Introduction

George Herbert’s understanding and approach to Scripture provide valuable models for our engagement with Scripture today. His views represent those of both the ancient Church and Anglicanism, at least in its classic expression. They are also in keeping with what today is sometimes called “Biblical Theology.” Biblical theology, as I am using the term, refers to the view that there is a coherent organic wholeness to the Bible despite the diversity of authors, settings, cultures and languages represented in it. Accordingly, while it is important to study each passage of Scripture in its own historical, cultural and literary context, making use of the tools of historical exegesis, it is also important to study each text in the context of the canon as a whole. Currently there is much interest in revisiting this more ancient approach to Scripture. I suggest that George Herbert is an exciting representative of this ancient view, whose writings can provide much insight and valuable examples in our current setting.

George Herbert (1593-1633) is known for his model of pastoral ministry, but his journey to ordained service was marked by some hesitation along the way. He began studying for ordination after his degrees at Trinity College, Cambridge (BA, 1613; MA 1616), but he also accepted the position of Public Orator for the University in 1619, and he delayed his ordination in order to serve in Parliament in 1624. He soon discovered that Parliament was not where he

---

1 Herbert is often considered the quintessential model of Anglicanism. “One who wishes to know what Anglicanism is and has not much time for study cannot do better than to pay attention to the life, the poems, and the prose of George Herbert.” Stephen Neill, Anglicanism (London: Mowbrays, 1977), 149.

2 See my brief description of biblical theology at http://www.tsm.edu/About_Trinity/Biblical_Theology_at_Trinity.html

3 Approaches to Scripture known as “canon criticism,” “biblical theology,” and the “theological interpretation of Scripture” represent some of this current interest. See, for example, the articles in the New Dictionary of Biblical Theology (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), and the Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible (gen. ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005). The multivolume Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, edited by Craig G. Bartholomew and Anthony C. Thiselton and published by Zondervan, is also of special note.
should be, so he proceeded to be ordained deacon in December of 1624. After further delays he was installed as rector of St. Andrew’s Church, Bemerton, near Salisbury, in April of 1630 and ordained priest in September of that year, serving as rector of St. Andrew’s for the last three years of his life. His main collection of English poetry, The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations, was entrusted to his friend Nicholas Farrer on Herbert’s deathbed, and Farrer published it that same year, 1633. Herbert also wrote a guidebook entitled A Priest to the Temple, or, The Country Parson, in which he intended, as he said in the preface, “to set down the Form and Character of a true Pastour, that I may have a Mark to aim at.” While The Temple and The Country Parson are his best-known and influential writings, other works remain as well, including several prose pieces, letters, proverbs and a number of writings of various sorts in Latin. Our attention will be on a few selections from The Country Parson and The Temple.

Herbert discusses his understanding of the nature of Scripture and a proper approach to it in chapter four of The Country Parson and also in two poems, “The H. Scriptures. I.,” and “The H. Scriptures. II.” After reading what Herbert says about Scripture, through both prose and poetry, we will see him engaging Scripture through a reading of one of his poems. I am not offering detailed studies of these texts, but rather giving a guided reading of them to introduce Herbert as an example of biblical theology.

The Country Parson

Chapter four of The Country Parson is entitled, “The Parson’s Knowledge.” Herbert says the Parson should be “full of all knowledge,” since knowledge of all sorts can be used for illustration in teaching. In Herbert’s rural community such knowledge would include “tillage, and pastorage.” After only two sentences about general knowledge, he turns to knowledge of the Scriptures, “the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort” (“magazine” referring here to a warehouse or storehouse). This reference to “life and comfort” is developed when he adds, “There he sucks, and lives.” This biblical image of a nursing infant, longing for “the pure spiritual milk” (1 Pet 2:2), expresses poignantly the provision for both life and comfort.

