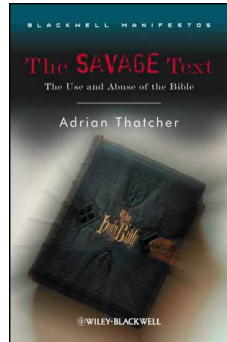


○ **REVIEW OF ADRIAN THATCHER, *THE SAVAGE TEXT: THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE***
(WILEY-BLACKWELL, 2008)

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This book is another in the Blackwell Manifesto series and the second on biblical matters, the first being Roland Boer's *Rescuing the Bible* (2007). Although coming from very different perspectives, both books address similar concerns – the appropriation and use of biblical texts, Bible, for conservative, fundamentalist agendas that result in marginalization, victimization and persecution of people designated Other. Unlike Boer, who is primarily a biblical and “secular” (Marxist) scholar, Thatcher is a theologian, currently Professorial Research Fellow in Applied Theology at University of Exeter. Thatcher's main area of work is in theology of marriage and family but it is his work on theology and sexuality (co-written with Elizabeth Stuart) with which I'm most familiar. *The Savage Text* stems from Thatcher's concerns on sexuality and the debates over the place of lesbian and gay people in the Anglican communion (Thatcher converted to the Church of England in 1988 and before then was a Baptist serving for 10 years as a Baptist minister). Thatcher's main concern is that, in these debates, Bible has been deployed as a savage text against ‘sexual minorities, especially... homosexual people’ (5) not only by ‘fundamentalists and evangelicals’ but also ‘bishops, church leaders and writers of reports’ (25). Through this book, Thatcher addresses both Anglican and Protestant churches, calling them to account on their use and abuse of Bible as a savage text, which he argues is an instance of bibliolatry, a setting up of Bible as coeval with the ‘Triune God’ (111). By doing so, he argues they are actually breaching a fundamental Reformation principle – the rejection of ‘idolatry in all its forms’ (113). The book's 8 chapters and 3 page Conclusion are divided into three sections and supported by a Glossary, Endnotes (alas), Bibliography, a scriptural Index and a General Index.

Thatcher sets out 7 basic theses as his ‘manifesto’ (9) in the first chapter, ‘The “Savage Text”’. His starting point is that there are two forms of Bible use amongst (Protestant) Christians, one which assumes that God is made known to humanity through the human, Jesus Christ, and the other that God is made known through both Jesus Christ and Bible (always here meaning the standard Protestant canon based on the Hebrew Tanakh without deuterocanonicals) together.

Under the first form, scripture is understood as a witness to the Christ event but under the second, scripture is counted as a ‘co-equal source’ of divine revelation and made an ‘inspired guidebook to supernatural realities and earthly ethical practices’ (10). The understanding of scripture as a witness to divine revelation rather than guidebook is the historical Christian and even Reformation approach to Bible. The guidebook approach – putting divine revelation in both Christ and Bible – renders scripture unholy by making it a savage text. It makes an idol of scripture which ‘undermines Christian faith in the Word of God made flesh’ (11). Furthermore this idolatrous elevation of the savage text maintains its popularity by offering Christians a bogus simplicity and concomitant bogus identity sustained by deploying scripture to define those of different theological views as Other. However, Christians can never be a People of the Book without betraying that which is most distinctive of Christianity and consequently ‘in the name of the One to Whom the Bible bears its essential witness, Christians must renounce overt and covert bibliolatry’ (12).

In Chapter 2, Thatcher explores the way scripture is deployed as a savage text in the current debates in the various Christian churches about sexuality and homosexuality. He discusses some of the standard proof texts used against same sex relationships such as Romans 1.26-7, Genesis 19 and Jude. Thatcher is a theologian not a biblical scholar and so I was somewhat disappointed by some of his discussion here. He is much more effective when he moves on to critique inconsistencies in applying scripture to homosexuality vis a vis other issues of sexuality, such as divorce, in the Church of England House of Bishops report, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*. Questions of complementarity and heteronormative readings of the Genesis creation accounts are also put under the microscope. He concludes the chapter by considering the ways scripture and Jesus himself may have been ‘more gay friendly than conventional readings have been able to acknowledge’ (33). Although brief, his discussion highlights well the (to many) surprisingly queerer aspects of the biblical world.

