

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Three Trajectories in Nineteenth-Century Anglican Biblical Interpretation: From Narrow to Broad

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## Abstract

Contemporary studies of Anglican biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century are scant. Those that do exist tend to paint the biblical interpretation of the period as unidimensional and flat. This paper highlights diverse ways the Bible was interpreted by Anglicans in the nineteenth century by looking at the writings of Charles Simeon, Benjamin Jowett, and Christina Rossetti. Each has interesting and distinct ways of approaching the Bible. The paper analyzes their interpretive practices before tracing them to the present and drawing out significant historical themes in each.

**Keywords:** Anglican biblical interpretation; Benjamin Jowett; Charles Simeon; Christina Rossetti; interpretation of scripture; Victorian Anglicanism

## Introduction

Recently, there has been revival of interest in premodern and figural approaches to the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> This has been associated with a new interest in the doctrine of Scripture and attempts to suss out what exactly the Bible is in and for the Church.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, however, this literature has bypassed nineteenth-century biblical interpretation or – as is often the case – pointed to the nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup>Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2010); as well as the *Brazos Theological Commentary of the Bible* series or standalone volumes such as Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). This new wave of interest in premodern exegesis was preceded by a prescient essay: David C. Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis', *Theology Today* 37.1 (1980), pp. 27–38.

<sup>2</sup>See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Matthew Baker, Mark Mourachian and Seraphim Danckaert, eds., *What Is the Bible?: The Patristic Doctrine of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016) and Brad East, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

century as a period in which the interpretation and doctrine of Scripture are flattened out. Scholars often cite Benjamin Jowett's contribution to *Essays and Reviews*, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', as a case-in-point to show that something significant had changed in the way Christians were thinking about and reading the Bible. In fact, before the renewed interest in premodern exegesis, claims such as those made by F. W. Farrar in his 1886 *History of Interpretation* were commonplace. Farrar suggested that there was linear progress from muddled, inexact interpretation in the past through to the ever-clearer, more correct interpretation of the present.<sup>3</sup> Farrar would write that 'We study the past not to denounce it, not to set ourselves above it, not to dis sever ourselves from its continuity, but to learn from it, and to avoid its failures . . . If we dwell upon its mistakes it is only that we may have grace to avoid them, and to be on our guard against similar tendencies'.<sup>4</sup> There was continuity with the past, but modern interpretation was to move increasingly away from its mistakes, according to Farrar. This involved some progress, but we can no longer accept the Whig historiography of Farrar and assume that the new is better and the old is wrong.

While some interpreters in the nineteenth century attempted to steer clear of past errors, other interpreters, such as those associated with the Oxford Movement, sought to *recover* earlier forms of reading Scripture. The reality is that the nineteenth century shows far more complexity in terms of interpretation of Scripture than might be apparent from received assumptions.<sup>5</sup> However, the scholarship that explores this complexity does so across a breadth of theological and ecclesial traditions.<sup>6</sup> Even within the Church of England, there are several diverse traditions for reading and interpreting Scripture. Rowan Greer picks up on some of this complexity, noting that Evangelicals and Tractarians (he names E. B. Pusey) clung to fideistic assumptions about Scripture and tended to reject the historical criticism, while others – namely Benjamin Jowett and William Sanday – made friends with the new historical scholarship.<sup>7</sup> But even Greer suggests 'making friends with history . . . became largely accepted' before he goes on to offer a descriptive account of this transition.<sup>8</sup>

One way of looking at the complexity of the Church of England is to chart the ways that the theology and exegesis of Scripture are more or less restrictive. What do I mean by this? That some approaches to the Bible lead the interpreter to a strict, unidimensional interpretation of each passage of Scripture. To understand a passage of Scripture is to explain why *x* means *y*. Any interpretation other than *y* is to miss the meaning of *x*. Interpreters differ in the way they locate *y*. Some suggest that *y* is what the initial human author meant when writing a particular passage, while others suggest it was how this passage was first heard and understood by its original audience. Still others see *y* to correspond to the Holy Spirit's intent behind the text,

<sup>3</sup>Farrar, *History of Interpretation: Eight Lectures Preached before the University of Oxford in the Year MDCCCLXXXV on the Foundation of the Late Rev. John Bampton* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1886).

<sup>4</sup>Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>For a corrective to the oversimplification of the nineteenth century see Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Larsen, *A People of One Book*.

<sup>7</sup>Rowan A. Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture: From the Reformation to the Present* (New York: Crossroads, 2006), p. 97.

<sup>8</sup>Greer, *Anglican Approaches to Scripture*, pp. 95–127.

and others the plain grammatical sense of the text itself, which has some integrity apart from the author.

On the other extreme, there are some approaches to the Bible that lead the interpreter to see each passage of Scripture as having a multiplicity of meanings. This means that *x* can mean *y*, *z*, *a* or *b* or any other number of things. This meaning may include what the human author intended for the text to mean, or what the Holy Spirit meant, but it is not limited to either of these senses. For interpreters who see the multiplicity of meanings to be possibilities, there is a spectrum from a few meanings for each passage of Scripture to potentially infinite numbers of meanings.

