

Biblical Language in the Hymns of Charles Wesley

‘Christians have been known as “people of the Book.” Actually, we are a people of two books, the Bible and the hymnal.’¹ If Christians have been ‘people of two books,’ this was most certainly true of the people called Methodists. Methodist families, even if they had no other personal library, owned at least two books – a copy of the Bible and a copy of the Hymnbook.

Methodist laymen learned both the Bible and theology through singing hymns, especially the hymns of Charles Wesley. Charles Wesley’s hymns are saturated with Scripture. In his analysis of fifty Wesley hymns, John Lawson found few lines that do not allude to the words of the Bible.² The Bicentennial Edition of the 1780 Hymnbook lists 2500 Scripture references for the 525 hymns; allusions are made to every book of the Bible except Nahum and Philemon.³

This paper examines Charles Wesley’s use of scripture in his hymns. It will show that his varied approach to biblical language includes three contrasting approaches to the use of Scripture in hymns. Some hymns allude to scriptural language in an almost casual fashion; some hymns make explicit use of a biblical text without developing the passage; in other hymns, Wesley developed the text in sermon form, much as a preacher might expound on a biblical passage.

¹ Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1993), 447.

² John Lawson, *The Wesley Hymns as a Guide to Scriptural Teaching* (MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

³ *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, vol. 7 of The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge with James Dale (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Abbreviated *Collection* in the text.

1) Incidental Scriptural Allusions

In some instances, Charles Wesley used the words of the Bible because of their familiarity to himself and to his audience. With this approach, the hymn's use of the text is not directly related to its biblical context.

Wesley's hymns show his familiarity with the early church fathers, classical literature, and English poets.⁴ However, it was the Authorized Version of the Bible and the Psalter of the *Book of Common Prayer* that provided the primary inspiration for his hymns. 'His familiarity, from a lifetime of devotional reading, enables him to speak in biblical phrases quite naturally.'⁵

Certain biblical phrases appear regularly in Wesley's hymns, as if they were such a natural part of his vocabulary that they were constantly at hand when he needed a phrase or metaphor. These phrases include:

'Will not let thee go' from Gen 32:26

'Stony heart' from Ezekiel 11:19

'Sun of righteousness' from Malachi 4:2.

Examples of Wesley's incidental use of biblical language can be seen in lines from his hymn 'For a Tender Conscience' published in the 1749 *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. The hymn is not based on one specific biblical text; it uses phrases that allude to various Scripture passages:

Almighty God of truth and love,

In me thy power exert,

The mountain from my soul remove,

The hardness from my heart...

(Matt 17:20)

(Mark 16:14)

From thee that I no more may part,

No more thy goodness grieve,

The filial awe, the fleshly heart,

The tender conscience give,

Quick as the apple of an eye,

O God, my conscience make:

Awake my soul, when sin is nigh,

And keep it still awake.⁶

(Eph 4:30; Rom 2:4)

(Ezek 11:19)

(Ps 17:8; Prov 7:2)

None of these references is directly related to the topic of this hymn, and it is impossible to know if Wesley consciously thought of the reference as he composed the hymn.

⁴ Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley's Verse: An Introduction* (London: Epworth Press, 1964).

⁵ J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 232.

⁶ Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 2 vols (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1749), II:230-231.

It is more likely, as Henry Rack suggested, that ‘the language of the hymns reveals a mind so steeped in the Bible as to use its language without conscious quotation.’⁷

Wesley was so attuned to the language of Scripture that his poetry speaks this language as naturally as we speak the language of public discourse today. Frequently, the careful reader of Wesley’s hymns encounters language that is reminiscent of the words of Scripture, even when no direct allusion may be intended. Wesley ‘had only one language, the language of Zion. The Scriptures were his native tongue.’⁸

2) Intertextual Use of Scripture

While some of the language in Wesley’s hymns appears to be an incidental result of his vast biblical vocabulary, other hymns suggest conscious allusions to texts that parallel the message of the hymn. In these hymns, Wesley used the words and narratives of Scripture to communicate a scriptural message.

