

Review Article

Using the Bible in Practical Theology
Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Zoë Bennett

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Abstract

Richard Briggs, a biblical scholar, offers a review and critique of Zoë Bennett's book, *Using the Bible in Practical Theology*: outlining its project; situating it in a growing dialogue between biblical studies and practical theology; and then offering three questions for further reflection arising out of the various emphases of the book. Zoë Bennett, a practical theologian and the book's author, then takes up these three points in response and offers further reflection on the continuing dialogue.

Keywords: Biblical studies; Practical theology; Insight; Context; Hermeneutics.

Introduction

The publication of *Using the Bible in Practical Theology* by Ashgate in their 'Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology' series in 2013 marks an important moment in a gradually increasing dialogue between biblical scholars and practical theologians concerning the role of the Bible in practical theology. As noted both in the book and in the contributions below, the book's appearance follows an engaging and illuminating symposium on the subject held under the auspices of the

British and Irish Association of Practical Theology (BIAPT), at which both authors of this review article were present, and at which we first met.¹ As a result of this meeting, and the fruitful openness to dialogue that it modelled and represented, when Richard came to review the book it seemed natural to him to invite a response from Zoë as author, and she was glad to accept the invitation.

As a result we are pleased to present both a review and an author's response to the book. We have not sought to achieve a single viewpoint between us that would resolve issues or contrasting perspectives. Indeed, we express the hope that the resulting dialogue will encourage further reflection on the issues among interested parties.

Review of the Book (by Richard Briggs)

This is a significant book appearing at the intersection of hermeneutics and practical theology, at a significant time when the discussion between these two disciplines is beginning to probe a little more deeply and constructively than it has done before. Zoë Bennett writes out of a recognition that practical theology needs the Bible, but that it has often not known what to do with it when it does turn to it. One marker that this is changing is the formation of a BIAPT special interest group on 'The Bible and Practical Theology'. This reviewer should disclose that he participated in that group's first meeting, as something of an outsider to the discipline; a meeting that is noted here as signifying 'rapprochement' (7) between biblical scholars and practical theologians. It was also, as Zoë says, hugely enjoyable.

So I came to this book intrigued to see what the conversation would look like when explored systematically over a whole monograph. One thing to state before turning to the *content* is the *tone* of the book. Rather like the BIAPT meeting noted above, this book evinces a wonderfully open and engaging tone. The self-reflexive awareness which is one of the hallmarks of practical theology at its best has filtered down to the reading of the Bible, and as Zoë weaves in and out of various hermeneutical theories she does so with a refreshing awareness of those for whom someone else's liberative reading may in turn be problematic, or all the ways in which one struggles to do justice to insights as they are cashed out in analytical accounts. As she partially sums it up at one point:

A core thesis of this book is that there are practices and ways of thinking that enable us as practical theologians to avoid sterile polarisations and to live with a more fluid and mobile, a more warm

¹ The BIAPT Bible and Practical Theology Symposium, a meeting of the 'special interest' group on Bible and Practical Theology, held at the Woodbrooke Study Centre, Birmingham, in May 2012.

and hospitable, and ultimately a more fruitful and faithful way of engaging with the Bible together. (p. 51)

This is a book that thus encourages ongoing conversation in the course of reviewing and channelling the conversation we have had thus far, and all this is welcome.

The content of the book falls into three parts. The first part engages hermeneutics, positing a reader of 'multiple texts'. Zoë suggests there are in fact four key texts: the Bible and life (or 'experience') as the first two, but adding in 'the reflective text' and 'the performed text'. (These are eventually cashed out so that the first two relate to *seeing*, the third to *telling*, and the fourth to *acting* – p. 109.) The key negotiation in this early stage, though, remains that between interpretation (of the text) and experience (of life). Zoë basically wants to blur this polarisation, and suggest that neither side trumps the other. A cleverly titled chapter ('Putting Ourselves in the Picture') reviews Bultmann's famous article about the impossibility of presuppositionless exegesis,² and then turns to liberation theologians and Gadamer for reflections on the difference this makes as to how we perceive the hermeneutical task. It is followed by a review of 'two traditions', with Schleiermacher on the one hand pioneering an engaged hermeneutic, while Barth sees the text as standing over against us, leading to theology operating from revelation on downwards to context. It is of course fair to see here two fundamentally different ways of operating, and the burden of Zoë's account is in fact to avoid going exclusively one way or the other, though I shall offer a comment below on this point.