This is only one way of organizing a sketch of nineteenth-century Anglican biblical interpretation. The same material could have been arranged historically, around central traditions, or key individuals. While the interpreters I will discuss below can be linked to larger movements within the Church of England, this is beside the point. The value in arranging the interpreters from most restrictive to least in their reading of Scripture is that it shows that thinkers who have very disparate theological and social commitments (for example, Charles Simeon and Benjamin Jowett) actually are quite similar in the ways they read the Bible. This is important, as I will show in the conclusion, because it provides some insight into why groups like modern Evangelicals and theological liberals (which are historically connected to the Broad Church movement) have almost identical approaches to reading the Bible.

This way of organizing nineteenth-century Anglican biblical interpretation is also important for the theological ideas it reveals and puts into focus. One's view of the nature and doctrine of Scripture – what kind of book the Bible *is* – informs how one treats it. Is it an ancient text that needs to be contextualized? Is it a collection of documents for the early Church that has to be reappropriated for the present? Or, is it a communication of the Holy Spirit for the Church, past, present and future? Assumptions about answers to these questions come to the surface in the way interpreters approach the Bible.

The rest of this essay will focus on three significant members of the Church of England who interpreted the Bible from most restrictive to least. Benjamin Jowett, whose writing on Scripture is often cited but little explored, is frequently mentioned in scholarship on the history of interpretation. Alongside Jowett, I will focus on two other interpreters. These are Charles Simeon and Christina Rossetti.<sup>9</sup> I will focus on

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<sup>9</sup>There is very little recent scholarship on Simeon's interpretation of Scripture. See Andrew Atherstone, *Charles Simeon on the Excellency of the Liturgy* (Norwich, UK: Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2011); Hugh Evan Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); and Alexander C. Zabriskie, 'Charles Simeon: Anglican Evangelical', *Church History* 9.2 (1940), pp. 103–119. Much more has been written on Rossetti's use of Scripture in recent years. See Emma Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), especially pp. 4, 33–69; Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), especially chapter five; Amanda W. Benchhuysen, 'The Prophetic Voice of Christina Rossetti,' in *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Woman Interpreters of the Bible*, Christiana De Groot and Marion Ann Taylor (eds.). (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 165–180; Andrew D. Armond, 'Limited Knowledge and the Tractarian Doctrine of Reserve in Christina Rossetti's "The Face of the Deep"', *Victorian Poetry* 48.2 (2010), pp. 219–242; and Timothy Larsen, 'Christina Rossetti, the Decalogue, and Biblical Interpretation', *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte* 16.1 (2009), pp. 21–36.

these interpreters in particular because they are examples of three distinct ways Anglican interpreters approached the Bible in the nineteenth century. Others would provide equally illuminating examples, and it would be easy to substitute someone like the Evangelical bishop J. C. Ryle for Charles Simeon, or John Keble for Christina Rossetti. But these three figures represent well three distinct modes of scriptural interpretation, they have all commented extensively on Scripture, and they have all commented on Galatians 5 in particular.

### Charles Simeon

Charles Simeon (1759–1836) was an Anglican clergyman who was widely regarded as a compelling preacher throughout his long career at Holy Trinity, Cambridge. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, Simeon was raised in a High Church household but had a profound and lasting conversion experience while studying at King’s College, Cambridge. He recounts his experience reading *The Whole Duty of Man* by Thomas Wilson, and then shortly thereafter having a transformative experience that culminated with him receiving the Eucharist on Easter Sunday.<sup>10</sup> He recounts this in his memoirs,

The thought rushed into my mind, What! may I transfer all my guilt to another? Has God provided an offering for me, that I may lay my sins on his head? then, God willing, I will not bear them on my own soul one moment longer. Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus; and on the Wednesday began to have a hope of mercy; on the Thursday that hope increased; on the Friday and Saturday it became more strong; and on the Sunday morning (Easter-day, April 4) I awoke early with those words upon my heart and lips, “Jesus Christ is risen to-day; Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul; and at the Lord’s table in our chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour.<sup>11</sup>

This personal experience of Christian faith shaped Simeon and his ministry going forward. And, after initial resistance to his ministry from parishioners, Simeon enjoyed a lengthy and influential preaching ministry at Holy Trinity.<sup>12</sup> It is in Simeon’s preaching and sermon material that we can see clearly the beliefs he has about the Bible and how it should be read. Happily, Simeon has left behind a large multi-volume work of sermon outlines for almost the whole of the Bible. In *Horae Homileticae*, each sermon is based on a text and goes on to offer exegetical points followed by suggestions for application.<sup>13</sup> This text helped to bolster Simeon’s reputation not just as a preacher but as a master teacher of preaching as well.

<sup>10</sup>William Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Simeon: With a Selection from His Writings and Correspondence* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1847), pp. 8–9.