J.R. Watson noted that a great hymn does much more than simply quote Scripture or tie together isolated lines. A great hymn is more than a ‘mosaic of biblical allusions’.⁹ A hymn is a ‘hermeneutic act. It takes a text, or an event, and interprets it, uses it, re-reads it, makes something new from it.’¹⁰

This interpretive approach is seen in the intertextual use of biblical passages in many Wesley hymns. Intertextuality is more than the casual use of Bible language; these deliberate allusions represent an attempt by Wesley to echo Scripture in these hymns.

This approach is related to the echoes of the Hebrew Bible seen in many Pauline passages. One example of many is the echo of Deuteronomy 30:11-14 in Romans 10:6-8. Moses reminded the people of Israel that the Law is near, not far removed and impossible to attain. Paul used similar language to argue that ‘the word of faith,’ not the Law, had been brought near to his readers. Hays, adapting the literary approach of John Hollander, argued that Paul is using ‘intertextuality,’ the ‘imbedding of fragments of an earlier text within a later one.’¹¹

⁷ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 257.

⁸ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Our First Song: Evangelism In the Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 24.

⁹ Henry Bett, *The Hymns of Methodism in their Literary Relations* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1913), 16.

¹⁰ J.R. Watson, *Pitying Tenderness and Tenderest Pity: The Hymns of Charles Wesley and the Writings of St Luke* (The A.S. Peake Memorial Lecture, 2005).

¹¹ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.

Intertextual fragments may be used in different circumstances than the original context. Hays traced Paul's language of Philippians 1:19¹² to Job's testimony in Job 13:16.¹³ There is no citation formula, the allusion is fleeting, and 'Paul's sentence is entirely comprehensible to a reader who has never heard of Job.'¹⁴ However, the reader who recognizes Paul's echo of Job will find that the two passages resonate with each other.

Paul is a prisoner; Job depicted himself as a prisoner (Job 13:27). Paul's statement of confidence comes as he awaits trial in Rome, confident that good will come, regardless of the results of the trial because, 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Phil. 1:21). Job sought a hearing before God, and was confident of ultimate vindication in such a trial (Job 13:18). An awareness of Paul's use of Job's phrase is not necessary to understanding Paul's message; but, the intertextual echo creates a 'counterpoint' in which a 'range of resonant harmonics become audible.'¹⁵ (Hays, 1989:23). Paul does not call attention to his use of Job, but his use of Job is significant to his message.

Paul's intertextuality parallels many examples of Charles Wesley's use of biblical language. Repeatedly, Wesley imbedded fragments of the biblical text in his writing. This intertextuality allowed Wesley to express his ideas in the language of Scripture, and, for the careful reader, hints at parallels with the biblical setting from which these fragments are drawn.

In his *Journal*, Charles Wesley often used biblical allusions that paralleled contemporary events. In his entry for July 7, 1751 Wesley wrote that he 'Lodged at Mr E-----, who did run well,' an allusion to Paul's condemnation of those at Galatia who had abandoned the truth after initial faith in Christ (Gal 5:7).¹⁶ Here, Wesley echoed a text communicating Paul's disappointment with the Galatian backsliders, the same disappointment Wesley felt regarding Mr. E-----'s backsliding.

Wesley quoted 2 Timothy 3:5 in a journal entry criticizing his Georgia parishioners because 'they have more of the form of godliness than the power'.¹⁷ Citing a phrase from Judges 21:25, he wrote of the refusal of a constable to protect Methodists from rioters, 'As

¹² '... for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance' (NIV).

¹³ 'Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance, for no godless man would dare come before him' (NIV).

¹⁴ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 21.

¹⁵ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 23.

¹⁶ S T Kimbrough, Jr. and Kenneth G.C. Newport, eds. *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A.* 2 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), I:xxi.

¹⁷ Kimbrough and Newport, *Journal*, I:14.

there is no king in Israel (no magistrate, I mean in Sheffield), every man does as seems good in his eyes.’¹⁸ Wesley’s journals are replete with such allusions.