Herbert says the Parson finds four things in Scripture: “Precepts for life, Doctrines for knowledge, Examples for illustration, and Promises for comfort.” He does not elaborate on these topics, but turns to the means the Parson uses for understanding the Scriptures, spending the rest of the chapter in explanation of the four means he has in mind. The first is “a holy Life,” citing our Lord’s statement in John 7:17, “if any do God’s will, he shall know of the Doctrine.” That one’s manner of life has hermeneutical significance is illustrated in the Letter to the Hebrews when the author upbraids his readers for their immaturity in understanding the things of God. He says, “solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb 5:14). Thus the understanding that our Lord, the biblical authors, and Herbert have in mind is not just a matter of the intellect. Indeed, Herbert goes on to say that, “wicked men, however learned, do not know the Scriptures, because they feel them not, and because they are not understood but with the same Spirit that writ them.” Again Herbert is echoing a theme in Scripture itself, found, for example in St. Paul’s statement that, “no one comprehends the thoughts of God.

4George Herbert Palmer, ed., The English Works of George Herbert, Newly Arranged and Annotated and Considered in Relation to His Life (3 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), I. 205. All quotes from Herbert are from this edition. The Country Parson was originally published in 1652.

5F. E. Hutchinson, ed., The Works of George Herbert (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941) contains the complete works in English and Latin, and is considered the standard edition. In the sections quoted in this article, Palmer’s edition differs from Hutchinson’s only in minor matters of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, which Palmer has slightly modernized in places, as have more recent editions such as John N. Wall, Jr., ed., George Herbert, The Country Parson, The Temple, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1981) and John Tobin, ed., George Herbert, The Complete English Poems, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1991). Palmer’s rearrangement of the order of the poems into supposed chronological order and according to subject matter is unfortunate, as Hutchinson notes (Works, lvi-lxix). Among the recent editions the notes in Tobin are particularly helpful.


7The English Standard Version is used throughout this article, when not citing Herbert’s own quotes from Scripture.
except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor 2:11-12). By “feel them” Herbert seems to refer to sharing in the spiritual realities of which the Scriptures are speaking. For a Christian, the Scriptures are much more than an ancient external word that merely conveys information and ideas. As our study continues we will see something of Herbert’s understanding of this “much more.”

The second means by which the Parson understands Scripture is prayer. Herbert considers prayer to be necessary even for the understanding of “temporall things,” so “how much more in things of another world, where the well is deep, and we have nothing of our selves to draw with?,” echoing the language of the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria (John 4:11). This need for prayer, our means of contact with God, corresponds to the need for the Holy Spirit. It is the unseen spiritual realities that are of concern to the Parson, “another world,” in which he and his parishioners live while also in this “temporall” world. The need for something more than mere intellectual engagement with the text is thus evident, so the Parson should say a short prayer for the Lord’s help before reading Scripture. Herbert suggests a prayer such as, “Lord, open mine eyes, that I may see the wondrous things of thy Law” (Ps 119:18), thus drawing upon Scripture for a prayer for understanding Scripture.

Herbert devotes the largest amount of attention to his third and fourth means, the “diligent Collation of Scripture with Scripture,” and the study of “Commenters and fathers, who have handled the places controverted.” By collation of Scripture Herbert means “an industrious and judicious comparing of place with place” in the Scriptures. Such study is bound to be helpful, Herbert says, because all of Scripture is “penn’d by one and the self-same Spirit.” So once again the divine quality of Scripture determines how one approaches it. This collation is fundamental to Herbert’s approach to Scripture and it provides the basis for Herbert’s expression of biblical theology. Herbert goes on to say that one should attend to the “coherence” of each passage, “touching what goes before, and what follows after,” that is, the flow of thought within a passage and its context within its particular book of the Bible. So Herbert attends to the context within a particular book and also, as in biblical theology, to the context of the whole of Scripture. How attention to the canonical context works out in practice we will see when we come to Herbert’s poetry.

Another element in this third means is consideration of “the scope of the Holy Ghost.” The Greek word σκοπούς (skopos) means “what is looked at,” and so it is used variously for “mark, goal, intent, aim.” The σκοπός of a text was a major subject for discussion in ancient philosophy and for the Fathers. When the Fathers speak of the “scope” (σκοπός) they refer to the intent or aim of Scripture, and they find its unitive σκοπούς focused on Christ. Within this perspective they can speak of the σκοπός of the Spirit, meaning the Spirit’s intent in a given passage in relation to the whole, such that the part is in keeping with the σκοπός of the whole. Herbert gives an example: “When the Apostles would have called down fire from Heaven, they were reproved, as ignorant of what spirit they were. For the Law required one thing, and the Gospel another; yet as diverse, not as repugnant: therefore the spirit of both is to be considered, and weighed.” Thus the unity of Scripture includes the dynamic progression of revelation through salvation history. The diversity does not represent disunity when properly understood. Herbert’s use of the term “repugnant” alludes to Article XX of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion which says, “and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.” Since the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion express classic Anglican thought, Herbert is indeed representative of Anglicanism in his view of Scripture. This view that there is unity amidst the diversity of Scripture is also the foundational perspective of biblical theology as I am using that term. We will see from Herbert’s poetry how this unity is conveyed through a complex web of types and imagery within the outworking of salvation history.

