

GLENN R. PAAUW

SAVING THE BIBLE  
FROM OURSELVES

*Learning to Read & Live the Bible Well*

## PREFACE

In the early 1990s George Barna spoke at a gathering of ministry leaders sponsored by International Bible Society. I had been at the Bible Society for a few years and had personally invested in their then 180-year-old mission of making the Bible widely available. But that night the ministry model I had bought into was challenged: easy access to well-translated Bibles isn't enough, he said. Bibles are everywhere in this country but the research shows an alarming disconnection problem. People find the Bible to be a difficult book, don't understand it, and are in fact abandoning it in droves.

His presentation made a deep impact on me. Right then and there I made a commitment: *I don't know how long I'll work here, but for as long as I do I will not be content to just sell or distribute Bibles. I am going to work on understanding and overcoming this disconnection problem. I don't want George Barna Jr. coming back here in thirty years to tell us the same story.*

In the late 1990s I was spending a leisurely morning in Moby Dickens bookshop in Taos, New Mexico, when it first really registered with me how differently the Bible is formatted compared to all the other books in that shop. They, I noticed, are so very readable. The Bible, I noticed again, is so very not.

A few years later, in the early 2000s, I was in a Sunday morning worship service at International Anglican Church in the sublime Shove Chapel on the campus of Colorado College. My Bible had a bookmark from Moby Dickens stuck in it. At one particular moment during the sermon the seven big ideas of this book came together in my mind. I pulled out that bookmark and wrote them all down on the back. That was the moment I decided I should try to write about them, and that bookmark remained my guide through the entire journey.

## - Introduction -

### EMBARKING

This book is a journey to the center of the Bible. Some people—those prone toward counting things—will tell you that the center of the Bible is Psalm 117, since there are 594 chapters before it and the same number following it. But counting is about precision, and verses, which measure smaller units, are more precise. Alas! There is no center verse of the Bible, since the overall count is an even number: 31,174 (in most English Bibles). But this may be a case in which counting is not the thing to do. I propose instead a voyage to the heart of the Bible, an exploration of the paths we might take to get there and a quest to unearth essential, but largely forgotten Bible practices.

The purpose of this book is to contribute to the construction of a new paradigm for engaging the Bible in the Christian community. It is an intervention for a Bible in crisis. Seven new “Bibles” will be introduced to the reader as steps on the path to recovering one deeply engaged Bible. The chapters are set up in groups. Each grouping reviews a key deficiency in how we currently see or interact with the Bible followed by a recommendation for a new presentation or practice.

My core argument is that for most of us, most of the time, small readings prevail over big readings. “Small” and “big” refer to more than the length of the passages we take in. I define *small readings* as those diminished samplings of Scripture in which individuals take in fragmentary bits outside of the Bible’s literary, historical and dramatic contexts. Also implicated here is a correspondingly meager soteriology—that narrow, individualistic and escapist view of salvation so common among Christians. My hope is that these deficiencies will come to be corrected by *big readings*. These are the more

magnified experiences that result when communities engage natural segments of text, or whole books, taking full account of the Bible's various contexts. This will foster the apprehension of the story's goal in a majestic regeneration that is as wide as God's good creation.

Closely related to these small and big readings are various other aspects of our current Bible culture, including related issues such as our typical visual presentation of the Bible, the inseparable connection of the Bible to our complicated life on earth, the way we make sense of (or don't bother with) the library of Scripture as a whole, and the role of aesthetics in what we do with the Bible.

Overall, I examine some of the ways the Bible has "fallen" in contemporary Christianity, followed by my own proposals for the Bible's restoration. I believe the journey to the Bible's redemption—just like our own—lies in incarnational recovery. Just as we require a holistic salvation that includes our bodies, so the Bible needs a restoration that includes its physical form. And the point of this redemption—also similar to our own—is a retrieval of original purpose and intended mission. The Word of God was sent into the world to be an agent of God's transformative power. When we harm the Bible, we hinder that errand.

### **WHY DOES THE BIBLE NEED TO BE SAVED?**

The American presidency has its own fascinating history and has gone through significant mutations as the times have changed along with those who've held the position. August of 1974, however, was a unique moment in that history. Gerald Ford assumed the office on the ninth day of the month following the resignation of Richard Nixon over the Watergate scandal. In his first address to the nation as president, Ford spoke of his commitment to restoring trust in the nation's highest office. This need arose as a result of the long and painful national crisis. Ford articulated the national mood by noting, "This is an hour of history that troubles our minds and hurts our hearts."

Those of us with a commitment to and love for the Bible might be excused for thinking similar words could be applied to the situation of the Scriptures in this hour. I've worked in Bible teaching, publishing and ministry outreach for nearly three decades now. I'm more familiar than I want to be with the

widespread use and abuse of this text. My heart does hurt and my mind is indeed troubled. There may not be some idyllic golden age of the Bible in the past, but that should not diminish our sense of the seriousness of its troubles today.

*Troubles? I thought the Bible was still a very popular book. What troubles?*

You may have heard that the Bible is the bestselling book of all time. And that's true, but that's not the half of it: the Bible is the bestselling book every single year. By any measure, this is remarkable. God didn't have a blockbuster once upon a time. He has THE blockbuster year after year after year. And if the Bible didn't need saving, this accomplishment would mean more than it actually does. It might mean that the content of the Bible would be extremely well known—after all, there are all those copies out there. Given the sheer distribution numbers, we should have Bible trivia experts on every corner. *Who's Melchizedek? I know! I know!* We certainly buy enough Bibles for this to be the case. But the researchers have been telling us for some time that the knowledge base isn't there. Regardless of the number of times we've rolled the Bible presses, the words on the page are not common currency.

Now, it's true that Bible literacy is not really the goal—the Bible's mission is more properly focused on deeper matters. Still, a deficient awareness of Bible basics like facts and storylines is revealing of a more profound loss. If I can't tell you who Moses, Paul, Abraham, Jesus and David are, and in what order they appear in the Bible's drama, I can't possibly know much about what's really going on there.

But there's more at stake here than a widespread cloning of the Bible Answer Man. Given Christian convictions about the Bible, we would expect (hope? pray?) that its unique content would be transforming people on a very significant scale. We would anticipate a deep cultural awareness of the themes, stories and truths of the Bible. We should be finding substantial engagement, both positive and negative, with key biblical claims. We should see, in other words, the Bible taken seriously as a culture-shaping force. But do we?

Well, increasingly no. There may be a kind of shadow that survives, the ghost of Bibles past, when sacred stories, phrases and echoes were interwoven in our literature, art and music, and when its memorable expressions were common parlance. But most of these allusions and references

are now lost on people. The whole Bible thing has become blurry for folks today. We might be swimming in millions of Bibles, but we are not a Scripture-soaked society.

*But what about the Bible-believing community? Isn't there a group of people still immersed in the Bible and very familiar with its contents? Isn't the Bible doing well there?*

There is such a group, it's true, and they are typically quite serious about the Bible. They do study their Bibles and read their devotionals. They go to churches where the Bible is expounded every week. They do better on their Bible literacy questionnaires. (Exactly how many people this describes is open to discussion.) But there may be more to this seeming success story than first meets the eye. It's worth scratching the surface a bit.

There are two stories here, one official and one underground. To get the gist of the official story, consider the things we in the Christian community regularly tell ourselves about the Scriptures. Superlatives abound: The Bible is dynamic, special, inspired and inspiring—the crucial spiritual tool God himself has given us; the Bible is God's instruction manual for life; the Lord of the universe has written a personal love letter to us; it is our passport to heaven; it contains the words of life; it contains the announcements of God—an utterly unique discourse of the divine. We also highlight key biblical self-descriptions: The Bible is God-breathed and the Spirit's own spiritual sword; it is living and active; it is a light for our path; when God sends his word out, it doesn't return to him without accomplishing what he wants. A recent survey of the role of the Bible in American life reports that close to eight out of ten Americans describe the Bible as either inspired by God or as the literal word of God.<sup>1</sup> We are not lacking for a positive view of the Bible.

We talk about the Bible and its importance for the Christian life all the time. In fact, we can't stop talking about it. Everyone knows that a serious believer is supposed to spend a lot of time “in the Word”—soaking it up, praying about it, applying it on a daily basis. Typically, the exhortation to be diligent in our Bible study is followed by the clear promise of big spiritual payoff. The expectation is that believers will spend significant time getting to know their Bibles. But we are also assured that even if we spend only a few minutes in the morning, we're sure to find the spiritual gem to get us through. The Bible will brighten our day, encourage us and strengthen us, if

only we will faithfully open it—even if just for a few moments. Those “Scriptures”—which more typically refer to presorted sentences and snippets—are said to be powerful.

And yet.

We know there is more to this story than the official line. The Christian community doesn't talk about it nearly as much, but there is an underside to the life of the Bible in our midst. This is the story of frustration, boredom and lack of connection. This is the story of failed expectations. Many of us try out the advice promoted in the official line and find that it doesn't work. We commit to a daily “quiet time,” but after a while we give up. We read our little spiritual morsel and discover it doesn't nourish us all that much, and certainly not enough to carry us through the day. Actually, we kind of forget it pretty quickly. The unofficial line regarding the Bible is the story of weird, indecipherable passages. The “and yet” comes down to this: there is more guilt about secret noncompliance with Bible-reading standards in the self-proclaimed Bible-believing community than there is gratitude for promises realized. For far too many folks there is a hoped-for-but-as-yet-undiscovered spiritual meal in the Bible. After too long a wait they begin to doubt there is any real food there at all.