In a letter to Vincent Perronet written in the aftermath of the Grace Murray affair, Charles uses biblical language to express his astonishment that John did not take blame for the fiasco. Charles writes of his confrontation with John: ‘I declared I would cover his nakedness as long as I could [Gen 9:23], and honour him before the people [I Sam 15:30]’.¹⁹ Given Charles’ extreme reaction to John’s proposal to Grace, one can imagine that Charles saw John as both the drunken, shameful Noah and the divinely rejected Saul in the relevant passages.

Similarly, Wesley’s hymns often echo biblical texts. When Wesley writes,
O that thou wouldst the heavens rent,
In majesty come down;
Stretch out thine arm omnipotent,
And seize me for thine own.

he accomplishes two things: he adapts the familiar words of Isaiah 64:1 for his personal prayer for revival and, more directly, he relates his own need for freedom from sin’s chains to Israel’s historic prayer for deliverance from captivity. Only God could deliver Israel from their enemies; only God can break sin’s power:

What though I cannot break my chain,
Or e’er throw off my load!
The things impossible to men
Are possible to God.²⁰

In a hymn ‘for believers fighting,’ Wesley alludes to Exodus 33:20. On Mount Sinai, God told Moses, ‘You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’ Wesley uses this language to suggest his deep hunger for a true knowledge of God:

I cannot see thy face, and live,
Then let me see thy face, and die!
Now, Lord, my gasping spirit receive,
Give me on eagles’ wings to fly,
With eagles’ eyes on thee to gaze,
And plunge into the glorious blaze.²¹

The literary scholar Reuben Brower stated that his purpose in studying allusion in the poetry of Alexander Pope was ‘to see how he used the poetry of the past for his own

¹⁸ Kimbrough and Newport, *Journal*, II:345.

¹⁹ Manuscript letter, 30 October, 1749.

²⁰ *Collection*, #134.

²¹ *Collection*, #275.

expressive purposes.’²² In the same way, a study of intertextual allusion in Wesley’s hymns shows how he used the text of Scripture to express his own theological and devotional thoughts.

3) Sermonic Development of Biblical Texts

In several hymns, Charles Wesley uses a biblical passage as a text for a hymnic sermon. This approach to biblical interpretation is similar to the sermonic exposition of Leviticus found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Phrases from the Scripture text are developed and expounded in each stanza.

Wesley’s ‘Jubilee Hymn’ from ‘Hymns for New Year’s Day, MDCCL’ illustrates this sermonic approach to biblical interpretation in hymns. The hymn is based on the commands and promises of Leviticus 25:8-17. The Law of the Year of Jubilee required Israelites to restore all land to its original owner every fiftieth year. This encouraged social justice, limited avarice, and protected the poor. When Israel failed to observe this law, the prophets thundered God’s condemnation:

Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins-- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.²³

The law of Jubilee was a command; it also implied a promise. If Israel maintained a just society, if they protected the patrimony which God had given them, and if they were faithful to God’s commands, He would protect them and make the Year of Jubilee a year of restoration, Sabbath rest, and celebration. The trumpet blast of Leviticus 25:9 signaled a year of rejoicing.

In his sermon at Nazareth, Jesus applied this imagery to his own ministry.²⁴ After centuries of exile, prophetic silence, and subjugation to foreign dominance, Jesus sounded a trumpet call that promised the return of Jubilee. Through His ministry, those in exile would be restored, the blind would see, and those who suffered oppression would be freed.

Wesley follows Jesus’ model in recognizing the implied messianic promise in the Year of Jubilee text. The blast of the shofar becomes the blast of the “gospel trumpet.” And, like Luke, Wesley reads Jesus’s proclamation as more than physical restoration; he sees the

²² Quoted in Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 19.

²³ Amos 5:11-12 (NIV).