<sup>11</sup>Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Simeon*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Simeon*, pp. 43–45.

<sup>13</sup>Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae: Or Discourses, Now First Digested into One Continued Series, and Forming a Commentary upon Every Book of the Old and New Testament, to Which Is Annexed an Improved Edition of a Translation of Claude’s Essay on the Composition of a Sermon* (London: Holdsworth, 1832–1833).

About the Bible more generally, Simeon writes in his *Horae Homileticae* that the Scriptures are called with great propriety

“the word of God”; first, because they were inspired by him. They were indeed written by men; but men were only the agents and instruments that God made use of: they wrote only what God by his Spirit dictated to them: so that, in reality the whole Scripture was as much written by the finger of God, as the laws were, which he inscribed on two tables of stone, and delivered to his servant Moses. And to this the Scriptures themselves bear witness; for in them it is said, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God”; and again, “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>14</sup>

From passages like this it might seem that Simeon has a facile theory of inspiration and a direct one-to-one understanding of God’s word via the human words of Scripture. Elsewhere, later on in the *Horae Homiliticae*, however, Simeon notes that the authors ‘expressed themselves, each in his own peculiar style, as any other writers would have done’, though they were kept by the Holy Spirit ‘from any error or mistake’.<sup>15</sup> Given these beliefs, it makes sense that Simeon wanted to ensure that the plain sense of the text of Scripture came through in all interpretations. He had a conviction that the Scriptures were the word of God and conveyed exactly what God wanted them to convey, even if their style was coloured by human agency.

Simeon was not interested in figural readings of the Old Testament as a rule, though he indulged in them from time to time.<sup>16</sup> When approaching the Old Testament, Simeon suggests,

The rule then that we would lay down is this; to follow strictly the apostolic explanations as far as we have them; and, where we have them not, to proceed with extreme caution; adhering rigidly to the analogy of faith, and standing as remote as possible from any thing which may appear fanciful, or give occasion to cavillers to discard typical expositions altogether.<sup>17</sup>

Simeon is open to making use of Old Testament figures if there is precedent in the New Testament, but otherwise warns the interpreter to be very careful to avoid the ‘fanciful’. This rule for Simeon comes from a concern to preserve the integrity of the Old Testament witness as the Word of God.

On the other hand, Simeon is open to prophetic passages of the Old Testament predicting Jesus’s life and ministry. He writes, ‘The declarations of the prophets were so numerous and minute, that a history of our Lord might be compiled from them, fuller, in many respects, than is contained in any one of the Evangelists’.<sup>18</sup> Simeon is not saying that Jesus is present in the Old Testament, but rather that the

<sup>14</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 17, p. 497.

<sup>15</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 19, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup>See his discussion of the ‘brasen altar’ and sacrificial cult of Israel in Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 1, pp. 572–573.

<sup>17</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 1, p. 571.

<sup>18</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 14, p. 189.

Old Testament points forward in time to the incarnate Lord's life and ministry. This is a crucial difference from other interpreters (as we shall see) who leave room for a more expansive vision of the meaning of Scripture, and who see the reality that it is the Word of God as an opening to plurivocity rather than as a reason for tightening interpretation away from excess.

Simeon writes of Scripture as 'Holy Writ', 'the Inspired Volume' and 'the mind of the Spirit of God'.<sup>19</sup> And yet that does not mean Scripture always speaks directly. Simeon notes that 'as wheels in a complicated machine may move in opposite directions and yet subserve one common end, so may truths apparently opposite be perfectly reconcilable with each other, and equally subserve the purposes of God in the accomplishment of man's salvation'.<sup>20</sup> Simeon is attentive, then, to the tensions within Scripture, but these tensions for him are ultimately part of the same design and serve the same end – the salvation of humanity.

We can see an example of what Simeon's exegesis looks like by looking at Galatians 5:22–3, which lists the famous fruit of the Spirit. Simeon writes about this passage as part of broader framework of 'two covenants . . . the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace'.<sup>21</sup> This latter covenant animates us by the Spirit, which is always weakening the flesh which is under the covenant of the law.<sup>22</sup> We can see that we are living under the covenant of grace, according to Simeon, when our lives exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, which 'spring from the divine principle, which is imparted to us by the Spirit of God at the time of our regeneration and conversion'.<sup>23</sup> Simeon lists the fruit of the Spirit, dividing them into 'those which have their sphere of action chiefly within our own bosoms' and 'those which have a more immediate relation to our fellow-creatures'.<sup>24</sup> So 'love' wells up within us to God, but 'goodness' and 'meekness' have more to do with our relationships with other humans. And together, this fruit 'characterizes the true Christian' and in no one else is it 'maintained and exercised' than in Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup>

In his exegesis of this passage, Simeon tries only to parse the text, (asking which fruit of the Spirit relates to God versus others), and to draw out the sense of the words, noting that the fruit of the Spirit comes from God, that it is the mark of Christian life, and that it ultimately describes the character of Jesus. This reading is very basic and narrow, as Simeon tries only to say what the words of the text mean, by perhaps breaking it down into smaller pieces so the reader might better understand each passage.