---


Oh Book! Infinite sweetnesse! Let my heart
Suck ev’ry letter, and a hony gain,
Herbert begins with the imagery of sucking which we saw
also in The Country Parson. Here it is his heart that is sucking on
every letter, which refers to that deeper engagement than just with
the mind which we noted in The Country Parson. Every bit yields
honey – there are no parts of Scripture without value. The imagery
of sucking, implicit in the reference to newborns longing for “the
pure spiritual milk” (1 Pet 2:2), is now combined with imagery
from the Psalter, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter
than honey to my mouth!” (Ps 119:103, cf. 19:10). The image of
honey might give the impression of mere pleasure, but Herbert
has in mind something medicinal, as the next lines indicate.

Precious for any grief in any part;
To cleare the breast, to mollifie all pain.
Thou art all health, health thriving till it make
A full eternitie.

Scripture is of value for grief in any part, both the clearing of
the breast, perhaps referring to the grief of guilt, and the mollify-
ing, or softening, of any disease or pain in this life. But far more
than simply softening grief in this life, Scripture actually produces
the health of the soul, conveying the life that is eternal life. The
physical healings in Scripture are sporadic signs of God’s power to
heal and the hope of full healing in the new heavens and new
earth. While a few receive physical healings in this life, all are of-
ered the healing of the inner person. “Though our outer self is
wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this
light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of
glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:16-17). This daily inner re-

“Honey "used medicinally is astringent or detersive, and balsamic." George
Ryley, Mr. Herbert’s Temple and Church Militant Explained and Improved (Bodleian
1987 [1715]), 65.
newhat in preparation for an eternal weight of glory is “health thriving till it make / A full eternitie.”

_Thou art a masse_
_Of strange delights, where we may wish and take._

When we come to Scripture we are like children in a toy store, allowed to have whatever we want. The pleasure of honey is matched here by the “strange delights.” Scripture is not only good for us, like medicine, it is pleasant and delightful.

_Ladies, look here. This is the thankfull glasse,_
_That mends the looker’s eyes; this is the well_
_That washes what it shows._

We are back immediately to the medicinal properties of Scripture. The image of Scripture as a mirror occurs in the New Testament (Jas 1:23-25) and is common in the Fathers. It is a mirror that not only shows defects but also brings the cure for defects as well as a washing for dirt. Herbert’s reference may seem to refer to a shallower work, healing mere cosmetic blemishes and washing away dirt, but his reference is actually still the same theme of deep inner healing, as earlier in the poem. For in Scripture the eye is connected to the inner person (Matt 6:22-23) and our eyes needed to be mended so we can see reality aright. Similarly, washing can refer to inner cleansing, not just outer dirt (1 Pet 3:21). The mirror of Scripture shows the need of the soul for cleansing and also reveals the provision of God in Christ for that cleansing.11

_Who can indeare_
_Thy praise too much? Thou are heav’n’s Lidger here,_
_Working against the states of death and hell._

A Lidger is a resident ambassador,12 so here we have the picture of an ambassador representing a foreign country. But this foreign country is heaven, so this particular ambassador is living in a country that is enemy-occupied. Thus this ambassador is actually working against the powers ruling the country. This picture draws on the biblical teaching that this world, while created good and still loved by God, has become alienated from God and is under the sway of the Evil One. Jesus refers to Satan as the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and John says the whole world lies under the power of the Evil One (1 John 5:19), a view shared by Paul (Eph 2:1-3). Accordingly, Paul can view the church as a colony of heaven in the midst of this world, an image he uses in writing to Christians in Philippi, which itself was a Roman colony (Acts 16:12). For example, Paul tells the Philippian Christians that their “citizenship (πολιτεύμα, politeuma) is in heaven” (Phil 3:20).