Part two is a sustained study of John Ruskin as an exemplar of a Victorian hermeneutical approach. This is a fascinating study, in which a certain amount of historical detail is required (and offered) to set the scene, before pursuing a thesis that Ruskin models the prime importance of *seeing* – 'the art of seeing clearly' (p. 79). This is worked out through three chapters which take up, in turn: seeing clearly, as a discipline of attentiveness; 'seeing with the heart', which is a kind of self-involving insight drawing in emotional and affective dimensions; and 'prophetic seeing', which is nicely parsed as partly a matter of 'dogged persistence' (p. 104) to try and make sense of the claims of faith against the world in which one finds oneself. This section of the book explores territory rather less well known to the average Bible student, and makes a compelling and thought-provoking cumulative case. I learned much here.

Part three turns to case studies of 'the Bible and theology in the public square'. There are three. First is the story of Giles Fraser resigning as Dean of St Paul's during the

² Rudolf Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?' (1960), reprinted in various places, e.g. in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 242-48.

Occupy protests of 2011; then the Kairos Palestine document of 2009 which called for recognition of the theological significance of Palestine and its peoples in contrast to readings of scripture which move too quickly to being pro-Israel; and third is a (fittingly) autobiographical reflection on the ways in which the practices explored in this book work out in Zoë's own context, especially in running a Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology in Cambridge. The overall drift of these final chapters is that we do not so much 'make' connections between scripture and our context as 'see' them, in a 'hermeneutic of immediacy' as characterised by the work on Ruskin.

I have tried above to 'see clearly' what Zoë is arguing. Let me conclude by 'seeing' what connections I find myself making with modes of hermeneutical engagement more familiar to me. I offer three points for further reflection.

One concerns the Schleiermacher/Barth contrast. It is right that there are two ways of looking at the theological task here, and it is helpful to argue that in fact they inter-relate more than is sometimes suggested. What I missed was some sense of whether one or the other orientation can more easily accommodate the insights of the other? Thus, my own reasons for preferring Barth's approach are *not* that I think theology should be 'top-down' to the exclusion of the interpretative significance of context. Rather, if one starts with revelation, then rightly construed (indeed à la Barth) this loops round to take up context in theologically informed terms. But if one starts with the human framing of the context, or reception of the revelation, then it is a lot harder to see how one makes the move to a revealing God (or a divine voice in and through the text, in the case of biblical interpretation). Now Zoë does mention once the Barmen declaration, and explicitly notes there that for Barth one should not equate *starting* with the text with *unconcern* for the world (p. 39, italics original). But I am not sure that a reader of her account is well-placed to see why Barth would think that the Barmen declaration is exactly the kind of engaged theological confession which one would expect to pursue if one starts with a theological account of a revealing God. I am open to seeing the case made that the Schleiermachian hermeneutical tradition (especially as mediated through the likes of Anthony Thisleton) can in turn offer a rich account of these matters, but I do not quite see that case being made here.