In summary, we can see that Simeon has a high view of Scripture, equating the words of Scripture with the words of God. Connected to this high view is a tentativeness about interpreting Scripture. One must always strive to understand what the words of Scripture mean and eschew 'fanciful' readings that would drift from this plain sense. For him, this is bound up with authorial intent. He writes of the Old Testament that,

<sup>19</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 1, pp. i, iii, and iv.

<sup>20</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 1, p. xxiii.

<sup>21</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 17, p. 232.

<sup>22</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 17, p. 233.

<sup>23</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 17, p. 235.

<sup>24</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 17, pp. 235–236.

<sup>25</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 17, p. 236.

In considering this portion of sacred history, we do not found upon it any doctrine relating to the Gospel: we do not even insinuate that it was originally *intended* to illustrate any of the peculiar doctrines of Christianity: we shall merely *take occasion from it* to introduce to your notice some useful observations, with which indeed it has no immediate connexion, but with which it has a very striking correspondence.<sup>26</sup>

This is the key point for Simeon. Christian doctrines are set forth clearly in the New Testament but the Old Testament does not ‘intend’ to convey these, even if it gives opportunity to speak about them. Turning to Broad Churchman, Benjamin Jowett, we see a slightly broader approach to Scripture as he seeks to get to what the text meant.

### Benjamin Jowett

Benjamin Jowett was born in London in 1817 to a family associated with the Evangelical movement. When Jowett was a student at Balliol College, Oxford, he was influenced by Tractarianism, but eventually was drawn to Broad Church sensibilities.<sup>27</sup> He remained at Oxford for the rest of his life, most notably in the position of Professor of Greek. In addition to translations of Plato and Aristotle, Jowett wrote works of theology, including his contribution to *Essays and Reviews* as well as a book on Pauline literature. Jowett died in Oxford in 1893 after a time of illness.

The best place in Jowett’s corpus to get a sense of his theology of Scripture is in his essay ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’ from *Essays and Reviews*, a collection of essays that sought to integrate Christian faith with the advances in modern scholarship, especially in the sciences.<sup>28</sup> Jowett’s essay elicited significant attention because it attacked traditional interpretations of Scripture. Jowett was one of the first English-speaking theologians to popularize German higher criticism, and to many readers, this seems at odds with fidelity to Scripture’s authority. His essay could be summarized by Jowett’s suggestion that interpreter’s role was to read the Bible ‘like any other book’.<sup>29</sup>

The problem, for Jowett, was that so much interpretation was the ‘erring fancy of men in the use of Scripture, or of the tenacity with which they cling to the interpretations of other times, or of the arguments by which they maintain them’.<sup>30</sup> To Jowett, interpreters were no longer trying to discover what Scripture meant, but they were only interested in defending how it had been received. He writes, ‘All the

<sup>26</sup>Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, vol. 1, p. 292.

<sup>27</sup>See Geoffrey Cust Faber, *Jowett: A Portrait with Background* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), Lionel A. Tollemache, *Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol* (London: Edward Arnold, 1895) and Peter Bingham Hinchliff, *Benjamin Jowett and the Christian Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). The term ‘Broad Church’ refers to a nineteenth-century movement within the Church of England that sought embrace reason, open-mindedness, and the best of scholarship (especially in history, textual studies, and science).

<sup>28</sup>Benjamin Jowett, ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’, in *Essays and Reviews*, John William Parker (ed.) (London: Longman, 1861): pp. 330–433.

<sup>29</sup>Jowett, ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’, p. 338.

<sup>30</sup>Jowett, ‘On the Interpretation of Scripture’, p. 330.

resources of knowledge may be turned into a means not of discovering the true rendering, but of upholding a received one . . . These are some of the ways in which the sense of Scripture has become confused, by the help of tradition, in the course of ages, under a load of commentators.<sup>31</sup> Church tradition, for Jowett, does not help to preserve the meaning of the Bible, but obscures it, and ensures that this obscurity is passed on from generation to generation.

So what does the Bible mean for Jowett? For him, the meaning of the text is not only found in how Scripture was first heard or read but the intent of the human author. He gets right to the point, writing that one who keeps to the 'plain meaning of words and the study of their context may know more of the original spirit and intention of the authors of the New Testament than all the controversial writers of former ages put together'.<sup>32</sup> Jowett is opposed to the kind of reading that digs deep into a text to find types or symbols of Christian truth. He writes,

No one will now seek to find hidden meanings in the scarlet thread of Rahab, or the number of Abraham's followers, or in the little circumstance mentioned after the resurrection of the Saviour that St. Peter was the first to enter the sepulchre. To most educated persons in the nineteenth century, these applications of Scripture appear foolish. Yet it is rather the excess of the method which provokes a smile than the method itself.<sup>33</sup>

He goes on to explain that the method of reading the Scriptures 'crosswise, or deciphered . . . as a book of symbols' is the problem, even if the results are fairly restrained.<sup>34</sup> The reason for this is that these methods of reading ignore the importance of the words of the author and their context. This is not to say that there is not a place for making intertextual connections. Jowett was aware, for instance, that Jesus himself used the Old Testament in this way when he applied its teaching to himself.<sup>35</sup> The key point that Jowett wants to make is that *application* of Scripture can be far more creative than *interpretation*.