And now for the bad news. It's not just the obvious failures that are failures. Even when we think we have success, the reality is often not very good. Fragmentary, superficial and out-of-context readings and misapplications abound. One of the core reasons for our Bible engagement breakdown is that so many would-be Bible readers have been sold the mistaken notion that the Bible is a look-it-up-and-find-the-answer handy guide to life. They've been encouraged to treat the Scriptures as if they were a collection of doctrinal, devotional and moralistic statements that can be accessed and chosen at will. This topical-search mode of Bible use directly undermines authentic Bible engagement. The advent of electronic Bibles with their speedy find-a-verse feature is only making it worse.

One glaring failure of such an approach is that it ignores huge swaths of the biblical text that don't comfortably fit the model. Many books have no candidates for the My-Favorite-Scripturette award and are studiously avoided by the verse-pickers and therefore effectively decanonized. The grave danger here is that people think they are getting to know the Bible

when actually they are being led to a small sampling of Bible passages—and often misreadings of them. Because this approach is so widely practiced and officially endorsed in Christian communities, even well-intentioned readers are inoculated against real Bible encounters, which differ significantly from the plucking procedure. This superficial use of the Scriptures is actually destructive because those who practice it operate under the illusion that they are engaging the Bible when they are not. They're rarely even aware of what they're missing.

The Bible needs to be saved because of what it has not become. It has not become a collection of books we know, the narrative we stew in, the words that form us. The Bible needs to be saved because it has been falsely promised to us and falsely delivered. It has been packaged aplenty, but unpacked not so much. The truth is the Bible is not easy. The Bible is a challenge—a sizeable library with a wide variety of ancient writings collected over a long period of time. There is no good reason to mislead folks about this fact. And yet, those who take the biggest shortcuts with the Bible are frequently those who have the greatest things to say about it. Unwilling to face the daunting truth, or finding it harder to sell, they push the Easy Button. But, as the saying goes, reality is a stubborn thing. It doesn't go away just because we pretend.

Religious scholar Timothy Beal provocatively contends that the current proliferation of Bibles has all the signs of a “distress crop.” The analogy is of a dying fruit tree that puts all its energy into one last burst of abundance, supplying a superharvest of produce, providing the best possible chance that more seeds will be sown and future trees grown. But soon after this sweet explosion, the tree dies. While the Bible industry appears to be thriving, says Beal, this is a superficiality that masks a deeper malaise. Even as people are failing to connect with the Bible, they keep buying more. The promise of a better outcome delivered through more additives or customized notes is ever before us. Our motto, according to Beal: “If at first we don't succeed, buy, buy again.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bible needs saving, not because of any defect in itself, but because we've buried it, boxed it in, wallpapered over it, neutered it, distorted it, isolated it, individualized it, minimized it, misread it, lied about it, debased it and oversold it. We have over-complicated its form while over-simplifying

its content. We've become cavalier and even cheesy with our Bibles. We'll do almost anything with them. What we have not done, truth be told, is trusted it to be itself. It may not be far off the mark to say that the Bible is completely different from what we've been led to believe it is.

Do we want the Bible to flourish, to have the meaningful life and effective mission that God intended for it? If so, then something must be done, because it is not achieving this mission. The evidence repeatedly shows that for all its sales the Bible remains a foreign book for the vast majority of us. And this is not only a problem in the United States: global mission agencies are now acknowledging an epidemic of biblical illiteracy worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Widespread positive assessment of the Bible combined with widespread ignorance of it amounts to the maintenance of a hollow cultural icon of the past and nothing more.

#### HOW CAN WE SAVE THE BIBLE FROM OURSELVES?

The direction of the answer seems clear enough: if we are the ones who have enslaved the Bible, then it's the chains we've imposed that have to come off. We need to undo the damage we've done. The Bible is still there, after all. Even with all its injuries, like the indefatigable Black Knight of Monty Python fame, soldiering on despite limbs cut off—*Mere flesh wounds! I've had worse!*—the Bible presses forward. Its words can still pulsate with power, despite centuries of being covered over, chopped up, fenced in, overcontrolled and carefully selected. As always, God does his work despite us as much as because of us. But this is no excuse for knowingly persisting in error. We can do better, and we must.

And here's the way: we need more Bibles. *No you didn't! You didn't just say we need more Bibles!*

More Bibles? At least in the cultural context of late capitalism in Western culture, isn't the problem that there are already too many Bibles? We have Bibles of every sort, Bibles infected with the niche-marketing virus and artificially, awkwardly—dare we say it, dishonestly—slanted toward every conceivable target audience. Don't we have more Bibles and more kinds of Bibles than we know what to do with? (The one that pretends to be a teen girls' magazine—or is it the other way around, a teen girls' magazine pretending to be a Bible?—the Bible that's green because the word *wilderness*

shows up a few times, the Bible with the favorite verses of people just like me highlighted in soft blue, or *The Playful Puppies Bible*. All of these are real Bibles, by the way.) More Bibles? Bible publishers are already successfully selling more Bibles to people who are ignoring the ones they have.<sup>4</sup>

More Bibles? Yes. Specifically, seven more Bibles.

But I don't mean more Bibles in *that* sense. These Bibles won't be found at your favorite retail dispenser of spiritual goods. These seven new Bibles are not "products," especially since the commodification of what are supposed to be our sacred writings has been a big contributor to our problems with the Bible. Instead, I'm referring to something like seven new understandings of the Bible. These seven perspectives will come together to form a new paradigm for the Bible. I'm offering a way of seeing the Bible comprehensively that will lead to discovering (or rediscovering) Bible practices that fit what the Bible really is.

So I'd like to introduce seven Bibles on the road to one new Bible. Of course, this Bible is not really unprecedented. "New" here merely means new to us. I'm looking for a Bible that is mostly unknown in our consumer-centric, late-modern world. It is new to us because we've lost our way with the Bible. So I'm proposing seven new Bibles to recover one Bible that we can take seriously in practice, not just in theory. One Bible we can do justice to. One Bible we can pursue by means of big readings, not small ones. One Bible seen and treated as a holy book. (Have we forgotten what the word *sacred* means?) One Bible that, to use C. S. Lewis's phrase, *we accept on its own terms rather than merely use on ours*.

What if we quit ignoring that dark underside of the Bible's story in our time and instead face it head on? Why are so many people struggling with their Bible reading? What can we do about it? What if we start saying things about the Bible that actually line up with what we find when we open it? What if we set aside our slick superlatives for a moment and take a good, hard look at the Bible itself? (Not that we can't have good things to say about the Bible; we can, but we need to arrive at them honestly.) And what if we developed Bible practices more fitting to what we discovered after that good, hard look?

It comes down to being attentive to two key questions: What is the Bible? and What are we supposed to do with it?

## THERE AND BACK AGAIN: THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

My answer to these two questions constitutes this book. Each of the seven new Bibles I propose is clearly worth a book-length treatment in its own right. My project here can be no more than an introductory outline of a would-be path to recovery. I am hoping to chart the course of the journey, not detail every step and nuance of the way. Some of this larger task of recovery will involve the decisions of Bible makers and publishers. Other parts will fall mostly to those who teach and preach the Bible in our church communities—leaders both lay and ordained are invited into what I hope is a holistic and healthy perspective on the Bible. But ultimately it will come down to what whole communities of Jesus followers do with the Bible. My prayer is that we all will become more reflective and intentional about our answers to the two core questions, and that this reflection and intentionality will result in renewed Bible practices. Because our hearts should be hurt by the current state of the Bible.

I will attempt to make the case for all this in an orderly way. One common literary structure found throughout the Bible is the chiasm, a way of arranging material in a reverse symmetrical pattern. The chiasm pattern (at its most basic: A-B-B-A) brings a pleasing, easy-to-remember structure to more complex parts of the Bible, both large and small. This book is built in a chiasm:

The Elegant Bible (chapters 1–2)

The Feasting Bible (chapters 3–4)

The Historical Bible (chapters 5–6)

The Storiated Bible (chapters 7–9)

The Earthly Bible (chapters 10–11)

The Synagogue Bible (chapters 12–13)

The Iconic Bible (chapters 14–15)

The first six chapters explore what the Bible is and how it came to be and recommend ways we can engage it that match what it really is. The final six chapters correspond to the first six in a reverse pattern, extending the opening themes in further directions. Once we regain an elegantly simple presentation of the Bible's natural complexity and literary variety (chapters 1–2), we can once again marry our sacred book of truth to beauty (chapters

14–15). If the Bible is a collection of meaty books best eaten in natural, whole forms (chapters 3–4), it is also true that meals are best experienced in community (chapters 12–13). If the Bible came to us in and through the rough and tumble of history (chapters 5–6), the meaning and direction of history is likewise the direct concern of the Bible's story (chapters 10–11). All of this leads to or flows from the climax of the chiasm: the restoration of the Bible as the story above all stories, a drama that we are invited to play a role in (chapters 7–9).

The chiastic journey of this book, then, is the proposed recovery of the Bible—a Bible that is presented as literature, eaten in natural forms, grounded in history, inviting in its narrative, restorative in its theme, engaged in community, and honored in its aesthetic presentation. My plea is that we deconstruct the crusty apparatus we've layered over our Bibles and, borrowing the language of my friend and colleague Christopher Smith, rediscover the beauty that lies beneath.<sup>5</sup>

If the Bible isn't what we've thought, we have to face the implications. If this is not a user's manual I'm holding in my hands or a collection of individual statements numbered for handy reference, I'm going to have to rethink my strategy for what to do with the Bible. After looking at what the Bible's current format seems to be telling us the Bible is, I will attempt to clear the deck by briefly looking at what the Bible actually is: a collection of ancient writings. This will lead to a discussion about why *this* Bible needs a slower, smarter, deeper engagement. I'll be talking about immersion in the deep blue sea of the Bible rather than skimming across the versified surface. I'll be making the case for eating good meals rather than speed snacking on what Philip Yancey calls Scripture McNuggets. My first plea will thus be for biblical holism, for exploring the Bible's smaller, richly-textured tellings in light of the complete compositions of which they are a part. And I'll argue for reading first, study second.