When he tells them that their manner of life must be worthy of the gospel (Phil 1:27), he uses a term referring to being citizens (πολιτεύομαι, politeuomai), hence the rendering in the _New Living Translation_, “you must live as citizens of heaven.” So Scripture is an ambassador from heaven, actively opposing the rule of death and hell, by bearing witness to the one who came, “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who thorough fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb 2:14-15).

_Thou art joyes handsell. Heav’n lies flat in thee,_
_Subject to ev’ry mounter’s bended knee._

A handsell is “a first instalment, a pledge of what is to follow.”13 So Scripture is not only a witness to the joy of God’s salvation, but is itself a sharing in the very thing. Paul refers to the Spirit as the ἀρραβών (arrabōn), the first installment or down payment, of our inheritance (Eph 1:14), and here we see Herbert saying the same of the Scriptures which have been inspired by the

---

11Hutchinson, _Works_, 496; Palmer, _English Works_, II. 186; Tobin, _George Herbert_, 353; Wall, _George Herbert_, 173.
12Hutchinson, _Works_, 496; Palmer, _English Works_, II. 186; Tobin, _George Herbert_, 353; Wall, _George Herbert_, 173.

“The cleansing and healing power of Christ’s blood is expressed in Herbert’s poem “An Offering.” “There is a balsome, or indeed a bloud, / Dropping from heav’n, which doth both cleanse and close / All sorts of wounds” (ll. 19-20).
Spirit. So this ambassador from heaven brings the joys of the homeland to those still living in enemy-occupied territory. Scripture does this in a way no earthly ambassador could do, by making the homeland accessible to us even while we live apart from it. Heaven has come down and now lies flat. We do not have to climb up to heaven, as the builders of the tower of Babel attempted (Gen 11:4). Rather, our access to heaven is through humble, prayerful attention to the Bible. When we open a Bible there is an otherworldly light blazing up from the open pages and a heavenly choir singing, if we had eyes to see and ears to hear. We can look into heaven itself. It is humble prayer that gives us the eyes and ears to encounter and recognize this revelation and enter into the joy of heaven even now. So the ambassador’s negative work against “the states of death and hell” is matched by the positive work with those who are citizens of heaven. Here we have the tension between already being reconciled to God and members of his kingdom, while not yet sharing fully in the inheritance. This eschatological tension between the “already” and the “not yet” is an important theme in the poem we will explore below as an example of Herbert’s biblical theology.

“The H. Scriptures. I.” is thus a song of praise in honor of Scripture and the benefits it offers those who approach it rightly. Healing, delight, and joy are available because we make contact with heaven itself through this book. How these benefits work, and the work required on our part, is the subject of the next poem, “The H. Scriptures. II.,” which follows immediately afterwards in The Temple.

“The H. Scriptures. II.”

In one sense, this poem can be seen as an expansion of the conclusion of “The H. Scriptures. I.” The Scriptures enable us to look into heaven, and now Herbert works with imagery of the earthly heavens to expound on what we see in the Scriptures, and how it speaks to us.

Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
And the configurations of their glorie!
Seeing not onely how each verse doth shine,
But all the constellations of the storie.

Herbert pictures Scripture as a multitude of lights, like the stars of the sky. Each star has its beauty, but they also combine into constellations. Herbert notes that these are “the constellations of the storie.” So the picture is not so much of many truths that can be organized into patterns of themes, as it is motifs and themes related to “the storie.” The themes and images are related to a story, the history of salvation.

This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie;
Then as dispersed herbs do watch a potion,
These three make up some Christian’s destinie.