²⁴ Luke 4:16-27.

fulfillment of the Year of Jubilee in the spread of the good news of spiritual restoration to all humankind:

Blow ye the trumpet, blow,
The gladly solemn sound,
Let all the nations know,
To earth's remotest bound;
The year of Jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.

Jesus, our great High-priest,
Hath full atonement made:
Ye weary spirits, rest,
Ye mournful souls, be glad;
The year of Jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.

Extol the Lamb of God,
The all-atoning Lamb,
Redemption in his blood
Throughout the world proclaim;
The year of Jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.

Ye slaves of sin and hell,
Your liberty receive,
And safe in Jesus dwell,
And blest in Jesus live;
The year of Jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.

Ye who have sold for nought
Your heritage above,
Receive it back unbought,
The gift of Jesu's love:
The year of Jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.

The gospel trumpet hear,
The news of heavenly grace,
And, saved from earth, appear
Before your Saviour's face:
The year of Jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.²⁵

²⁵ George Osborn, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868-72), VI:12.

Wesley's hymn that most closely follows the structure of a biblical text is a hymn based on Deuteronomy 6:7. Illustrating his sermonic approach to interpretation, this hymn applies the ancient text to the life of the singer today. The Mosaic text notes four occasions for teaching the Law in Jewish families:

And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children,
and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house,
and when thou walkest by the way,
and when thou liest down,
and when thou risest up.

These four phrases provide the structure for Wesley's hymn. Each phrase of the biblical text inspires a meditation on the believer's practice of God's presence.

On the phrase 'When thou sittest in thine house,' Wesley wrote:

When quiet in my house I sit,
Thy book be my companion still
My joy thy sayings to repeat,
Talk o'er the records of thy will,
And search the oracles divine,
Till every heartfelt word be mine.

On the phrase 'When thou walkest by the way,' he wrote:

O might the gracious words divine
Subject of all my converse be!
So will the Lord his follower join,
And walk and talk himself with me,
So would my heart his presence prove,
And burn with everlasting love.

On the phrase 'When thou liest down,' he wrote:

Oft as I lay me down to rest,
O may the reconciling word
Sweetly compose my weary breast!
While, on the bosom of my Lord,
I sink in blissful dreams away,
And visions of eternal day.

The phrase 'When thou risest up' concludes the hymn:

Rising to sing my Saviour's praise,
Thee may I publish all day long;
And let thy precious word of grace
Flow from my heart, and fill my tongue
Fill all my life with purest love,
And join me to thy church above.²⁶

²⁶ Charles Wesley, *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1762), I:92-93.

This hymn illustrates all three uses of biblical language in Wesley's hymns. In addition to the sermon form of the entire hymn, several phrases suggest the incidental use of biblical language. Examples include:

'My joy thy sayings to repeat' (stz. 1) suggests the idea of Jeremiah 15:16 ('Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart').

'And search the oracles divine' (stz. 1) hints at John 5:39 ('Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me').

'While on the bosom of my Lord' (stz. 3) is language that reminds the reader of the scene at the Last Supper (John 13:23), even though Wesley's hymn has nothing to do with this passage.

'Rising to sing my Saviour's praise/ Thee may I publish all day long' (stz. 4) suggests both the 'morning praise' motif of Psalm 59:16 ('But I will sing of thy power; yea, I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning') and the use of the term 'publish' as an expression of praise and thanksgiving (Deut 32:3 and Ps 26:7).

A more explicit intertextual use of Scripture is seen in the second stanza's allusion to Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to the travellers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35):

O may the gracious words divine
Subject of all my converse be!
So will the Lord his follower join,
And walk and talk himself with me;
So shall my heart his presence prove,
And burn with everlasting love.²⁷

Wesley's use of biblical language suggests both the natural outflow of a lifetime of biblical study and a deliberate effort to 'preach' through his hymns. Wesley's use of Scripture does not indicate a struggle to locate proof texts that could be adapted to his hymns. Rather, in very natural discourse, he '...brings, as did every medieval writer, "things new and old" out of the Scriptures simply by absorbing them into his being and then writing and speaking.'²⁸