If scripture has been used in an idolatrous way in contemporary sexuality debates to reinforce cultural homophobia is this an isolated phenomenon or indicative of a broader pattern of abuse of scripture? Thatcher answers yes to the latter proposition and in the book’s second section, ‘The Savage Text at Work’, he explores parallels both contemporary and from the past. Four chapters here address the use of scripture to marginalize and oppress through its deployment in struggles and debates to do with racism and slavery, end times apocalyptic theologies, attitudes to children, and finally a chapter addressing Christian anti-Semitism and misogyny. But Thatcher acknowledges that this list is not exhaustive but rather representative of a pattern that recurs across a suite of social issues in which ‘(a)ppel to the Bible guarantees nothing’ but serves to ‘license all manner of savagery’ (109). Homophobic use of scripture is yet another instance of Bible used as savage text. Consequently, Thatcher argues that what really needs to be addressed is ‘the authority of the Bible and the actual use of the Bible’ (35) in Christian churches and communities.

These questions are the subject of the final section of *Savage Text*, ‘Beyond the Text: Faith in the Triune God’. In Chapter 7, Thatcher ponders how it was that Protestant churches born out of the Reformation rejection of idolatry should succumb to an idolatry of the book and then considers some alternative perspectives on biblical authority. Ironically, he argues, the seeds of current Protestant bibliolatry lie in the other central Reformation principle, sola scriptura, which elevates the scriptures to be the sole arbiter of Christian faith and practice. Problems arose almost immediately, of course, in that the Creeds and such practices as Sunday observance and infant

baptism were not to be found in the Bible. Furthermore so as to critique a suite of Roman practices, the Western Bible had to be reshaped by declaring some texts apocryphal and the rest inspired. As a result, all of scripture came to be seen as 'equally valuable' and 'equal in authority' (116) such that 'anyone' should be able to 'figure out the meaning of scripture for themselves' (117). This move required the 'necessity of a literal interpretation of the Bible... a literal understanding of scripture becomes imposed on alternative readings of scripture' (118). These alternative reading strategies included allegorical, anagogical, moral as well as literal readings of scripture. This move to the literal served to create a climate of bible worship within the Reformed churches, anticipating the fundamentalism that is a feature of so much of Protestantism today. Ironically the printing of bibles in the vernacular, e.g. the Authorized Version in England, aided and abetted the climate of bible worship by providing for the first time an apparently uniform, stable text in contrast to the pre-Gutenberg plethora of manuscript variation. However, Thatcher reminds his readers that the Anglican Church never adopted the principle of sola scriptura but was in argument against the Puritans and Calvinists over the proposition. He brings to attention the figure of Richard Hooker, 'one of the "founders" of Anglican theology' (124). Hooker adopted a middle way based on 'the authority of the Church over the interpretation of the Bible' (ibid.). The Bible is the Church's book and serves as a 'witness to Jesus Christ' with each of the 'Testaments ... different in how they do it' (125). Thatcher advocates Hooker's position as a guide to an Anglican use of scripture in contemporary intra-communion debates on sexuality etc.

In his final chapter, 'On Not Being a people of the Book', Thatcher critiques Protestant approaches that, while acknowledging scripture as a witness, have the de facto effect of inscribing it as guidebook. Representative of this, what Thatcher terms, neo-biblicism is John Webster's *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, but he later turns his attention to Brueggeman's *The Book that Breathes New Life*. Indeed the title of the latter illustrates a recurring feature of neo-biblicism – personalization, investing 'the book with myriad personal qualities that normally belong to persons and their interaction' (139). Ironically, Webster (and indeed Brueggemann), would subscribe to the notion of scripture as witness. Nevertheless, as well as scripture breathing, it is a servant, a teacher and elected by God. Scripture judges and interrogates its readers and should be received with 'submission, obedience and affection' (140). Such language reifies scripture and elevates it to de facto equivalence with Christ. In contrast, Thatcher is concerned to dethrone scripture and refer all the authority to Christ. He concludes by offering seven 'principles for a peaceful reading of the Bible' (152). Thatcher is a theologian and these are principles for religious and theological use of scripture in Christian churches, primarily Anglican and Protestant, although he advocates them for Roman Catholicism too. His starting point affirms the notion of scripture as witness rather than revelation - 'read the Bible to learn about... God's self-communication in Christ' (153). Next he counters notions of equal value and authority of scripture by proposing that one expect 'moral and spiritual development in the Bible' (156) and that Christians 'read the Old Testament through the New' (158). His next three principles subordinate scripture to both Jesus and the Christian church. Scripture should be read through the 'rule of faith' (160) or the principal Christian creeds, while the 'Love Commandments of Jesus' (162), as found in Matthew 22.40, should be the guide to ethical practice both in reading the text and disputing it. Rather than treating scripture as a guidebook coeval with Christ, Thatcher proposes that it be considered as primary tradition to the extra- and post-canonical sources that are then considered

secondary tradition. Finally he calls on Christians to ‘let the Spirit show us Jesus’ (165). Scripture is a vital source but as soon as it ‘begins to speak by and for itself, the voice of the Spirit falls silent’ (166).