Herbert is referring to the “diligent Collation of Scripture with Scripture” that we saw in The Country Parson. Many authors in the Bible quote or allude to passages elsewhere within the Bible, making explicit connections within the canon. But there are also many patterns of types and images connecting various parts of Scripture and combining to present some truth of the revelation. While Herbert is concerned with the immediate context of each passage in its own setting, as we saw in The Country Parson, these connections within the canonical context as a whole are of particular interest to him. The context is not just the passage that immediately precedes or follows, but also passages that “ten leaves off doth lie.” Perhaps this reference to the pages of Scripture as “leaves” forms part of the transition from imagery related to the stars to the image of various herbs mixed together to form a “potion,” that is,

¹⁴“The star is a favorite word with Herbert, occurring in eighteen of his poems. He attaches mystic meanings to it, and employs it to indicate more than the physical object.” Palmer, English Works, II. 364, commenting on Herbert’s poem, “The Starre.” See further n. 17 below.
a medicine. We are back to the motif of Scripture as that which makes us healthy, which we saw in “The H. Scriptures. I.” And the “destinie” of the Christian is that which was referred to there as “a full eternitie,” that is the eternal life of heaven. The image of “some Christian’s destinie” speaks of pilgrimage and story, pointing to the future fulfillment of what has already begun to be experienced here. Scripture works against “the states of death and hell” to bring eternal life by guiding Christians in their pilgrim path in this life. It does so not just through the meaning of each passage in its individual context, but also when the passages are combined like the ingredients in a medicine.

_Starres are poore books, and oftentimes do misse:_

This book of starres lights to eternall blisse.

Herbert returns to his opening image of the stars of the sky. The poverty of the stars is related to their use in navigation. Herbert might be referring to navigation by the stars in an earthly journey, but more likely he is referring to astrology.17 Whichever the precise allusion, he contrasts the stars of the sky with this “book of starres” which lights the way “to eternall blisse.” When we open the Bible we not only see heaven lying flat, as in the previous poem, but the equivalent of a night sky ablaze with numerous stars, each a point of light that gives light, and which together form constellations that guide us through this life towards home with more precision than the stars provide earthly travelers, or those seeking guidance through astrology.

So “The H. Scriptures. II.” combines the medicinal quality of Scripture noted in “The H. Scriptures. I” with the theme of guidance. Both of these benefits are in the context of the goal of eternal life. How, then, does Herbert go about gathering herbs for a potion or finding the constellations in the stars that will “light to eternall blisse”? The following poem illustrates basic elements in Herbert’s use of Scripture.

_The Bunch of Grapes_

This poem, a meditation by Herbert on the experiences of Israel in her wanderings in the wilderness after the exodus from

---

15Among many studies of this aspect of the Fathers see Andrew Louth, _Discerning the Mystery: An essay on the nature of theology_ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 121-147, and Frances Young, Biblical Exegesis, 248-264, and passim.

16Several of Herbert’s poems refer to the medicinal properties of flowers. “And if an herb hath power, what have the starres? / A rose, besides his beautie, is a cure.” “Providence,” ll. 77-78, cf. “The Rose,” l. 18. Palmer, _English Works_, III. 86. The expression “watch a potion” means “await to be combined into a potion,” though this is “a much discussed expression, puzzling almost to the point of emendation.” Tobin, _George Herbert_, 353.
Egypt, illustrates something of how “Thy words do finde me out, and parallels bring. / And in another make me understood.” At one point during Israel’s wilderness wanderings they drew near Canaan, and twelve spies were sent into the promised land. They found a land of abundance, and they “cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them” (Num 13:23). A single cluster of grapes that requires two men to carry it is a very striking image of the abundance that awaits Israel in the land of Canaan once they have passed through their journey in the wilderness. But when the spies returned they not only brought the cluster of grapes, but also a report of strong fortifications and giants in the land, remarking “we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them” (Num 13:33). Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, were for taking the land, but the other ten were against it, and the people sided with them and were ready to choose a leader to take them back to Egypt (Num 14:1-4). This rebellious lack of faith roused God’s anger and led to Israel being sent back to “the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea” (Num 14:25), and the generation that came out of Egypt perished in the wilderness due to their murmurings and unbelief (Num 14:26-38). Both the murmurings of the people and the promise of the cluster of grapes figure in this poem.

Joy, I did lock thee up: but some bad man
Hath let thee out again;
And now, me thinks, I am where I began
Sev’n years ago: one vogue and vein,
One aire of thoughts usurps my brain.

Herbert’s starting point is not Egypt or the wilderness, but an experience that is more like the promised land. He has had a time of joy, and he thought he had it locked up, but the joy has escaped him. This movement from joy to distress is a motif in a number of Herbert’s poems. It seems he is back where he started. “Vogue” here refers to a “general course or tendency,” and “vein” refers to a distinctive quality, and so, combined with “One aire of thoughts usurps my brain,” we have the picture of a person whose life is thoroughly consumed with distressing thoughts and feelings.