My case will then move on to the claim that when we pay good, close attention to this collection of writings, there is no other conclusion we can come to except that God's story (theology) is so embedded in and intertwined with our story (history) that the only good Bible reading and understanding is "grounded." That is, the Bible is tied to, bound up together with, arises from, addresses and redeems *this* place, *these* people, *our* lives. If we

try to divorce the Bible and its spiritual teachings from the blood and guts and failures and hopes of God's people in history, we will sorely miss its point. One thing we've most certainly learned from the last one hundred years of historical study of the Bible is that the Bible is not a systematics—a timeless, organized scheme of otherworldly salvation. The surprising drama is rooted in this earth, and its promises will only be realized on this earth. Yes, the Bible is divine discourse, but God chose to speak in the Bible only in and through fully human voices. A dehistoricized Bible, pontificating to us from some point safely above the fray, is an unreal Bible, as unhelpful to us as a docetic Christ, who only seems to be human but really isn't. If we are determined to take flight to some higher, more noble realm above, we should be honest and go get our story from somewhere other than the Bible. The early church faced this option and dismissed world-denying, fly-away salvation as a heresy—gnosticism. But it's a very persistent, hydra-headed error and every generation faces the need to denounce it again.

Throughout the discussion I take seriously the fact that the Bibles we have are cultural artifacts. What we do with our Bibles—physically, tangibly, experientially—both reveals and shapes what we think the Bible is. God's world is a connected world and we have ignored for far too long the relationship between the forms of the Bible and its content. We do a lot of things with the Bible without thinking very much about *what* we're doing. But the Bible is not an ethereal book of spiritual ideas. The Bible itself is part of our world: it is a thing, an object, an artifact we make and form. When it is well-made—crafted, we might say—it will do more than say or teach things; it will embody them. To think we can sever this connection without consequence is to fail to think as good creational monotheists. The one, true God made the world to be a place in which form and content are meant to work together.

Since we are in the midst of a transition from traditional print to electronic forms of text, this principle is more important than ever. When sacred words move to the realm of floating electronic bits, the temptation to ignore their form is made stronger. But historic, orthodox Christian teaching stands on the connection of salvation with creation. The principle behind this is that when God saves, he is saving what he has already made. Just as we are not saved if there is no resurrection (though one might not know this from listening to

typical funeral orations), the saving of the Bible will involve some physical restoration work as well. Beauty and the Bible will have to be addressed.

What does a journey to the center of the Bible look like? Any decent adventure into the Bible will take full account of both its form and its content. It will begin with knowledge of the messages of whole books and a clear perception of the uniqueness of their contributions. It will be followed by growing insight into how these books come together to form a single narrative—of God, Israel and the world—that comes into its own in the utterly remarkable story of Jesus of Nazareth and the new community he launched. We'll know we've hit the heart of it all—that is, that the Bible is achieving its purpose—when we realize that this ancient tribal tale has somehow become *our* center. When many more of us are engaged in communities that breathe this story and find their purpose in living this drama, then perhaps troubled minds and hurting hearts can be put at ease. The Bible too can be saved.

### ENDING WITH LOVE

Why did God give us the kind of Bible he did? Why did God give us a Bible at all? Why do we so often try to turn the Bible into something it manifestly is not? What is the *telos* (the great goal) of the Bible? Is the Bible itself part of God's mission to the world? If so, how exactly?

I invite you to ponder these big background questions (along with the two key ones I mentioned earlier: What is the Bible? What are we supposed to do with it?) as we begin our journey to the center of the Bible. Good answers can best be found by intentionally adopting the practice of sympathetic reading. I believe what C. S. Lewis said, that one's first responsibility regarding any piece of literature is to follow where it would lead. We are obligated to receive the submitted writing on the author's terms before we take over with our own attempts to use it on ours.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Bible we are sorely tempted to get things backwards, to begin with our demands for immediate and obvious relevance on terms that we dictate. Indeed, much Bible publishing is built on this dishonoring practice. Call it submission, call it a willing suspension of disbelief, call it respecting an author—it comes down to stifling myself and to not letting my own questions, concerns and inner voices overrule what it is I'm first of all supposed to *receive*. Reading openly, deeply and slowly, and thus receiving the text as it was first meant—

this is the key discipline for all good reading. So it is with the Bible. The beginning of good Bible engagement is a bit of reflection on what it means to be a virtuous reader in general.

God was willing to take a great risk with the Bible: he left it in our hands. And we've done all kinds of things to it through the ages. We make it in certain ways and we read it in certain ways. Apparently this is what God planned all along. He expected and expects us to bring something of ourselves to it. The Bible is not magic. Nor is it kept away from us, safe and untouchable. To think we can simply be passive with the Bible, withholding our own active thought, reflection and shared community engagement, is to not accept the responsibility of being human.

We do best by the Bible when what we bring to it is our love. In the face of postmodernism's hermeneutic of suspicion, I, along with others, recommend an epistemology of love in order to truly come to know the Bible. As N. T. Wright emphasizes, this is not the usual modernist proposal in which the knower stands dominantly over the known:

Knowledge has to do with the interrelation of humans and the created world. This brings it within the sphere of the biblical belief that humans are made in the image of the creator, and that in consequence they are entrusted with the task of exercising wise responsibility within the created order. They are neither detached observers of, nor predators upon, creation. From this point of view, knowledge can be a form of *redeeming* stewardship; it can be, in one sense, a form of love.<sup>7</sup>

Wright goes on to identify the result of this kind of stewardship of knowledge:

To know is to be in a relation with the known, which means that the 'knower' must be open to the possibility of the 'known' being other than had been expected or even desired, and must be prepared to respond accordingly, not merely to observe from a distance.<sup>8</sup>

Wright's critical realism can help to protect us from ourselves. Which reader of the Bible is not prone to remaking the text in their own image? How many of us profess a love for the Bible that is really no more than an affection for our own predetermined ideas? May we all be open to discovering in our sacred book things we had not seen, had not known, had not expected. May we, in other words, love the Scriptures as something bigger

than and other than ourselves. We need a love that is truly and fully open to something coming to us from outside the imaginings of our own minds and hearts, something that can illumine our world and our stories. This is the kind of love we must bring to the Bible.

I embark on this journey knowing that it is a dangerous thing to mess with people's Bibles. Folks of all kinds and representing various perspectives tend to be pretty attached to what they believe about it, tend to be pretty certain about their certainties. I'm no different. But as Wendell Berry has reminded us, "The reason we need to have our *false* certainties shaken is so that we may see the possibility of better orders than we have."<sup>9</sup>

Protestants in particular will always say they love the Bible, in part because we understand our own history as a story of *biblical* reformation and recovery. But we are also the ones especially prone to instrumentalist and manipulative approaches to the Bible. Too often our well-intentioned biblical devotion comes down to merely using the Bible with our agenda already in place. So let us test this love we so constantly proclaim. A genuine love for the Bible won't mind a bit of reflection on the state of the Bible, on what the Bible once was, on what it has become and on what it could be again. As opposed to bibliolatry, this love will not be a worship of the thing itself, but a love *through* it to meet the one who stands behind it, who woos us into his story and ultimately to himself. But if we hear *him* calling to us through the mighty drama of the Bible, we will of course want to do right by his script.

## OUR COMPLICATED BIBLE

*Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.*

ANTOINE DE SAINT EXUPÉRY

**W**hat is the Bible?

There are the usual answers: The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is God's inspired truth. The Bible is divine revelation. Or, the Bible is an ancient, mythological and unscientific book. Others jump to more descriptive answers—adjectives more than answers, really. The Bible is perfect, wonderful, insightful, helpful, encouraging and so on. Alternatively, for some it is incomprehensible, irrelevant, bloody, damaging or worse. But we haven't really answered the question: What is the Bible? When I open the book or turn on the screen, what is it precisely that I'm encountering?

Many people claim the Bible as the foundation of their life. Churches around the world and through the ages have pledged their commitment and faithfulness to it. It is therefore somewhat astonishing that we rarely stop to answer this question: What is it, exactly? I suspect that we pick up signals *based on how we see the Bible being used* and deduce from them what the Bible actually is. But our practices send confusing and conflicted messages. Most people simply haven't worked out clearly and consistently what they think the Bible is. And I would venture that most churches don't expressly address this question either; more likely they just go about their business,

using the Bible in various ways. Again, I say, this is quite remarkable given the vital importance we claim for the Bible. You'd think we'd make sure those within our spiritual communities know what the Bible is in the interest of helping them interact with it appropriately.

I do know a man who addressed this question head-on in an adult Sunday School class. The class was an introduction to the Bible and at the end the following question was included in the review test:

Which of the following is the Bible most like: (A) Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, (B) The Reader's Digest Guide to Home Repairs, or (C) The Collected Papers of the American Antislavery Society?

What was this teacher looking for? He summarized it this way: "The correct answer is C, although we most often use the Bible like A and expect it to be like B." Part of his intention in the class was to help the students realize that "the Bible is a series of occasional pieces of various genres that traces the development of a transformational movement."<sup>1</sup> To this we will return—when we reach the climax of our journey to the center of the Bible, we will need a good, summarizing description like this one.

But our task in this chapter is more limited. We need a first-level answer to the question. Let's begin by simply trying to see the Bible clearly. After all, we identify many things based on how they present themselves to us. So, what does the Bible look like it is? How is it presented?

### A SHORT HISTORY OF THE COMPLEXIFICATION OF THE BIBLE

We've never been able to leave the Bible alone. Ancient manuscript collections of the Bible reveal a fairly universal compulsion to tamper with the sacred text. From very early on, Christian scribes did more than record bare words. They began to interact with the sacred writings, minimally at first. Things begin to happen in, around and under the Bible's own words.