If *interpretation* is limited to deciphering what the human author of Scripture meant to say, given the meaning of his words and context, *application* can move rightly to apply these words to modern circumstances. Jowett writes that 'almost by a law of the human mind, the application of Scripture takes the place of its original meaning. And the question is, not how to get rid of this natural tendency, but how we may have the true use of it'.<sup>36</sup> Application is not a free-for-all, but it does allow more freedom than interpretation proper.

The one facet of interpretation that remains ambiguous for Jowett is the dual intent one might find as the human authors of Scripture attempt to refer to the divine when their words do not achieve their referential goal. In an essay titled 'Essay on the Abstract Ideas of the New Testament', he notes,

<sup>31</sup>Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 330.

<sup>32</sup>Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', pp. 340–341.

<sup>33</sup>Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', pp. 368–369.

<sup>34</sup>Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 369.

<sup>35</sup>Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 406.

<sup>36</sup>Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 404.



The Gospel has necessarily its mixed modes, not merely because it is preached to the poor, and therefore adopts the expressions of ordinary life; nor because its language is incrustated with the phraseology of the Alexandrian writers; but because its subject is mixed, and, as it were, intermediate between God and man. Natural theology speaks clearly, but it is of God only; moral philosophy speaks clearly, but it is of man only: but the Gospel is, as it were, the communion of God and man, and its ideas are in a state of transition or oscillation, having two aspects towards God and man, which it is hard to keep in view at once.<sup>37</sup>

One implication of what Jowett is expressing here is that it is possible for a text of Scripture to have two meanings. One is the divine reality to which it points – what the human author intends to say about God – as well as the meaning of the human words if they fall short of indicating the divine reality to which the author points. This is not necessarily a positive feature of Scripture, but in Jowett's view, it is the reality: Human writing can transcend itself and reach the divine, and at the same time human writing can be limited by its own finitude.

Turning to Jowett's interpretation of Galatians 5:22–3, we see his tight exegesis in action, as Jowett aims to draw out the intent of St. Paul. He does this primarily by cross-referencing the Greek words that St. Paul uses in Galatians with the same or similar words in other Pauline texts. For instance, he comments on the word joy or *χαρά* in Greek that 'joy or light-heartedness is, in itself, a Christian duty', which he suggests is comparable to the word 'rejoice' as it is used in Romans 12:15.<sup>38</sup> The implication is that this is what St. Paul intends by using this word, given that he has used it in similar ways in other passages.

Jowett continues to pick through the text in this way. In his exegesis of the tale end of verse 23, 'There is no law against these things.' (NRSV), or 'οὐκ ἔστιν νόμος', Jowett writes, 'It neither prohibits nor enjoins Christian graces, which belong to a different sphere. The Apostle has accidentally lighted upon a formula which occurs also in Aristotle.'<sup>39</sup> What is fascinating about Jowett's insight here is his identification of St. Paul's intended meaning, and then his observation that St. Paul actually 'accidentally lighted upon' an idea from Aristotle. In Jowett's view, then, St. Paul intended one meaning, but actually invoked another notion (from Aristotle) without realizing it. This is not far off from Jowett's suggestion that a text can possibly have two meanings. The first is the intent of the author, and the second may come from a mistake or human finitude that haphazardly invokes another meaning (in this case Aristotle) or in other parts of Holy Scripture, the sense of words that fail to point to their divine intent.

The scriptural complexity that Jowett has in view allows for a more nuanced interpretation of texts than Simeon might, for Jowett could parse two meanings of a given text in some cases. Simeon wants to get to one. Jowett also allows for more expansive readings of Scripture when it comes to application, and this too widens

<sup>37</sup>Benjamin Jowett, *Scripture and Truth: Dissertations* (London: Henry Frowde, 1907), pp. 125–126.

<sup>38</sup>Benjamin Jowett, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans with Critical Notes and Dissertations*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 384.

<sup>39</sup>Jowett, *The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, Galatians, Romans*, p. 385.

how Scripture is used, if not what it may mean, as compared to Simeon. The next section will look at the more expansive reading of Christina Rossetti.

### Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti was born in 1830 in London to Pasquale Giuseppe Rossetti, of Neapolitan descent, and her mother, Frances Mary Lavinia, of Italian and English descent. Rossetti's father was a scholar of Dante and he educated his four children at home. Christina faced serious health issues as a teenager. It was also during this time that worship at Christ Church, Albany Street, and a growing devotional life focused her attention on religious life. Though not without options, Rossetti chose to remain single. In 1862, she published *'Goblin Market' and Other Poems* with much success. She was diagnosed with Graves' disease in 1872 and lived quiet life with her mother until her death from cancer on December 29, 1894.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to the interpretation of Scripture, Rossetti goes far beyond the fairly restricted interpretation of Simeon and Jowett. She approaches the whole canon of Scripture, drawing from both the Old and New Testaments in a broad, figural reading. For example, in *Letter and Spirit*, her commentary on the Ten Commandments, she draws from both Testaments to illustrate each commandment. In dealing with the fifth commandment on honouring one's mother and father, Rossetti hops around the biblical canon, looking at Cain (who sinned against his parents by sinning against their son, Abel), and then later in Genesis to Joseph.<sup>41</sup> Joseph wanted to honour his parents and this is part of the reason he was willing to treat his brothers so well in the end. Rossetti leaves Genesis when she writes about taking God's name in vain, referring to texts in Exodus, Isaiah, and 1 Corinthians.<sup>42</sup> In both of these examples, we can see that Rossetti has no problem drawing on passages from across the canon of Scripture to bring light to those in other places.

Another feature of Rossetti's exegesis in *Letter and Spirit* is the way she reads the Old Testament commandments figurally, looking beyond their literal sense towards their spiritual significance. For example, though the fifth commandment is about children honouring their parents, the significance of the command changes when it is read in view of Lk. 11:2–4 and Mt. 6:9–13. In these passages, Jesus prays to 'Our Father in heaven' and this shows us that the commandments of the Old Testament are not only about human relationships but spiritual ones as well. If God is the father of all, then to honour one's father and mother is also a command to honour God, our heavenly father. Rossetti can write 'The Fifth Commandment is swallowed up in the First, for "God is greater than our heart;" and because One is our Father which is

<sup>40</sup>For biographical treatment of Rossetti, see Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981); Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994); Elizabeth Ludlow, 'Christina Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites', in *The Oxford Handbook of Oxford Movement*, Stewart J. Brown, Peter Nockles, and James Pereiro (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 427–436 and Diane D'Amico and David A. Kent, 'Rossetti and the Tractarians', *Victorian Poetry* 44.1 (2006), pp. 93–104.

<sup>41</sup>Christina G. Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1883), pp. 44–45.

<sup>42</sup>Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit*, pp. 132–133.

in heaven, therefore all we are brethren'.<sup>43</sup> This is why Dinah Roe can write that 'Rossetti's "pattern of writing" is itself a literary enactment of the typological way that she believes the Bible ought to be read'.<sup>44</sup> Roe here is specifically referring to Rossetti's commentary on Revelation, *The Face of the Deep*, but it applies equally to her exegesis in *Letter and Spirit*. Rossetti reads Scripture as whole, seeing it as interconnected and multifaceted.

To see this more concretely, we can look at Rossetti's commentary on the Benedicite, *Seek and Find*. One paragraph from this text on the person of Joseph gives us a glimpse into the kind of deep spiritual reading that Rossetti is capable of. She writes, commenting on Joseph's dream (Gen. 37:1–11),

When Joseph stands before us as a figure of Jesus Christ, the mystery of the dream and its interpretation shifts its ground, the mysterious element ascending to a higher level. It is no marvel to behold moon and stars, His mother and His brethren, do obeisance unto Him: but the sun does obeisance also; hereby the Incarnation appears dimly intimated, the Godhead abasing itself to the Manhood, the Creator clothing Himself with the creature, and subjecting Himself to the laws which rule creation; yea, in fulness of time the divine Father delegating to that Only-begotten Son, Who for ever abides Very Man no less than Very God, the sovereignty and administration of the universe.<sup>45</sup>

In this passage, Rossetti draws out significant Christological theology from this Old Testament text. She is not interested in looking at what this text would have originally meant in a way that someone like Jowett was, nor was she interested in simply following the plain sense of the words to get to their meaning, like Simeon. Instead, Rossetti is taking an expansive reading, looking to Joseph's dreams as types and prophecies of the Son of Man, the one whom all his brethren will worship, the creator and sustainer of nature. For Rossetti, the story of Joseph is ultimately about Jesus.

To take another example of Rossetti's expansive reading of Scripture, we can look to her book *Time Flies*, a reading diary.<sup>46</sup> She notes in this book that many of the images of the Old Testament are actually referents for something in the New. For instance, she suggests manna is a type of 'true bread from heaven', that the sabbath figures the final rest for the people of God, and water is a figure for the Holy Spirit.<sup>47</sup> One can see that each of these concrete Old Testament images, whatever else they may indicate in their textual context, also points forward to New Testament truths. In Rossetti's words from another passage, the images of Scripture 'suggest a double meaning, the literal and the spiritual'.<sup>48</sup> This layered reading is tethered to Rossetti's belief that the Scripture is one whole, even though it can be divided into two

<sup>43</sup>Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit*, p. 45.

<sup>44</sup>Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), p. 180.