I did toward Canaan draw, but now I am
Brought back to the Red Sea, the sea of shame.

Herbert draws upon the biblical story to help him understand his experience. Like Israel, Herbert had drawn close to Canaan, the promised land. But also like Israel, he has returned to the desert. Israel was turned back due to her sin, and perhaps Herbert is alluding to his own sinfulness when he says of joy “some bad man / Hath let thee out again.” Whatever the cause, it seems like he is back to square one, all the way back to the Red Sea, just as Is-

According to Chana Bloch, this poem, “provides Herbert’s most explicit statement of the meaning of typology for the life of the believer.” Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 141.

See William G. Witt, “George Herbert’s Approach to God: The Faith and Spirituality of a Country Priest,” Theology Today 60 (2003), 229-233. In “Affliction I” (one of five poems entitled “Affliction”) Herbert describes the joys he had when he entered into God’s service. At first everything was “milk and sweet-nesses” and “There was no moneth but May” (ll. 19, 22). But then severe illness overtook him and “Sorrow was all my soul” (l. 29), so that he even thought of abandoning his service to God and “go seek / Some other master out” (ll. 63-64). This latter theme is expressed very powerfully in another of Herbert’s poems, “The Collar,” which begins, “I Struck the board, and cry’d, No more. / I will abroad.” After thirty-two lines expressing rejection of God’s call, the poem suddenly shifts at the end, “But as I rav’d and grew more fierce and wilde / At every word, / Me thoughts I heard one calling, Childe! / And I reply’d, My Lord” (ll. 33-36). The rejection of the constraints of the “collar” is overcome by the Divine “Caller.” Perhaps Herbert’s hesitancy in entering ordained service is related to such thoughts and feelings, though (according to Hutchinson) ambition, a sense of unworthiness, and physical illness all played a role (Works, xxxiiii).

Hutchinson, Works, 522; Tobin, George Herbert, 387; Wall, George Herbert, 250.

This poem probably comes from Herbert’s time in Bemerton, that is, in the last years of his life, but attempts to identify a specific event in Herbert’s life are not helpful, since “Herbert’s difficult and fluctuating progress from the Red Sea ’towards Canaan’ has rather to do with the universal human struggle for a willing and willed submission.” Rosemond Tuve, A Reading of George Herbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 113 n. 3.
rael was turned back toward the Red Sea. What should have been a sign of triumph has become an image of their shame.

For as the Jews of old by God’s command
   Travell’d, and saw no town,
So now each Christian hath his journeys spann’d.
   Their storie pennes and sets us down.
   A single deed is small renown.
God’s works are wide, and let in future times.
   His ancient justice overflows our crimes.

Before developing the connections between his life and the experience of Israel at that turning point in the wilderness, Herbert steps back and comments on such a reading of Scripture. Our pilgrimage is “spann’d,” that is, “measured out, limited,”22 so that the story of Israel provides patterns that are replicated in the lives of Christians. Their story describes our experience as well. Indeed, the stories were intended by God to have such a reference forward into the future, for the deeds themselves included a future orientation.23 Herbert here is expressing the same point St. Paul makes when warning the Corinthians about their false sense of security based on having the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. He tells the Corinthians that Israel also had a baptism and spiritual food, nevertheless their sin led to their perishing in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:1-13). Paul says, “Now these things took place as examples [τύποι, typoi, types] for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.... Now these things happened to them as an example [τυπικός, typikos, in the manner of a type], and they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:6,11). Paul is saying that both the

---

**Footnotes:**


23“It is important to realize that the types were considered purposeful anticipations by God of the future unfolding of His Will, not merely imaginative analogies drawn by the reader.” Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), 81.

24The ESV translates δὲ, (*de*) as “but,” but the reference to τυπικός (*typikos*) suggests addition rather than contrast. Since δὲ, can signal either idea depending on the context, I have changed “but” to “and.”