While the wider cultural aesthetic preference was for *scriptio continua* (no spaces between words and no punctuation), early Scripture manuscripts began introducing new features. Many of these seem to be related to providing "helps" for the public reading of the Bible. We should remember that most people did not see these manuscripts, but rather heard them being read. Writing material was scarce and expensive and not many people could read and write. So the first additions to the Bible's pages were there for those

who read them to others. Breathing marks, paragraph or other sense unit markings, visual cues used to mark the beginnings of new words, and page numbering all appear.

There were also special abbreviated ways of presenting the divine names. Monogram-like combinations of Greek letters superimposed on each other debuted as with the *tau-rho* and later *chi-rho* pairs that functioned as shorthand ways of referring to Christ. Other symbols were creatively scripted in among the words. Visually pure Bible texts are pretty hard to come by.<sup>2</sup>

What began as very circumspect intervention, however, grew into something more. We moved from textual glosses, marks, symbols and chapter divisions to full-blown commentary and ornate artwork. All of this shows up not only in the margins but also in the spaces between lines and wrapped around the holy words. The temptation to comment directly on the biblical page has been indulged by copyists from the start. It's inevitable—and a healthy sign anyway—that a text as significant as the Bible's provokes strong responses and interactions. However, dangers lurk here.

First, it's essential that the boundaries of what is sacred and what is not remain clear. For receivers of the text, the aura of authority can easily start to float over our own commentary. Second, even when the boundaries are clear, the additions can become bloated and overwhelm the Bible text in appearance and thus perceived importance. Third, commentary in particular can become a kind of overbearing boss, fencing in the text and restricting the interpretive possibilities. It becomes very easy to squeeze the Bible into a mold, reversing roles with a text that is seeking to reshape us around its story.

Marking divisions in the text is perhaps the key intervention made through the Bible's history. These divisions could include paragraphs, marked sections for readings or the topical gospel canons produced by the fourth-century church historian Eusebius. (Paragraph markings in the First Testament, inserted to aid in the weekly synagogue readings, predate even the writing of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>) Various chapter systems of the New Testament were made, including one that broke Matthew into sixty-eight sections, Mark into forty-eight, Luke into eighty-three and so on. Chapters were organizing principles, developed to structure liturgical

readings or to help speed the finding of passages and topics within the Bible. Their guiding principle tended to be breaking up the text into sections of roughly equal length rather than attentively revealing the natural literary sections of the Bible.

We tend to think of our ever-present modern Bible companions—chapter and verse numbers—as belonging inexorably together. But they actually have separate histories. The chapter system we know today was developed around the year 1200 by the English church leader Stephen Langton. But this system wasn't immediately standardized. For example, the famous printed Bibles of Johannes Gutenberg, beginning in the 1450s, didn't include it. Eventually, however, Langton's chapter divisions would be married to verse markings, and the new arrangement would become a dynasty. That's a bit of a story, and we'll get to it shortly.

The story of Bible verses brings us to the real birth of the modern Bible. We can see this momentous emergence by focusing on the few short years from 1525 to 1557. Once the new cultural form took shape, it spread remarkably quickly and soon became the assumed, standard presentation of the Bible. The reasons for this are historically intriguing, revealing of what a lot of folks apparently *wanted* the Bible to be.

This particular chapter of the story we are concerned with has a pleasant enough beginning. William Tyndale's first New Testament in 1525 was a readable, coherent presentation: a single-column setting fairly attuned to literary form. For example, in Luke's Gospel lists and songs are presented in unique forms, appropriate to embedded subgenres. There are no intrusions to the text save for chapter headings. Overall it is an accessible work that invites big readings.

But the changes began quickly. In the 1530s extrabiblical material was increasingly poking into the sacred text itself (not just the margins) and two-column settings became the norm. The decisive turn for the modernist Bible, however, was the introduction of numbered verse divisions. By the sixteenth century the chapter numbers that we know today had been in place for three hundred years. But Reformation-era Bible dueling required a greater level of fine-tuning. The first attempt at inserting numbered verse markings was made by an Italian scholar, Santi Pagnini, who in 1528 versified a Latin New Testament. But as with those earlier alternate chapter divisions, Pagnini's numbering system didn't take hold.

## THE GOSPEL OF ST LUKE

11-19

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to compile a treatise of those things, which are surely known among us, even as they declared them unto us, which from the beginning saw them themselves, and were ministers at the doing: I determined also, as soon as I had searched out diligently all things from the beginning, that then I would write unto thee, good Theophilus: that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, whereof thou art informed.

### CHAPTER ONE

Zacharias.

Elizabeth.

Lev. 11: 4.

John.

\* To make the children have such an heart to God as Abraham and the Fathers had.

Psa. 131.  
Mal. 3. 4.  
Mal. 4. 6.

A sign is asked.

**T**here was in the days of Herod king of Jewry, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia. And his wife was of the daughters of Aaron: And her name was Elizabeth. Both were perfect before God, and walked in all the laws and ordinances of the Lord, that no man could find fault with them. And they had no child, because that Elizabeth was barren and both were well stricken in age.

And it came to pass, as he executed the priest's office before God, as his course came (according to the custom of the priest's office) his lot was to burn incense. And went into the temple of the Lord and the whole multitude of the people were without in prayer while the incense was a-burning. And there appeared unto him an angel of the lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was abashed, and fear came on him.

And the angel said unto him: fear not Zachary, for thy prayer is heard: And thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John, and thou shalt have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the lord, and shall neither drink wine nor strong drink. And he shall be filled with the holy ghost, even in his mother's womb: and many of the children of Israel shall he turn to their Lord God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias to turn the hearts\* of the fathers to the children, and the unbelievers to the wisdom of the just men: to make the people ready for the Lord.

And Zacharias said unto the angel: Whereby shall I know this? seeing that I am old and my wife well stricken in years. And the angel answered and said

Figure 1.1. Tyndale's New Testament

It didn't take long for the experiment to be tried again. Similar new cultural expressions often occur independently yet in close historical proximity. In this case, something seems to have been insisting on coming to expression in the Bible realm, and the turn to modernism was its fullness of time. Close to the heart of modernity is the impulse to segment, in the belief that the path to understanding comes from the exhaustive examination of the constituent pieces of a thing. Sure enough, Robert Estienne, a French printer and classical scholar, gave numbered verse divisions another shot in 1551. What was Estienne's motivation? He wanted to produce a Bible concordance, a tool that would change decisively the answer to the question, what are we supposed to do with the Bible? Estienne introduced his numbered verses to a Greek New Testament, and this time the system caught on. These are the verse numbers we see reflected in most Bibles today. All that was left was to number the older verse markings that already divided the First Testament. Everything was in place for a fully segmented, modernistic Bible. Tyndale's beauty had been escorted to the edge of a cliff.

Just a few short years later in 1557, an edition of the Geneva New Testament turned each verse into a paragraph of its own. In 1560 the Geneva Bible would repeat and enshrine the error. As for Tyndale's clean and readable text? Over she goes. In truth, it was a kind of death, a demolishing of the natural form of the Bible. Of course, literary words would continue to be translated, but words alone do not literature make. King James I of England, unhappy with the strongly Calvinistic notes in the Geneva Bible, would commission a new English translation a generation later. The King James Bible was a literary masterpiece as far as its language was concerned, but it continued the destructive device of indenting and thus isolating each newly-numbered fragment. And it became the new standard for Bible printing. It was the death knell for a certain kind of Bible, a Bible that presented something closer to what the Scriptures inherently were. In this new form an essential part of the literature had withered, expired and disappeared, namely, the form.

It is critical to note here that Estienne's intention was to produce a reference tool (a concordance for a Greek New Testament), but the Geneva Bible took this specialized form intended for a specialized use and transferred it to a Bible for general readers of the English text. The new form

The righteous flourish.

Psalms.

The Lord will not faile his

f Thy iudgements are most constant against the wicked, and passe our reach, g Thou wilt strengthen them with all power, & blesse them with all felicitie. h Though the faithfull seeme to wither, and be cut down by the wicked, yet they shall grow againe and flourish in the Church of God as the cedars doe in mount Lebanon. i The children of God shall haue a power aboue nature, and their age shall bring forth manie fresh fruits.

foole doeth not vnderstand this, 7 (When the wicked grow as the grasse, and all the workers of wickednesse doe flourish) that they shall be destroyed for euer. 8 But thou, O Lord, art most High for euermore. 9 For loe, thine enemies, O Lord: for loe, thine enemies shall perish: all the workers of iniquitie shall be destroyed. 10 But thou shalt exalt mine home like the vnicornes, and I shall bee anoynted with fresh oyle. 11 Mine eye also shall see my desire against mine enemies: and mine eares shall heare my wish against the wicked, that rise vp against me. 12 The righteous shall flourish like a palme tree, and shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. 13 Such as bee planted in the house of the Lord, shall flourish in the courts of our God. 14 They shall still bring forth fruit in their age: they shall be fit and flourishing. 15 To declare that the Lord my rocke is righteous, and that none iniquity is in him.

P S A L. XCIII.

1 Hee praiseth the power of God in the creation of the world, and beatech downe all people which lift them vp against his maiesty, 5 and promisseth to consider his promises.

The Lord reigneth, and is clothed with maiestie: the Lord is clothed, and girded with power, the world also shall be established, that it cannot be moued.

2 Thy throne is established of old: thou art from euerlasting.

3 The floods haue lifted vp, O Lord: the floods haue lifted vp their voyce: the floods lift vp their waues.

4 The waues of the sea are marueilous through the noise of many waters, yet the Lord on high is more mighty.

5 Thy testimonies are very sure: holinesse becommeth thine House, O Lord, for euer.

P S A L. XCIII.

1 He prayeth vnto God against the violence and arrogence of tyrants, 10 warning them of Gods iudgements. 12 Them doth he comfort: the afflicted by the good issue of their afflictions, as he fill in himselfe, and did see in others, and by the ruine of the wicked, 23 whom the Lord will destroy.