<sup>45</sup>Christina Rossetti, *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies on the Benedicite* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1879), pp. 30–31.

<sup>46</sup>Christina G. Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, seventh ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1902).

<sup>47</sup>Rossetti, *Time Flies*, pp. 109 and 211.

<sup>48</sup>Rossetti, *Seek and Find*, p. 40.

Testaments or many books. This is because Scripture is written by one divine author, and given the Holy Spirit inspires each human author, this same divine intent can be found throughout the whole canon. Timothy Larsen sees this in Rossetti's writing and can note that she is 'deeply committed to the unity of Scripture'.<sup>49</sup> He goes on to say that 'one way she expresses this is by using verses from one part of the canon as a lens through which to read passages from another.'<sup>50</sup> Not only is Rossetti convinced that one divine author has inspired the whole of Scripture but also that the figures throughout both Testaments (such as those listed above, including water, bread, etc.) are mutually interpreting. Therefore, if one wants to understand the true meaning of manna, one must look to Jesus, the true bread from heaven (Jn. 6:32), and to understand the true meaning of Jesus's self-giving, one must look to the giving of manna.

Rossetti's interpretation of Galatians 5:22–3 is also illuminating. She meditates on this text in *Times Flies*, writing,

Blessed be God that these lovely graces are "fruits" not flowers. Flowers might be demanded of us at the dawn of our day of probation, so soon as ever "the Dayspring from on high" had visited us. But for fruits time is allowed; they form gradually, sweeten gradually, ripen gradually. Even "the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it."<sup>51</sup>

In this lovely passage, Rossetti offers an expansive reading of Scripture, where the imagery of the fruit of the Spirit is not just a useful metaphor, but a type with some depth. Unlike flowers, she notes, fruit takes time to develop and ripen, and so does the work of the Spirit in human lives. She goes on to develop this imagery further, writing that,

Holy Church is that garden of God wherein, according to His many types, God the Holy Ghost deigns to dwell and work. A dove's bower is very peaceful. A watered garden brings forth abundantly. Fruits ripen, sweeten, and are perfected by the sun's blazing fire. The wind blowing "where it listeth" brings out and sheds abroad fragrance, and makes music among bowing branches. "Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire."<sup>52</sup>

Here, Rossetti goes beyond the letter of the text and sets the fruit of the Spirit in the context of the 'garden' of the Church, and the 'wind' hovering over this garden she sees to be the Holy Spirit, alluding to John 3:18 as well as the hymn 'Come Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire'. Her reading of Galatians 5 is rich and imaginative.

All of this is to show that Rossetti has an approach to Scripture that is distinct from both Simeon and Jowett. She reads expansively, like many other Tractarians, including John Keble and E. B. Pusey. This means she sees Scripture to be a united

<sup>49</sup>Timothy Larsen, 'Christina Rossetti, the Decalogue, and Biblical Interpretation', *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte* 16.1 (2009), p. 29.

<sup>50</sup>Larsen, 'Christina Rossetti, the Decalogue, and Biblical Interpretation', p. 29.

<sup>51</sup>Rossetti, *Time Flies*, p. 272.

<sup>52</sup>Rossetti, *Time Flies*, p. 272.

whole, inspired by the Holy Spirit, with each text and image possessing a multivalency in service of the divine author of Scripture.

### Historical Observations

In conclusion, I want to offer four historical observations. The interpreters examined in this short essay do not give us grounds to make sweeping statements but perhaps serve as witnesses to these tentative insights.

The first observation is simple but important: There was as much variety in the ways nineteenth-century Anglicans read the Bible as there is in the way contemporary Anglicans read. One could extract observations about the period from a Dicken's novel, Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, or snatches of insight from Jowett, and paint the century's biblical interpretation as a one-dimensional and uniform movement towards reading the Bible like any other book. But the truth is that biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century was diverse. Not everyone read the same way. There was not an interpretive war waged between conservatives and liberals, but varying degrees of openness and specific ways of reading that were nuanced and complex. Scholars ought to be careful not to caricature the period.

The second observation is that there is remarkable similarity between the ways Simeon and Jowett – and I would argue Evangelicals and Broad Churchmen more widely – read the Bible. Despite having very different theological commitments and very different conceptions of the ontology of Scripture, both were committed to the belief that the purpose of interpretation is to uncover what the text meant in the past, in order that one might learn from it in the present. It's true that Simeon and Jowett were attempting to uncover this meaning for different reasons and situated it slightly differently, but the result was the same. For example, while both Simeon and Jowett wanted to know the single meaning of a text, Simeon sought to find it in what the text said, apart from theological systems or traditions of interpretation. This was because Simeon was convinced that despite speaking through human personalities, the Bible – all of it – is God's Word. And to honour it rightly as God's word meant untangling it from all but its true meaning.

Jowett too wanted to untangle Scripture, but this was because he was convinced that the interpreter's role was to read it 'like any other book'.<sup>53</sup> This meant that Jowett wanted to situate the meaning of the Bible in the intent of the human author and how it was first received. Every other interpretive possibility that had accrued since the first century needed to be blown away in order to return to this meaning.