---

event itself and its written description have Christians in mind. Herbert shares this perspective, making connection with both the written account, “their story,” and with “God’s works” narrated there. “Herbert is seriously interested in the idea that his case too is covered, taken count of, in an eternally true series of events that preceded him in time; in other words he reads history and biblical story as one great web of metaphor.”25

His reference to God’s “ancient justice” seems ominous, returning our attention to the effects of Israel’s unbelief in the wilderness as they are brought back to the “sea of shame.” Herbert seems to be saying that God’s just judgment upon them can overflow upon us as well, echoing the warning St. Paul was giving the Corinthians. Perhaps Herbert sees himself replicating the effects of that divine “ancient justice” in his current state.

Then have we too our guardian fires and clouds.
   Our Scripture-dew drops fast.
We have our sands and serpents, tents and shrouds.
   Alas! Our murmurings come not last.

Having noted the typological nature of “their storie” and “God’s works,” Herbert proceeds to make connections between the life of Christians and the experiences of Israel in the wilderness. While the note of “justice” sounds an ominous tone, Herbert now refers to the blessings as well as to the difficulties Israel experienced in the wilderness. Like the Israelites, we have “guardian fires and clouds” (Exod 13:21-22). As Israel had manna in the wilderness (Exod 16), so we have Scripture to feed us on the journey (cf. Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4). But along with these signs of God’s care and provision, we also have an experience of the harshness and the difficulty of the desert, and the complaining response to these conditions.

But where’s the cluster? Where’s the taste
Of mine inheritance? Lord, if I must borrow,
Let me as well take up their joy, as sorrow.

---

Having just said that our “murmurings come not last” he demonstrates it by murmuring! He now turns to prayer, but does so to complain. If the story of Israel is a story we replicate, let us have the cluster of grapes that provided a taste of the promised land while they were still in the wilderness. Herbert has lost joy, and he wants at least a little taste of it again.

*But can he want the grape, who hath the wine?*  
*I have their fruit and more.*

Now the poem takes a dramatic turn. The Christian is not simply repeating the experience of Israel. There is a replication of patterns, but there is also fulfillment, development, movement to a new stage for those “on whom the end of the ages has come.”

*Blessed be God, who prosper’d Noah’s vine  
And made it bring forth grapes good store.*

When Noah and his family had come through the Flood he planted a vineyard, produced grapes and then wine (Gen 9:20-21). While wine is often associated with drunkenness in the Old Testament, wine is also seen as an image of God’s blessing and prosperity (Ps 104:15; Prov 3:10; Isa 55:1; Joel 2:24). Herbert agrees that God should be blessed for this gift.

*But much more him I must adore,  
Who of the Laws sowre juice sweet wine did make,  
Ev’n God himself being pressed for my sake.*

With this further contrast we understand that he has more than the wine of grapes in mind. Herbert is thinking of the winepress of God’s wrath which produces a cup of wine that the nations are forced to drink, an image of God’s judgment (Isa 63:1-6; Jer 25:15-29; Rev 14:10, 19; 19:15). Here at the conclusion of the poem we have spine-tingling imagery for the heart of the gospel. The “Laws sowre juice” is our sin and its consequences, and the amazing revelation on the cross is that God himself is pressed in the winepress of his wrath and produces “sweet wine.” The ominous tone earlier of “His ancient justice overflows our crimes” is now transformed. He does not overflow our crimes in judgment as we deserve, but overflows them with his redeeming blood, bringing forgiveness.

Herbert’s complaint, “where’s the taste / Of mine inheritance?” is now answered in the wine of the holy communion. This same thought is developed powerfully at the end of “The Agonie.”

*Who knows not Love, let him assay  
And taste that juice which on the crosse a pike Did set again abroach; then let him say  
If ever he did taste the like.  
Love is that liquour sweet and most divine  
Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.*

So the tasting of the sacrament is a means to receive the love of God manifest on the cross. The recognition of this love requires the interpretive context provided by the Scriptures. Without the Scriptures we would know neither the “Laws sowre juice” nor the imagery of pressing, let alone the blood of Christ “set again abroach” by a pike on the cross.

Herbert understands this action of God to be for him personally – God was “pressed for my sake,” just as St. Paul can refer to Christ as the one “who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). So the original problem of his lack of joy has been “resolved rather than explained.”

*The H. Scriptures. I.,” l. 7.

*The H. Scriptures. II.,” l. 7.