O Lord God the auenger, O God the auenger, shew thy selfe clearly.

2 Exalt thy selfe, O Iudge of the world, and render a reward to the proud.

3 Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?

4 They prate and speake fiercely: all the workers of iniquity vauit themselves.

5 They smite downe thy people, O Lord, and trouble thine heritage.

6 They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherlesse.

7 Yet they say, The Lord shall not see: neither will the God of Iacob regard it.

8 Vnderstand, yee vnwise among the people: and ye fooles, when will ye be wise?

9 Hee that planted the eare, shall hee not heare? or he that formed the eye, shall hee not see?

10 Or he that chastiseth the nations, shall hee

a As God by his power and wisdom hath made and governeth the world: so must the same be our defence against all enemies and dangers. b Wherewith thou sitest and governest the world. c Gods power appeareth in ruling the furious waters. d Besides Gods power and wisdom in creating and governing, his great mercy also appeareth in that hee hath giuen his people his word and covenant.

a Whole office is to take vengeance on the wicked. b Shew by effect that thou art Iudge of the world to punish the wicked. c That is, bragge of their cruelty & oppression: or esteem themselves aboue all other. d Seeing the Church was then so sore oppressed, it ought not to seeme strange to vs, if we see it so now, and therefore we must call to God, to take our cause in hand. e He sheweth that they are desperate in malice, inasmuch as they feared not God, but gaue them selues wholly to doe wickedly. f He sheweth that it is impossible, but God should heare, see, and vnderstand their wickednesse. g If God punish whole nations for their sinnes, it is vnreasonable for any one man, or els a few to thinke that God will spare them.

not correct? he that teacheth man knowledge, shall hee not know?

11 The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanitie.

12 Blessed is the man whom thou chastisest, O Lord, and teachest him in thy Law.

13 That thou mayest giue him rest from the dayes of euill, whiles the pitte is digged for the wicked.

14 Surely the Lord will not faile his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance.

15 For iudgement shall returne to iustice, and all the vpriight in heart shall follow after it.

16 Who will rise vp with me against the wicked? or who will take my part against the workers of iniquitie?

17 If the Lord had not holpen me, my soule had almost dwelt in silence.

18 When I said, My foot slideth, thy mercy, O Lord, stayed me.

19 In the multitude of my thoughts in mine heart, thy comforts haue reioiced my soule.

20 Hath the throne of iniquitie fellowship with thee, which forgeth wrong for a Law?

21 They gather them together against the soule of the righteous, and condemne the innocent blood.

22 But the Lord is my refuge, and my God is the rocke of mine hope.

23 And he will recompense them their wickednesse, & destroy them in their owne malice, yea, the Lord our God shall destroy them.

o It is a great token of Gods iudgement when the purpose of the wicked is broken, but most, when they are destroyed in their owne malice.

P S A L. XCV.

1 An earnest exhortation to praise God for the government of the world and the election of the Church. 8 An admonition not to follow the rebellion of the olde fathers, that tempted God in the wilderness. 12 For the which they might not enter into the land of promise.

Come, let vs reioyce vnto the Lord: let vs sing alowde vnto the rocke of our salvation.

2 Let vs come before his face with praise: let vs sing lowd vnto him with Psalmes.

3 For the Lord is a great God, and a great King aboue all gods.

4 In whose hand are the deepe places of the earth, and the heights of the mountaines are his.

5 To whom the Sea belongeth, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

6 Come, let vs worship and fall downe, and kneele before the Lord our maker.

7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheepe of his hand: to day, if ye wil heare his voyce,

8 Harden not your heart, as in Meribah, and as in the day of Massah in the wilderness.

9 When your fathers tempted mee, prouoed me, though they had seene my worke.

10 Fourtie yeeres haue I contended with this generation, and said, They are a people that erre in heart, for they haue not known my wayes.

11 Wherefore I sware in my wrath, saying, Surely they shall not enter into my rest.

if they heare his voice. f By the contemning of Gods word. (Or in the place which was so called. 16 For irration. reade Exod. 17. Exod. 17. 2. Num. 14. 22) g They were without iudgement and reason. h That is, into the land of Canaan, where he promised them rest.

h God hath reioiced ouer his, and chastiseth them for their weakness, at they should suppose: hee reioiceth with the wicked, i God will reduce the state & government of the just to their righte, and then the just shall follow him cheerfully. k He complaineth of the which would not helpe him to resist the enemies: yet was assured that Gods helpe would not faile. l When I thought there was no way but death. m In my trouble and distress I had found thy precious helpe. n Though the wicked might pretend iustice in opposing the Church, yet they haue not the authority of God.

a He sheweth that Gods seruice is not in darkness, but chiefly in the sacrifice of praise & thanksgiving. b Thus the Angels (who respect of nature thought vnpossible) are not in the sight of God: for the idoles, which man doeth reuerence. c All things are governed by his providence. d By these three words he signifieth one thing: meaning that they must wholly giue themselves to serue God. e That is, the sheepe, whom he governeth with his owne hand. f He sheweth what is they are Gods sheepe: that is,

P S A L.

Figure 1.2. A page from the Psalms in the Geneva Bible

became standard, and its visual message altered how readers perceived and understood the very nature of the Bible.

At stake here is a key feature of any reader's communication pact with any piece of writing: the recognition of an author's chosen literary type and a subsequent agreement to follow the rules of that choice. Once the Bible is visually fragmented and made uniform, where then is the letter, the poem, the oracle, the story? They are gone with the new modernist wind and replaced by bits and pieces, all numbingly the same, a uniform list bound by two columns on the printed page. The new form actively works at undoing the author's literary intentions as well as the reader's understanding of their corresponding obligation. As the reader takes in the numbered list going down the page, the message is clear: these propositions are meant to be read and understood independently as separate statements of spiritual truth. And the Bible, therefore, is the collection of these true, perfect, divine spiritual statements.

This revolution was actually twofold. The new modern reference imprint that was placed on top of the Bible text simultaneously masked the original, natural units of the text while also imposing a new structure of numbered, fragmented micro-units. It was a double loss: the Bible's native form was lost as a foreign one was forced in. This colonization of the Bible text would decisively change the course of the Bible for the next five centuries.

This wind blew in quickly, and the change it brought was momentous indeed. From now on the versified Bible became what almost everyone thought of simply as the Bible. The Bible had gone from being a collection of books—a rich variety of genres, each fulfilling its specified task in the developing overall narrative—to a list of singled-out statements. It was the form that morphed, but this changed what the Bible *was* for people. As Bible historian David Norton says of this crucial period, "The reader is being directed to texts rather than to the text."<sup>4</sup> The early modern period thus proved to be a crucial one for the Bible. As we will see, there was a direct link between the new form of the text and new Bible practices.

What does the Bible look like now? How is it presented? What does the format of the Bible tell us it is? Before anyone even says a word, the modern complexification of the Bible has staked out its preemptive position on the issue and has *already shown us* what the Bible is. And given this predeter-

mined answer in the format itself, it should come as no surprise at all what people will then do with this Bible.

### **BAMBOOZLED BY BIBLIOCLUTTER**

In 1707, one hundred and fifty years after the appearance of the Geneva New Testament, philosopher John Locke would write that the Scriptures “are so chop’d and minc’d, and as they are now Printed, stand so broken and divided, that . . . the Common People take the Verses usually for distinct Aphorisms,” and “even Men of more advanc’d Knowledge in reading them, lose very much of the strength and force of the Coherence, and the Light that depends on it.”<sup>5</sup>

Chop’d and minc’d, the modern Bible has bad complexity. This is not the kind of complexity that science speaks of these days, those intricate patterns of nature—waves, leaves, coastlines—formed by the simplest of small patterns iterated and reiterated over time and space. That kind of complexity is pleasing to us and fitting to the nature of things. But the Bible’s newfound complexity is artificial, intrusive and ultimately misleading as to the true nature of what it is.

Granted, the Bible is in and of itself a complex book—diverse literary types, diverse authors, a meandering storyline that can sometime seem completely off track. But this kind of complexity in the Bible does come together over time and space to create a pleasing and fitting pattern. What we’ve done to the Bible—that’s something else entirely. We’ve created a Bible exoskeleton—a hard outer structure that covers and essentially hides what is beneath. Columns, numbers, headings, footnotes, cross-references, callouts, colored letters, etc., etc., etc. Our overindulged addiction to addition has given us everything we could ask for except the text itself in a clean, natural expression. What we have in our Bibles now is excess. We have effectively buried the text and blinded readers with data smog.<sup>6</sup>

The modernist Bible has the problem of presenting the reader with an imposingly dense and complicated book to digest, and this in an age when reading in general is already under assault. We should rethink how we’ve presented our holy book, if only for the sake of issuing a decent invitation for people to simply read it. But the form of the modernist Bible has other issues.

will be liberated from its bondage to decay<sup>c</sup> and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

<sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning<sup>d</sup> as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup>Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,<sup>e</sup> groan<sup>f</sup> inwardly as we wait eagerly<sup>g</sup> for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in this hope we were saved.<sup>h</sup> But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

<sup>26</sup>In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us<sup>i</sup> through wordless groans. <sup>27</sup>And he who searches our hearts<sup>j</sup> knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

<sup>28</sup>And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who<sup>a</sup> have been called<sup>k</sup> according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those God foreknew<sup>l</sup> he also predestined<sup>m</sup> to be conformed to the image of his Son,<sup>n</sup> that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>30</sup>And those he predestined,<sup>o</sup> he also called; those he called, he also justified;<sup>p</sup> those he justified, he also glorified.<sup>q</sup>

**More Than Conquerors**

<sup>31</sup>What, then, shall we say in response to these things?<sup>r</sup> If God is for us, who can be against us?<sup>s</sup> <sup>32</sup>He who did not spare his own Son,<sup>t</sup> but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge<sup>u</sup> against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who then is the one who condemns?