It may be fair to say that Simeon was more concerned with the divine intent in Scripture, and Jowett was more concerned with the human authorial intent, but both thought the best way to get back to this original meaning was to dispense with tradition and stay faithful to the text, whether using the tools of bare reading, or historical reconstruction. Though their means were different, both Jowett and Simeon had the same end in mind, trying to understand the text historically by appealing to authorial intent. In this sense, their interpretation of Scripture is very modern.

<sup>53</sup>Jowett, 'On the Interpretation of Scripture', p. 338.

The third historical observation I want to make is that – at least with respect to these three figures – there is a correlation between an appreciation of church tradition and a more expansive reading of Scripture. The negative also holds true, that the suspicion towards tradition leads to more restrictive readings of Scripture. For both Simeon and Jowett, traditional interpretation of texts obscured what they said, and to read through the church fathers, or Medieval interpreters, was to put a barrier between oneself and Scripture.

This is not the case for Rossetti. Though she was not an academic and did not have the technical interpretative skills in biblical languages that Jowett did, she had absorbed much of the tradition of the Church through her connection to the Tractarian movement and her worship at Christ Church, Albany Street, a parish influenced by the Oxford Movement. This means that in Rossetti's reading of Scripture, tradition is not an impediment to understanding the text, but functions like something akin to a set of glasses. Tradition has a clarifying role and gives her the freedom to see Scripture through it in varying ways. Again, this was not an idiosyncrasy of Rossetti's, but rather characteristic of a larger movement within the Church of England.

The fourth and final observation I want to make is that the trajectories one sees in nineteenth-century Anglican biblical interpretation carry forward into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well. The early Evangelicalism of Simeon, and his strain to find the single meaning of the text, is not too dissimilar from modern Evangelical interpretive practice. Whether it's Gordon D. Fee's and Douglas Stewart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* or Grant R. Osborne's *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, the aim is to get to the bottom of what each text means, without reading into it or bringing preconceived interpretations to bear. Not that this kind of reading is limited to evangelical Protestantism, for there is a counterpart in the apologetic-heavy wing of anglophone Catholicism as well.

In as much as modern anglophone liberal Protestantism is the heir of the nineteenth-century Broad Church movement, we can see similar lines of continuity. Marcus Borg's books use the tools of historical criticism to determine what the texts of Scripture 'originally' really meant. The other scholars comprising the Jesus Seminar are a reminder that the influence of Broad Church approaches to Scripture cut across denominational lines.

Debates over pressing issues such as women's ordination or same-sex marriage are often waged between Evangelical and liberal Christians by attempting to return to what relevant passages originally meant to their first audience. The assumption on both sides of the debate is that there is a single meaning for each given text buried in the past, and interpreters only have to discover it.

Lines can also be traced from Christina Rossetti and other Tractarian interpreters to the present days as well, though perhaps not as directly as from Evangelical or Broad Church sources. One can certainly see the continued interest in interpreting Scripture through the church fathers in modern heirs of Tractarianism in the Anglo-Catholic movement, but also in other quarters. For example, one can look to the renewed interest in theological interpretation of Scripture as well as, more broadly, the evangelical Catholicism displayed in places like the journal *Pro Ecclesia*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>See footnote one.

As diverse as biblical interpretation is today across the churches, it is important to remember that just this diversity existed in nineteenth-century Anglicanism and has only continued to spread. This paper serves as reminder that this is the case and that more research is necessary to appreciate the complexity of the period, especially in the Church of England. Of course, this paper only looks directly at three interpreters – Simeon, Jowett, and Rossetti – and for the above historical insights to hold true, they would have to be tested against a broader group of interpreters from the nineteenth-century Church of England. Given that so many lines can be drawn from then to today, further research tracing these lines promises to be fruitful and illuminating.

### A Theological Coda

One of the theological lessons we can learn from these three nineteenth-century approaches to scriptural interpretation is that though the power of Holy Scripture is evident, attempts to describe its force remain limited. Holy Scripture is the Word of God, and, however interpreters see its meaning to be present, its power over the hearts and minds of Christians continues to hold sway. Thus, the rise of modern ways of reading that link the meaning of Scripture to authorial intent continued to flourish a century and half after first coming onto the English-speaking scene, and the difficulty of hammering down this intent is persistent to this day. The enchanting power of Scripture still calls for readers to discover this meaning afresh. Moreover, while patristic and Medieval interpretive practices that imaginatively delve into the types and images of Scripture were abandoned by many, these same approaches now have allure to a new generation of Christians.

Interpretive practices change and will continue to change. New scholarship and learning will sharpen the ways we see certain passages of Scripture. Fruitful insights from the past will continue to bear upon the present, and yet the truth and beauty of Scripture will never be exhausted. The interpretive breadth of nineteenth-century Anglicanism points to both the challenge of interpretation and the alluring depths of Holy Scripture.