A second and related point concerns tricky ways in which these balances and interactions between two prevailing traditions need to be carefully expressed. I am aware that part of the point is to challenge the polarisation, but there are occasional moments where the phrasing seems at least unfortunate. Thus 'texts do *not* speak to us, individuals and communities of interpretation do' (p. 27) but in practice (!) one can recognise differences between moments where a group reading a text experience being met with something from outside them rather than their own prior understanding. Or 'The Bible was written by humans ... the canon of scripture was

set by the winners' (p. 45) – well yes (and in the latter case also no), but these are not sufficient accounts of what is both human and divine action. A sense of the challenge here is the striking line used by Giles Fraser in one of the case studies: 'It's at times of stress when you don't read the Bible but the Bible reads you' (cited on pp. 113, 117). This is indeed a kind of 'hermeneutic of immediacy', but Zoë can see that it seems to operate the wrong way round for her project. However, she argues that 'the emphasis is firmly on the reader' here, since Fraser was thrown back on what he had already internalised in prior experience of the Bible. But I would have liked to see that point explored more fully, since it seems like Fraser's statement actually requires a more subtle way of expressing how a readerly account can at the same time be an account of divine action. In this case, the balance needed is indeed precisely the one noted in the preceding point about the two traditions.

And finally, a third question concerns the nature of the third and final section of the book. The 'case studies' approach is exactly appropriate for the climax of the account, and they are all interesting studies, making helpful points. What might have made them a more compelling conclusion, in my view, would have been some form of more extended engagement with actual scriptural texts. Perhaps inadvertently, this engagement takes the form of various verses being pulled in in a range of *ad hoc* appeals. One can see the appropriateness of that too, but I would have valued at least one or two case studies where it is shown how a sustained reading of a biblical text is of 'use' to practical theology, to recall the title of this volume. I do not think Zoë intends to argue that 'using the Bible in practical theology' ends up solely requiring the seeing of *ad hoc*/immediate links, but the point would have been clearer with an example that did something else. Her brief look at 1 Corinthians 10 as a putative Pauline example of such a use of scripture (pp. 18-19) does not quite get to being such a study. The nearest there is, I think, is a brief approach early on (p. 9) to two contrasting scenarios of 'wrestling' in Genesis and the different modes of life with God they suggest – a genuinely striking insight that whets the appetite for more of the same.

I hope that the genre of 'book review', with its almost inevitable requirement that one focus on points one would like to see further developed or nuanced, does not obscure the overall appreciation of this book. It is, as noted, a significant book at a significant time. Its focus on the core disciplines of 'seeing' is particularly welcome. Overall, it is a practical theological account of the use of the Bible, rather than a scriptural account of practical theological concerns, but once again it seems to me that what one is looking for in the end is an account that fully embodies the dialectical interplay between these two angles of approach and allows them to bear fruit together. The likelihood of that happening is very much increased by this book.

Response to Richard Briggs's Review (by Zoë Bennett)

I am delighted to receive not only a review that is warmly appreciative and constructively challenging, but also an invitation to respond to it in print. This is a most apt 'ongoing conversation' stemming from the BIAPT colloquium in which Richard and I took part. Richard has most certainly 'seen clearly' what I was arguing in the book, which is always a joy to an author. I will take up his three 'points for further reflection' in turn.

Richard offers the view that the Barthian approach of starting with the revelation of God can more easily accommodate the significance of context, than starting with human context to accommodate the revelation of God. He rightly says that I did not make the opposite case, but rather suggested an interrelationship. He politely did not say this, but he would have been right had he said I want to muddy the waters a bit. Richard uses two expressions: 'a human framing of the context', and 'a theological account of a revealing God'. And herein lies the issue for me: why should we expect to meet the self-revelation of God any more through human theological accounts than through human accounts of experience and context? They are both human accounts. Is not the Bible itself a human account, taken to itself by human communities, in which we find human theological accounts and human accounts of experience and context? How do we know that Barth would not have stood up to the tyrant even if he were not a Christian? Ruskin said, 'a knave's religion is always the rottenest thing about him'; may not the opposite also be true? It may be the case that Barth was as much a socialist as he was a Christian, and despised the elite's support of German culture and the disasters to which that led, and so had a point of reference alongside his reading of the Bible, which made him suspicious of what the dominant culture made of the Bible.