8:21<sup>c</sup> Ac 3:21; 2Pe 3:13; Rev 21:1  
 8:22<sup>d</sup> Jer 12:4  
 8:23<sup>e</sup> 2Co 5:5  
 1Co 5:2, 4<sup>g</sup> Gal 5:5  
 8:24<sup>h</sup> 1Th 5:8  
 8:26<sup>i</sup> Eph 6:18  
 8:27<sup>j</sup> Rev 2:23  
 8:28<sup>k</sup> 1Co 1:9;  
 2Ti 1:9  
 8:29<sup>l</sup> Ro 11:2  
<sup>m</sup> Eph 1:5, 11  
<sup>n</sup> 1Co 15:49;  
 2Co 3:18; Php 3:21;  
 1Jn 3:2  
 8:30<sup>o</sup> Eph 1:5, 11  
<sup>p</sup> 1Co 6:11<sup>q</sup> Ro 9:23  
 8:31<sup>r</sup> Ro 4:1  
<sup>s</sup> Ps 118:6  
 8:32<sup>t</sup> Jn 3:16;  
 Ro 4:25; 5:8  
 8:33<sup>u</sup> Isa 50:8, 9

8:34<sup>v</sup> Ro 5:6-8  
<sup>w</sup> Mk 16:19  
<sup>x</sup> Heb 7:25; 9:24;  
 1Jn 2:1  
 8:35<sup>y</sup> 1Co 4:11  
 8:36<sup>z</sup> Ps 44:22;  
 2Co 4:11  
 8:37<sup>aa</sup> 1Co 15:57  
<sup>ab</sup> Gal 2:20; Rev 1:5;  
 3:9  
 8:38<sup>ac</sup> Eph 1:21;  
 1Pe 3:22  
 8:39<sup>ad</sup> Ro 5:8  
 9:1<sup>ae</sup> 2Co 11:10;  
 Gal 1:20; 1Ti 2:7  
<sup>af</sup> Ro 1:9  
 9:3<sup>ag</sup> Ex 32:32  
<sup>ah</sup> 1Co 12:3; 16:22  
<sup>ai</sup> Ro 11:14  
 9:4<sup>aj</sup> Ex 4:22  
<sup>ak</sup> Ge 17:2; Ac 3:25;  
 Eph 2:12<sup>al</sup> Ps 147:19  
<sup>am</sup> Heb 9:1<sup>an</sup> Ac 13:32  
 9:5<sup>ao</sup> Mt 1:1-16  
<sup>ap</sup> Jn 1:1<sup>aq</sup> Ro 1:25  
 9:6<sup>ar</sup> Ro 2:28, 29;  
 Gal 6:16

No one. Christ Jesus who died<sup>v</sup> — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God<sup>w</sup> and is also interceding for us.<sup>x</sup> <sup>35</sup>Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?<sup>y</sup> <sup>36</sup>As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
 we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”<sup>bz</sup>

<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors<sup>a</sup> through him who loved us.<sup>b</sup> <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,<sup>c</sup> neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,<sup>c</sup> <sup>39</sup>neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God<sup>d</sup> that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Paul's Anguish Over Israel**

**9** I speak the truth in Christ — I am not lying,<sup>e</sup> my conscience confirms<sup>f</sup> it through the Holy Spirit — <sup>2</sup>I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup>For I could wish that I myself<sup>g</sup> were cursed<sup>h</sup> and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race,<sup>i</sup> <sup>4</sup>the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship;<sup>j</sup> theirs the divine glory, the covenants,<sup>k</sup> the receiving of the law,<sup>l</sup> the temple worship<sup>m</sup> and the promises.<sup>n</sup> <sup>5</sup>Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah,<sup>o</sup> who is God over all,<sup>p</sup> forever praised!<sup>dq</sup> Amen.

**God's Sovereign Choice**

<sup>6</sup>It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.<sup>r</sup> <sup>7</sup>Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring

<sup>a</sup> 28 Or that all things work together for good to those who love God, who; or that in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good — with those who  
<sup>b</sup> 36 Psalm 44:22  
<sup>c</sup> 38 Or nor heavenly rulers  
<sup>d</sup> 5 Or Messiah, who is over all. God be forever praised! Or Messiah. God who is over all be forever praised!

**Figure 1.3.** A contemporary modernist Bible with two columns, chapter and verse numbering, section headings, translators' footnotes, cross-references, etc.

The Thunderbird problem is known in the automobile industry as the problem of upgrades that backfire. The original Thunderbird was immediately well-received, so much that Thunderbird clubs were formed by the car's enthusiasts. Perceived as smart, sporty and fun, the Thunderbird clearly struck a chord with a dedicated group of drivers. Then, in the usual pattern of well-intentioned tinkering with the goal of improving on the good to make it even better, the Thunderbird somewhere lost its way. No doubt a case could be made for each added feature and new design. But when you added them all up, something else happened. All the enthusiasts rebelled. They claimed they didn't recognize their beloved anymore. Whatever else this big, complicated machine was, it wasn't the car they had fallen for. Feature creep had led to feature fatigue. Upgrades had overwhelmed the original vision. But then in an important, clarifying move, Ford went back to the start and released a new retro version of the Thunderbird, thus winning back the tribe.

Such is the story of the modernist TMI Bible. Every note, every heading, every number, every stop-reading-and-jump-around reference was born with the best of intentions. We were only trying to help. Help make the Good Book easier to understand. Help find things more quickly. Help with a little guidance from the authorized, credentialed experts. Help the very words of Jesus himself find a straight line to our hearts. But these additives too have backfired. We've piled them on. Bible readers now face information overload, leading paradoxically to information anxiety. At some point, serving up more facts, data, interpretation and application about the Bible only serves to make us nervous about all that we apparently don't yet know. The release of every new study Bible only reinforces this anxiety. In all of this, the original has gotten very hard to recognize and we seem to have lost the core thing itself. We have a Thunderbird problem with the Bible. Bible enthusiasts should rebel.

It's worth observing that the modernist Bible has a kind of desperation about it, a frantic nervousness that keeps doing things to the text—cutting and cataloging it, fencing it in with approved commentary, cross-referencing everything to prove some kind of harmony. Perhaps this is due to an underlying feeling of inadequacy in the face of modernity's demand for comprehensive certainty. The bare text makes the modernist nervous, so



he won't leave the text alone. The bare text has too many possibilities—mysteries even. The bare text is difficult to control. The modernist turn in culture led the keepers of the Bible to transform it into something “precise, punctual, calculable, standard, bureaucratic, rigid, invariant, finely coordinated, and routine.”<sup>7</sup>

This nervousness emerges clearly in that template of all modern Bibles, the Geneva Bible. In the book of Romans, wherein so much was at stake for Reformation Christians, the interpreters could take no chances. The framing notes dwarf Paul's own portrait of Jesus and the meaning of his gospel, scarcely leaving the apostle any room on the page. God's system of salvation is presented as precise, standard, invariant and finely coordinated. All those carefully divided and numbered particles of what was once a letter to a church are addressed and explained one by one. Perhaps all the boundaries, explanations and controls issued by the Geneva divines are correct—I'm not here to take issue with their theology right now. But there is virtually no chance that a reader of this Bible will engage first of all, and freely, with the sacred text itself and on its own terms. This is a Bible that needs to be saved.

What do we see when we see a Bible? What if we saw something completely different? Would we then envision a different answer to the question of what the Bible is?

- two -

## UNVEILING THE ELEGANT BIBLE

*Elegance is "far-side" simplicity that is artfully crafted,  
emotionally engaging, profoundly intelligent.*

MATTHEW MAY

In his insightful book *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing*, Matthew May relates the story of Laweiplein, the name of a busy intersection in the heart of Drachten in northern Holland.<sup>1</sup> Laweiplein was the brainchild of Hans Monderman, a Dutch traffic engineer, or perhaps we should say, a Dutchman engaged in the art of reverse engineering. Monderman had a firm commitment in the opposite direction of modern traffic control. Monderman began his career as an accident investigator, and he eventually connected some dots. He saw that most traffic accidents happen because motorists are given far too much of the wrong information. What Monderman saw was that traffic engineers, attempting to account for every mistake or wrong choice a motorist might make, seek to direct, manage, control and regulate all those choices. Motorists respond by disengaging and bringing less of themselves into their driving. Assuming that the signs and road markings are doing all the work, they stop thinking.

So Monderman mounted a long-term war on what he considered overbearing and counterproductive traffic regulation. As May puts it, "To Monderman, the problem wasn't one of engineering, but rather one of context."<sup>2</sup>

Laweiplein is a red brick square in the center of the city, and since 2004 has been completely unregulated. Every day some 22,000 cars and trucks plus thousands more cyclists and pedestrians pass through this intersection. When people come to the intersection, they are completely engaged, taking full account of everything the situation presents at the moment they arrive. They slow down, account for others, blend in and go through. The result is a smooth, natural flow of traffic in which each participant is expected to participate appropriately, rather than being expected to be a problem that has to be told what to do in every respect. As Monderman says, “The trouble with traffic engineers is that when there’s a problem with a road, they always try to add something.”<sup>3</sup> Monderman believes that every road tells a story, and if we simply listen attentively to that story, we will intuitively know what to do on that particular road.

The Geneva Bible introduced the same philosophy behind overwrought traffic control to the Bible. It filled the Bible with the equivalent of traffic signs, road markings, white lines and arrows. But as the people of Drachten came to see when they removed all the regulations and formal control mechanisms from Laweiplein, the number of accidents—and all the attendant frustration, anger and social tension—went down. Can we similarly reverse engineer the modern study Bible? If we were to remove our imposed, regulatory-like certainty, predictability and control, would Bible engagement and awareness rise? Would people start bringing more of themselves to the Bible?