*Summers, George Herbert, 128.*
As the wine is a means of contact with God’s love, so also with the Scriptures. They provide the revelation of God and also an interpretive framework for understanding Herbert’s own life and experiences, thereby giving meaning, guidance, and hope. But as we saw in *The Country Parson*, the knowledge Herbert has in mind is more than just intellectual. The Bible itself provides something that can be tasted. In his own experience he has that which corresponds to the trials and failures of God’s people, but also to the new life that has come in Christ. So here we see a little of how “the book of books” is a “storehouse and magazine of life and comfort,” as affirmed in *The Country Parson*. In “The Bunch of Grapes,” Herbert works with one major period in the life of Israel, picking up on several of the details of the story that provide analogies in his own life, and then zeroing in on one particular detail, the cluster of grapes, and ringing changes on the connection between grapes and wine in Scripture.1

This attention to the details of the text is characteristic of ancient Christian appropriation of the Bible. Instead of developing general statements about great theological truths, the Fathers often work with the details of the text in the way we see in Herbert, hearing the message about God, sin, redemption, and the life of discipleship not through abstract doctrines but through the details of the images and events of the story.2 The words and images of Scripture are “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12) and, as Herbert says in *The Country Parson*, they are to be felt. More than simple information is conveyed, and the whole person is affected, given life and comfort and being healed and guided unto “eternall blisse.”

---

1The image of the bunch of grapes was already well developed in the Fathers and also had a place in the illustrations found in books and stained glass in Herbert’s day. See Tuve, *A Reading*, 115-116. Tuve’s study of Herbert’s poetic imagery in the context of the visual imagery of the day adds an important dimension.


---

**Conclusion**

I have touched on some of the most basic features of Herbert’s appropriation of Scripture. By way of conclusion I will hint at a few of the other dimensions that may be explored. To begin with, as Herbert engages these symbols and communicates the constellations he finds, his own words have a quality like that of the biblical prophets, in that, “a prophetic symbol is not just a picture but an experience.”3 His own language is characterized by what T. S. Eliot referred to as a “direct sensuous apprehension of thought.”4 As with the words of Scripture, Herbert wants his readers to feel his words. Certainly, I can attest that every time I read “The Bunch of Grapes” I have a visceral response when I come to its conclusion. Herbert helps me enter into “the secrets of God treasured in the holy Scriptures,” (*The Country Parson*, ch. 4).

Yet a further way in which Herbert’s poetry itself has similarities to the revelation in Scripture is the shape he gives to some of his poems. Herbert is well-known for his shaped poems, for example, “The Altar” which is written in the shape of an altar by varying the length of lines in the poem. Chana Bloch suggests that this characteristic found in several of Herbert’s poems is itself expressive of Scriptural tradition of the prophets. “Herbert carves out the form of a poem as Jeremiah carved out his wooden yokes, the better to teach us with.” They are “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual states.”5

This interweaving of form and meaning is found in yet another way in Herbert’s poem, “Coloss. 3.3,” subtitled, “Our life is hid in Him that Is My Treasure.” This is a ten-line poem with each line containing a single word in italics and capitalized. These words occur further to the right in each successive line so one can read them diagonally through the poem. The diagonal sentence says, “My Life Is Hid In Him That Is My Treasure,” and this is the point of the poem itself. But this very layout sends a second message as well. “The acrostic says, “My Life Is Hid In Him That Is

---


5Bloch, *Spelling the Word*, 206.
“My Treasure,” but what the acrostic does, we might articulate as Scripture Is The Treasure Hidden In My Poem.”

Scripture is indeed a treasure hidden in Herbert’s poetry. This article is the briefest of introductions to Herbert as an example of the ancient appropriation of Scripture. Herbert’s value in our current effort to regain the ancient vision and approach to Scripture is great indeed.

The Rev. Dr. Rod Whitacre is Professor of Biblical Studies at Trinity.

---


37 For those interested in further study of Herbert’s use of the Bible I recommend starting with Chana Bloch, Spelling the Word. If space had permitted I would have included a reading of “Aaron,” as further illustration of Herbert’s Biblical Theology. Herbert works with several of the details of the high priest’s vestments in Exodus 28 to speak to the nature of Christian priesthood in Christ. This poem is especially significant for those who are ordained; at least it is such in my own experience.