsection of the exhibition, *Made in God's Image*, featured works produced by collaboration between the artist in residence, Anthony Schrag, and representatives of the Christian community. In one, the performance artist Roxanne Claxton tore up pages of the Bible, stuffed them in her mouth, ate them, and put them down her clothes to embellish her breasts and genitalia, as the accompanying audio commentary reflected on the desire to destroy the Word as idol and weapon. By taking scripture into her body, the artist was also declaring her intimate proximity to that

<sup>1</sup> Tom Phillips, personal email.

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same Word and opening up an ambiguous relation (at once violent, conflictual and substitutionary) between the Bible and Christianity as embodied in her own life and flesh. In another work, which became the cause célèbre and the lightning conductor for outrage, Jane Clarke, the minister of the newly formed Metropolitan Community Church in Glasgow, offered up a Bible – through Schrag’s serendipitous choice, a *Family Faith and Values* edition, with a white and gold embossed cover and several opening pages to enter family networks, births and marriages – alongside a container of pens and an open invitation to visitors: ‘If you feel you have been excluded from the Bible, please write your way back into it.’

Over a year later, Jane Clarke kindly brought the now infamous Bible to a café in Glasgow,<sup>2</sup> modestly wrapped in a plastic bag, so that I could read the comments which hitherto I had only been able to collate from ad hoc citations in the press (Fig 1.1). The ornate gold ‘Holy Bible’ on the front cover had been embellished by the promise/warning: ‘Raw and uncut’. Some Bible-savvy readers had (rudely?) highlighted painful textual sore spots where the Bible seems to overtly transgress against the moral standards of modernity: Genesis 19 ‘gang rape is a crime’; Leviticus 20.13 ‘I would die for love. Bring it on’ and alternatively ‘This refers to temple prostitution, not a loving relationship’ (though this still raises the question of whether reserving stoning for temple prostitutes effectively modifies the biblical offence). One wily exegete wanted to know how it was that the serpent in Eden told a fundamental truth about the tree (that by eating the fruit the couple would obtain knowledge and know the difference between good and evil) that God himself had neglected to mention. The injustice and lack of humour in a prophet having forty-two boys killed for having called him ‘baldy’ (2 Kings 2: 23–5) was stridently pointed out. Framing comments stockpiled at the beginning – ‘Lose the God joke and live by your own morality’; ‘Please burn after reading. Preferably before’; ‘I wish this book didn’t exist’; ‘Everyone is a person, no matter what. I don’t want a Fascist God’; ‘This is all sexist pish, so disregard it all’ – and at the end ‘PS. Gays aren’t evil’.

The two major Enlightenment moves of (a) the displacement of the Bible by fact/science and (b) the demystification of the Bible as fiction were widely represented. These tended to congregate in the early sections

<sup>2</sup> I am deeply grateful to Jane Clarke for allowing me access to all the original materials including her own public statement. The views expressed here and throughout are my own.