We have created a Bible with an imposing, off-putting surface of bad complexity, while pretending the Bible is a directly-accessible list of simple propositions. This is backwards on both counts. What we need is a Bible with an elegant surface simplicity that will open up for us the inherent and immensely interesting good complexity that lies deep within.

An Elegant Bible that breaks free from the nearly five-hundred-year stranglehold of the cluttered modernist Bible will be a Bible that respects what we should have known all along. The Elegant Bible will reflect the wisdom that form and content always belong together in God’s good creation. Form is part of the content of things. If you change the form, you change the content. If you change the form of the Bible, you have already answered the question of what it is.

Careful observers have for some time detected a semi-gnostic bent in much of modernistic Christianity, and this is reflected in how we often think about the Bible.<sup>4</sup> Naively believing that the Bible is essentially a collection of ideas, we've convinced ourselves that the form, structure and visual appearance of the text is irrelevant and concerned ourselves only with the content. If the words are there, we presume the rest of it doesn't really matter—as if reading the book of Romans in the Geneva Bible is like reading a letter from a Christian leader to a first-century church.

We need the Elegant Bible because we are creational monotheists. A healthy, well-functioning biblical doctrine of creation entails a thoughtful attention to form. For too long we have merely affirmed the bare fact that God is Creator, but have not attended to the implications of what this means for our understanding and good functioning in this Creator's world. The Bible is not magically communicated to our minds through some kind of mental telepathy. We always apprehend the Bible by means of some physical form. Every Bible is an artifact in the physical world, and the kind of artifact the Bible is can serve it well, or it can grossly distort what it essentially is. Whatever form the Bible takes matters to our understanding and shapes what we think we're doing. Immensely.

A crucial shift will have to take place in order for us to break off our love affair with the fragmented Bible. We will have to commit to focusing first on the rich tapestry of the Bible itself, rather than beginning with our overriding desire to use and manipulate the Bible in certain ways. Stephen Langton wanted short, easy-to-find sections for commentaries, so he developed a chapter system. Robert Estienne wanted a Bible concordance as a tool to study the Bible in a new way, so he added numbered verses to the text. The Complicated Bible begins with the question, how can we do what we want with the Bible? The Elegant Bible begins with the question, what is the Bible and how can we honor what it is?

It is time to turn our attention to a Laweiplein Bible, a Bible in which people can immerse themselves—fully present, fully attentive—without being overdirected about what to believe or misled as to the nature of what it is they are encountering.

## A CENTURIES OVERDUE EXTREME BIBLE MAKEOVER

The Bible has never stayed the same. Its journey has already been extensive from the people gathered at the New Gate of the temple in Jerusalem to here

Jeremiah's thundered oracles, to churches around the Mediterranean reading the scrolls sent to them by Paul, to early Christian scribes copying and gathering the books into codex form, to gifted artists illuminating the text with brilliant colors and precious gold, to presses rolling out pages after pages, and all the way up to electronic screens glowing with the sacred words. The Bible has always been an artifact in our world, and the journey will continue. One way or another, the Bible of the future will be shaped, and we are the ones who will shape it.

▮ If, as I have argued, the current popular form of the Bible is problematic, the first step seems clear enough. We need a bit of cultural unmaking, a dismantling of the modernist overlay on the Bible. Its fractured format demonstrably leads to fractured readings. Deconstructing the Bible of the Reformation is the first step toward saving the Bible. The Langton-Estienne dynasty has had its day, but it's time for the rule of chapter-and-verse to end.

▮ Of course, given the extensive infrastructure we've built around this modernistic system of slicing and dicing the Bible, at this point we likely can't dispense with it completely. The use of the numbered pieces of the modernist Bible is a practice deeply embedded in modernistic Christianity. (Now that we're stuck with it to some degree, one wishes its creators had been more attuned to the natural flow of the writings themselves.) We'll need to keep a chapter-and-verse copy around as a book on our shelves or a setting in our ebooks. The system was created to enable certain reference works in the first place—commentaries and concordances—and as the occasional reference tool it will remain helpful. But if we wish to hear the Scriptures sing to us again, this tone-deaf intrusion need not be the Bible we live with daily. We can read, study, meditate on and preach from a holistic Bible. The use of a better form will help reform our diminished Bible engagement habits.

▮ Also, contrary to what most people think, a chapter-and-verse Bible is not essential for referring to a particular passage. It would be healthier and show a greater knowledge of the Bible itself if we were to adopt the practice of referencing by context and content.<sup>5</sup> People in book clubs do it all the time, the Bible itself does it when quoting from other books in the Bible and the whole church had to do it for most of its history. The rather rigid de facto requirement that every mention of a Bible passage be accompanied by a

numbered reference is somewhat about precision, and useful in reference tool contexts, but it seems mostly to reflect an issue of trust and potential verification. We first employed proof-texting for doctrinal squabbles, and apparently now it's needed for every devotional use of each fragment as well.

The bookcleaning will commence with the removal of the artificial additives—chapters and verses to be sure, but also all the other helps we've boxed in this text with. It's the cumulative effect of all the additives that produces the modern Bible's downfall. Just as when we clean out the garage, we have to pick up each item and ask, what is this and why is it here? Then we can decide what to do with it.

**Chapter and verse numbers.** These are intrusions that fail to reflect authorial intent and so divide up the text in unnatural ways. Both are rather inattentively placed. They signal readers to take as appropriate units sections of text that are often not appropriate units. Chapter divisions can break up larger units of thought—the very first chapter marker in the Bible, between Genesis 1 and 2, cuts off the opening song of creation by several lines; the servant song of Isaiah 53 actually starts in Isaiah 52, etc. They can also throw several smaller units of thought together in a single chapter. Chapters miss natural units of thought that are both bigger and smaller than the typical chapter size. Verse divisions are similarly misplaced, often dividing what should be held together or combining what should be separated. But verses are particularly pernicious because they positively encourage the reader to take each numbered thought out of context as a standalone statement of truth. And to take the bad news and drop it to the level of devastating, verses have now become the primary way millions of people approach the Bible. Verses read in isolation, selected by topic, arranged in groups, sent out in kitschy-decorated Facebook updates—this is what passes for Bible knowledge in our era. The point here is that the format of the Bible is where this trouble begins. The word *Scripture* has even been transformed. Rather than using the word in its original sense of a complete writing—a book of the Bible—people now commonly use it to refer to a single one of these artificially created fragments: “Let me share a scripture with you.” If we were to do nothing but take the verse numbers out of our Bibles and refuse to use them as references in our Bible practices, this alone might spark a Bible re-engagement movement.<sup>6</sup>

**Section headings.** These are interpretive signs that tell the reader in advance what the next few paragraphs are about. They are both directive and limiting. Because they are printed right in among the Bible text itself, it is very easy for readers to take them as part of the Bible, just as authoritative and inspired as the rest of it. But in reality they are the literary equivalent of watching a movie and having someone sitting next to you constantly saying, “This is the part where . . .” After a while it’s best to let the person know you’d like to watch the movie for yourself and see what unfolds. These section headings also incorrectly send the signal to readers that the Bible is essentially made up of short, topical portions meant to be read independently, like entries in an encyclopedia.

**Cross references.** These attempt to take the free-standing verses of the modern Bible and point you to other free-standing verses that ostensibly address the same topic. The very live danger here is that by following the thread of cross references and adding them up, we believe we’ve arrived at the Bible’s teaching on that particular point. Sadly, the crucial step of determining the meaning of these various free-standing statements in their full context (immediate, literary, historical, location in the overall biblical narrative, etc.) is simply overlooked. Cross references are the print equivalent of hyperlinks in electronic texts. Both function especially well as a steady stream of distractions, temptations to break our concentration and leave the text we are reading and jump to somewhere else. A cross-referenced Bible is not a deep reading, immersive Bible.

**Study Bibles.** These have developed the fine art of designing the Bible page to reverse the relative importance of the divinely inspired words and our attempted commentary. All the color borders, shaded backgrounds, and fancy bold and italic fonts surround and uphold the chaff, not the wheat. Readers are strongly directed by the visual cues to prioritize the material and shouldn’t be blamed for doing what they’re told. Neither should it surprise us when readers actually use study Bible notes not to enhance their reading of the text, but to replace it.

**Page layout.** Finally, our bookcleaning project must address the overall layout of the text on the page. The common two-column setting of the Bible is an understandable phenomenon. (We won’t even speak here of the brief but distressing appearance of three-column Bibles a few years ago.) The

Bible is a very large book, and it isn't easy to fit into a reasonable size. Using two columns per page helps save valuable space and makes for a more efficient typesetting that reduces costs. But the deeper price paid is considerable. It is nearly impossible to show literary form in a two-column Bible. The short length of each line effectively cuts off the use of white space and lining to reveal genre or the natural structure of biblical texts. In a two-column Bible everything appears relentlessly the same. Israel's ancient song lyrics, pithy proverbs, lengthy narratives, first-century letters—one wouldn't know about any of this from the looks of it.

So let's say we have this Scripture scrubbing, once-every-half-a-millennium Bible bath. What would we be left with? A mass of unnumbered, undivided, undifferentiated texts? Something like the *scriptio continua* of the old manuscripts? No, because the bookcleaning is merely the necessary but negative first step of our extreme Bible makeover. On my Accordance Bible software program the options under "Display" include "Turn off verse references." Hit it and all the numbers disappear from the text, but the program is at a loss for what to do next. The natural form of the text hasn't been programmed in. Deconstruction is always the easy part, but re-envisioning the Bible is what we're after. We have every reason to hold out for a true Bible apocalypse, an unveiling, a pulling back of the curtain to see what's really been there all along. Step two is based on giving the Scriptures our full, careful and loving attention so that we can faithfully produce Bible artifacts (whether in print, on screen or audio) that authentically reveal the Bible as it is.