I don't wish thereby to suggest that either the 'divine voice' or 'the revealing God' are meaningless phrases. Far from it. But it is a question of where that voice is to be heard. This is illustrated well in the dispute that arose between the Boff brothers, Clodovis and Leonardo over liberation theology. I draw from the account of Sandro Magister, discussing the 'Aparecida' conference in Brazil, May 2007, who quotes the brothers in turn:

[Clodovis states that u]nlike liberation theology, which 'begins with the poor and arrives at Christ', Aparecida 'begins with Christ and arrives at the poor', clearly establishing that 'the Christ-principle always includes the poor, but the poor-principle does not necessarily include Christ. [...] The original source of theology is nothing other than faith in Christ'...

In his brother's view, the thesis of Clodovis should be reversed:

‘It is not true that liberation theology replaces God and Christ with the poor. [...] It was Christ who wanted to identify himself with the poor [cf. Matt. 5:31-45]. The place of the poor is a privileged place of encounter with the Lord. Those who encounter the poor inevitably encounter Christ, still in his crucified form, asking to be taken down from the cross and brought back to life.’³

It is immediately noticeable here that Leonardo Boff not only disputes that starting with the experience of the poor replaces God and Christ with the poor, but also demonstrates that the very move to identify Christ in the poor is dependent on an understanding of the life and teaching of Christ. This is presumably mediated to him through the ‘tradition’ of church teaching, Christian action, and ultimately the Gospels. Furthermore Clodovis Boff, while championing the priority of theology and the Christ-principle, actually starts with an experience, ‘faith in Christ’. I do not think that starting with the revelation of God can more readily accommodate the significance of context and experience than starting with human context and experience can accommodate the revelation of God, but that the two are inextricably intertwined.

And this has some bearing on Richard’s second point, which centres round Giles Fraser’s remark: ‘It’s at times of stress when you don’t read the Bible, the Bible reads you’. Richard says that this statement of Fraser’s ‘requires a more subtle way of expressing how a readerly account can at the same time be an account of divine action’. This provokes me to ask myself why, in a whole two-page spread of a broadsheet, this was the expression that jumped out and hit me between the eyes, and drew me in to the analysis of this interview. As Richard says, it seems to operate the wrong way round for my project. But does it?

In the iterative process between tradition/Bible and experience, when the Bible is buried in your heart and life it becomes an integral part of the way you read experience (as in Fraser’s remark), but having that tradition and text buried in you is also itself moulded by your experience. So experience can change how you understand what is buried in you if you are reflective (as exemplified by Ruskin). The Bible may be to us something that surprises us and catches our imagination, drawing us beyond where we are now – as in Moltmann’s words about eschatological hope, it may be ‘a thorn in the side of the present’; in Coleridge’s words, something which ‘finds me’; or in Blake’s, that which ‘rouzes the faculties to act’.⁴ In Fraser’s case the Bible was not only in his heart, it was reflected to him

³ Sandro Magister, *Clodovis and Leonardo Boff, separated brethren*, 2008, last accessed 23 August 2013, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/205773?eng=y>.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications for a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 2002; first published in German, 1965), 21; S.T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an*

literally as he looked out of St Paul's and read the placards of the protesters. The Bible on the placards was a kind of 'speech-act', as was the Bible in his heart, which drew him to see he was in the wrong place.

Finally Richard wishes that there had been a more extended engagement with actual scriptural texts. This is all the more telling a point in that, at the BIAPT colloquium we both attended, the group did some reading of scriptural texts together at my suggestion, and this was one of the highlights of the time together. Yes, Richard, if I ever get to do a second edition I will include an extra chapter that does just this. My interest in the book was in examining some public texts that illustrated how the Bible was being used publicly. It is nevertheless true that sustained engagement with a specific text in which I offer my own interpretation of its significance for practical theology would clearly enhance the book. I think I would like it to be Rachel's sort of wrestling – communal, down to earth, 'embedded in daily life'. Here is a challenge for the future and for my way of struggling to be faithful to those words of the Matthean Jesus about the Son of Man present in our midst.

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