Perhaps Wesley's greatest hymn is 'Wrestling Jacob,' from Genesis 32:24-32. Wesley sees the Jacob narrative as a typology of Christian experience. He 'takes the

²⁷ Wesley, *Short Hymns*, I:92-93

²⁸ Sister Benedicta, quoted in Timothy Dudley-Smith, "Charles Wesley – A Hymnwriter for Today," *The Hymn*, 39/4, (October, 1988:7-15), 11.

experience of Jacob wrestling with the angel and presents it as the story of the agony and joy of every truly repentant and eventually justified sinner.²⁹

This hymn does not use verse by verse exegesis of the Scripture. Rather, by rewriting the narrative, Wesley ‘transform(s) the imagery of Scripture into categories of contemporaneous experience.’³⁰ Wesley wrote a hymnic sermon on the Genesis narrative in which the singer is not just an observer but a participant in the narrative:

Charles intended not only to communicate biblical teaching, but also to cause us to replicate biblical experience. ...he turned the singer of his hymns into an actor in the biblical drama he is recounting. By singing Wesley’s poetical renditions of Scripture, we become “wrestling Jacob,” struggling for “the blessing.”³¹ (Tyson, 1986:25).

This hymn shows the experiential emphasis of Charles Wesley’s interpretation of the Old Testament narrative:

Come, O thou Traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

I need not tell thee who I am,
My misery and sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my name,
Look on thy hands, and read it there;
But who, I ask thee, who art Thou?
Tell me Thy name, and tell me now.

In vain thou strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold!
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

Wilt thou not yet to me reveal
Thy new, unutterable name?
Tell me, I still beseech thee, tell;
To know it now resolved I am;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,

²⁹ T. Crichton Mitchell, *Charles Wesley: Man With the Dancing Heart* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 245.

³⁰ S T Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 118.

³¹ John R. Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 25.

Till I thy name, thy nature know.

Yield to me now, for I am weak,
 But confident in self-despair;
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
 Be conquered by my instant prayer;
Speak, or thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me if thy name is Love.

'Tis Love! 'tis Love! thou diedst for me!
 I hear thy whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
 Pure, universal love thou art;
To me, to all, thy bowels move;
Thy nature and thy name is Love.

The Sun of righteousness on me
 Hath rose with healing in his wings,
Withered my nature's strength; from thee
 My soul its life and succour brings;
My help is all laid up above;
Thy nature and thy name is Love.

Lame as I am, I take the prey,
 Hell, earth, and sin, with ease o'ercome;
I leap for joy, pursue my way,
 And as a bounding hart fly home,
Through all eternity to prove
Thy nature and thy name is Love.³²

Conclusion

This paper is a first step in a developing study of Charles Wesley's use of Scripture. In his use of biblical language, Wesley moves between the incidental use of familiar language, deliberate intertextual allusions, and sermonic development of texts. Each of these approaches contributes to the great variety of biblical language in his hymns.

Further research on Charles Wesley's use of biblical language should examine Charles Wesley's hermeneutic. Among the principles that Wesley's interpretation of the Bible are (1) christological interpretation, (2) experiential interpretation, and (3) poetic interpretation.

A final hymn offers a fitting conclusion to a study of Charles Wesley and the Bible. For Wesley, and for us, the understanding of Scripture requires more than academic study.

³² *Collection*, #136.

God's Word is revealed fully only by God's Spirit. So, in a hymn to be sung 'before reading the Scriptures,' Wesley prayed:

Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire,
Let us thine influence prove,
Source of the old prophetic fire,
Fountain of light and love.

Come, Holy Ghost, (for moved by thee
The prophets wrote and spoke)
Unlock the truth, thyself the key,
Unseal the sacred book.

Expand thy wings, celestial Dove,
Brood o'er our nature's night;
On our disordered spirits move,
And let there now be light.

God, through himself, we then shall know,
If thou within us shine,
And sound, with all thy saints below,
The depths of love divine.³³

³³ *Collection, #85.*