### REINTRODUCING THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

What is the Bible? The Bible is a collection, not of verses, but of books. The locus of meaning in the Bible is the individual book. A scripture is a book, or sacred writing, and the central intentional unit of the biblical authors and editors. Each book has a unique purpose and point of view, addresses a unique situation or need, and employs a definite literary type, or genre. These books have long been hidden from view and it's past time they were revealed in all their rich, diverse and complex-yet-simple glory.

The first job of a Bible dedicated to simplicity and beauty is to declare the glory of the books. The Elegant Bible accomplishes this by first taking literary analysis and Bible design with utmost seriousness. The goal is an

intelligent yet accessible, almost intuitive, literary presentation that honors the books the authors actually wrote. Believing the Bible is a mass of “content” leaves us free to put easy-to-use chapter and verse numbers just about anywhere. Believing the Bible is made up of intentionally crafted and unique books demands an attention to its natural forms and structures. Good Bible literary study will diligently unearth the hidden treasures of the Bible’s inherent structures. Good Bible design will enable the reader to see these structures even before they read a word of the content.

Christopher R. Smith has written about the prospects we have for finding the biblical authors’ expressed literary-structural intentions:

Ancient writers didn’t have the freedom to add spacing and headings that abundant, affordable publishing materials now permit modern authors to use to indicate their outlines. Moreover, in many cases ancient works were intended to be delivered orally, and were written down only for transmission to their recipients. . . . For both of these reasons, it has long seemed reasonable to me that ancient authors would have embedded recognizable literary-structural signals directly within their works. I became convinced, after many years of research and reflection, that within the pages of the Bible these signals characteristically take the form of recurring phrases that have been placed intentionally at the seams of literary structures.<sup>7</sup>

Smith’s comments indicate the kind of diligence and reflection that should regularly be brought to bear in Bible publishing, but has not been. We have inherited a modern Bible format. It is a cultural creation, a tradition. It is not original to the Bible but was developed for very narrow reasons over a thousand years after the last biblical book was written. Yet it has become the default for us, our unthinking form for presenting the Scriptures despite the disservice that it does to those very Scriptures. Bible publishers should consider taking the Hippocratic oath and applying it to the sacred writings in their care: first, do no harm.

A newly conceived, elegant Bible will instead follow Smith’s advice. It will find and format for easy recognition these signals, signs and structures that the biblical authors themselves have indicated. Unique books will be uniquely formatted, helped along by a generous single-column setting. The New Testament’s letters will look like letters, with their characteristic three-part pattern, the opening identification of sender and recipients along with

Ancient works delivered by mouth.

greetings, the main body, and the closing good wishes and instructions. Collections of song lyrics (Psalms, Lamentations and Song of Songs) and the prophetic oracles in the First Testament will visually reflect the underlying parallelism characteristic of Hebrew poetry, and stanza breaks will be subtly noted with line breaks. Narratives will be invitingly presented as the uninterrupted stories they are. Collections of short wisdom sayings and reflections (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, James) will embody the wisdom of allowing their form to serve their content. Lists will look like lists, genealogies like genealogies, speeches like speeches.

Imagine all this variety in the Bible, formatted to look like what it is, and then consider this: a steady succession of modern English Bibles presented the entire text of the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—as a numbered list. The Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible, the King James Bible and their myriad children in the following centuries all succumbed to this revolutionary and disastrous formatting innovation of the sixteenth century. Never mind the king, God save the Bible!

So what would Smith's vision look like in practice? Consider the book of Matthew.<sup>8</sup> The casual reader might be excused for thinking that all four of the gospels are simple collections of a number of short episodes in the life of Jesus. But actually, each of the four has its own unique way of shaping the story of Israel's promised king.

Matthew organizes his work as a whole in a pattern of five, reflecting, no doubt, the strong Jewish attachment to the five books of Moses. (Long before Matthew, the book of Psalms had been similarly structured into five books.) Matthew collects the teachings of Jesus into five long speeches and then inserts them into the story at key intervals. For the first one, revealingly, Jesus goes up on a mountain as Moses did before him. As Smith explains, "To show how important these five speeches are, the author marks them all in the same way. Each one begins with the disciples coming to Jesus for teaching. Each one ends with a variation of the phrase, *When Jesus had finished saying these things . . .*"<sup>9</sup> Here we see an example of Smith's proposal that recurring phrases often mark the seams of literary structures. Matthew thus presents five story and speech pairs that are introduced by an intentionally arranged genealogy and concluded with the passion narrative of Jesus' new exodus. The formatting point that Smith makes about all this is that the

pened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

**W**hen Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others — and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

modern Bible's presentation of twenty eight chapters, oblivious as it is to this actual structure, removes the possibility that the reader will see what Matthew is doing.<sup>10</sup> Matthew not only *tells us with his words* that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's story, he *shows us with his structure*. But if we don't pick up on and reflect his cues, part of Matthew's message is lost on the Bible's readers.

You can see in the sample case of Matthew presented above how the Elegant Bible will approach the formatting of individual books and their natural sections. Think for a moment about all the variety of books in the Bible. These books are indeed made up of smaller elements, not our traditional chapters, but smaller elements nonetheless. In the Elegant Bible these elements below the full book level will find their meaning as one of the building blocks of a book, not with blaring numbers, but merely as they are simply and pleasingly set apart. Such things as Jeremiah's collection of oracles against the nations, the assembled sayings of King Lemuel in Proverbs, one of the dramatic scenes in the book of Ruth, a speech of Eliphaz the Temanite in Job, or the gathering of journey stories in Luke's gospel—all these and more will be recognized, acknowledged and clearly presented in simple, obvious form as a gift to the reader.

As part of this interest of promoting a healthy understanding of the books themselves, it's worth pointing out that even our typical division of book boundaries is not entirely correct. Several whole books that were later divided (only because they couldn't fit completely on a single scroll) have remained divided in our contemporary codex form. Though both were originally unified works, Samuel-Kings and Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah are now presented as separated books. Scribes would often attempt to stitch them together again by overlapping their copy of the text at the ending of one scroll with that at the beginning of text in another. In our current Bibles we can find this feature in the text that ends with Chronicles and begins Ezra. But since we're no longer reading off of papyrus scrolls, it would seem reasonable to reunify these books. The same goes for Luke's divided two-volume history of the early Christian movement, Luke-Acts. The two volumes work together in significant ways, both structurally and in terms of content. They are best read in tandem. Even given the ancient status of the collection of the four gospels, I have to doubt that Luke himself would appreciate having John's book divide his two volumes.

Finally, the Bible is more than a single collection of books. In fact, the whole collection is made up of smaller groupings of books. We're used to a standardized collection and ordering of books in the Bible, but it wasn't always so. In the history of the development of the Bible there was actually a lot of variation in how the books were collected and in what order they were presented. In the First Testament we're used to Law, History, Poetry and Prophets, while in the New it's Gospels, History, Letters (Paul's and then the others), and then Revelation. But our grouping of the First Testament came from a later Greek translation (the Septuagint), not the Hebrew Bible. The Bible Jesus knew was Law, Prophets and Writings (see Luke's account of what Jesus said to the disciples after his resurrection). And as for the New Testament, while the overall groupings have long been fairly standard, there has been a lot of variety within them.

The point is that it is not necessary that there be a single, permanently set order of books. There is diversity within the history of the Bible. There are important things to think about in relation to the order of books. Why should the Prophets simply have the big ones first and the smaller ones next? Would a chronological order perhaps be more helpful to readers? The same goes for Paul's letters; why largest to smallest? Why should the Gospels be bunched together? Perhaps their distinctive points of view would be better realized if they were separated. The meaning of a book is related to its surroundings. The rabbis of old used to debate why this or that order was better, why certain connections between books made sense. We might be more engaged in our Bibles if we began to have the same kinds of discussions.

### **RECLAIMING SIMPLICITY**

Overall, the vision of the Elegant Bible is a vision for recovering the smart simplicity of the Bible itself. The Elegant Bible has no desire to be precise, punctual, calculable, standard, bureaucratic, rigid, invariant, finely coordinated and routine. The Bible was not born in modernity and was not written by moderns. It speaks to modernity as it speaks to every age, but we have allowed our current historical period to transform our Bible into something it is not. William Thompson, Lord Kelvin once said:

When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it,

when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind.<sup>11</sup>

We have unfortunately been taken in by this deception (in many different cultural realms). In the case of the Bible we have desperately tried to turn it into something that can be counted—its truths added up—in order to validate its claim to knowledge. To save the Bible from ourselves, we must begin to trust once again its ancient ways of saying things.

In a word, the Elegant Bible is a clean Bible. It has unencumbered words on a page, pleasingly set, easy to read. There is no feeling of nervousness or desperation brooding over the book, no trying to protect from every error, rebut every potential interpretive mistake, tell you every application or force a hard harmony from verse to verse. Instead there is a calm confidence in the text alone, the text on its own terms. Oh, all the challenges of the Bible are still there—the Elegant Bible doesn't make the Bible easy. But it leaves these challenges where they belong, in the tensions and surprises and hard words themselves, not in struggling to get past all the flotsam and jetsam of the modernist concoction.

The story is told that when asked how he sculpted his statue of David, Michelangelo replied, "I saw David through the stone, and I simply chipped away everything that was not David." The path to restoring our Bible begins with chipping away at everything that doesn't belong there. There is a masterpiece buried under the modernist Bible. The Elegant Bible seeks to re-discover it.

The saving of the Bible begins with a simple, clean and natural presentation of the text of the Bible, giving us a much better chance to start engaging the Scriptures well. Because form and function always work together in God's good creation, the Elegant Bible naturally introduces us to the Feasting Bible.