I was keen to read this book, not simply because of my familiarity with Thatcher’s work in sexuality, but also because the issues this book addresses are questions that I have been compelled to consider as well. The role and purpose of scripture is a question thrown into sharp relief by the struggles, social as well as religious, over sexuality. But as Thatcher acknowledges, it is not only sexuality that has forced this question to the fore. Historically, Afro-American churches rejected the notion of ‘the Bible’ as ‘one undifferentiated, inspired Word’ and developed a hermeneutic of appropriation with ‘a theological core of equality, justice and love’ by which they could use ‘the Bible in its service’ (53-4). Furthermore, in feminist engagement with scripture questions of its authority and purpose have likewise come under debate. Indeed Thatcher’s notion of Bible as primary tradition echoes Schüssler Fiorenza’s idea of scripture’s role as a structuring prototype rather than foundational archetype and so I was surprised that Thatcher did not engage with her or other feminist biblical scholars who have debated these questions. Perhaps that might be due to considerations of Thatcher’s intended audience. The arguments of a feminist, Catholic theologian and biblical scholar might not hold much sway to a Protestant or evangelical Anglican readership. At times, Thatcher himself sounds more Catholic than Protestant and he even acknowledges that there ‘is much in official Catholic teaching about the Bible that accords with the argument of this book’ (163). And I would add in Eastern Orthodox teaching as well.

I hope this book triggers a serious discussion leading to a change in Protestant positions on authority of scripture, at least within the Anglican communion and mainstream Protestant denominations (I doubt that any of the fundamentalist churches would even bother with this book, regrettably) so I further hope it attracts a wide readership. I would also hope that this book be taken up into biblical studies courses, particularly those with a primarily Protestant studentship, so as to foster and advance such a debate. Similar debates need to be held by Western Catholics and Eastern Orthodox but in a different way due to different understandings of scriptural authority – Thatcher’s book should nevertheless be a useful contribution there, too. In any such debates, I hope that two further principles, sadly not taken up in *The Savage Text*, are recognized and advanced. The first is the fact of the sheer ecumenicity of these various scriptural collections called the Bible. The characters, stories and sacred imagery in these texts constitute a shared repository of sacred story across a bewildering diversity of cultures and religions both temporally and geographically. This fact opens the possibility of mutually enriching conversations, interfaith and intercultural. Ironically, something like this exchange does take place already within certain streams of fundamentalist Christianity that have adopted a form of Christian Zionism. These Christians engage with aspects of rabbinic hermeneutics and draw on contemporary Jewish religious Zionism in, sadly, particularly toxic ways. So the other principle I would advocate is to abandon the Christian fetishizing of the Hebrew text in favour of recognizing and affirming the fact of scriptural and canonical diversity. The fetishizing of the Hebrew text derives from the mistaken assumption that a text in the “original” language must be the “original” text. In the West, Jerome applied this assumption to shape the hybrid Vulgate Bible, a mixture of Hebrew and Greek scriptures together with New Testament. Jerome’s project was advanced in the Reformation by the Protestant separation out of the Greek scriptures into the Apocrypha and then

finally in the 19th century by the dropping of these Apocrypha altogether from most standard Protestant Bibles. This move sustains the fiction that the Protestant Hebrew Old Testament, based on the Jewish Tanakh, represents the early Christian scriptures/Old Testament. However, what early Christians counted as scripture is probably more likely to be found in the Bibles of the Eastern Churches, in large part based on the Greek scriptures called (inaccurately) Septuagint. Indeed, for a Western evangelical Christian these scriptures (e.g. Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, Psalms 151-155, Greek Jeremiah, 1 Enoch etc) are more representative of 'lost Christianities' (132) needing to be rediscovered than anything from, say, Nag Hammadi. Furthermore, this eastern canonical and scriptural diversity reflects what we have learned from Qumran about the reality of scriptural diversity and plurality within the turn of the era Jewish milieu from which are derived the Christianities and Rabbinic and other Judaisms of today. Recognizing and embracing this diversity would go some way to countering the literalist, bibliolatrous application of scriptures which, amongst other things, rely so much on the mistaken presumption of the singularity and uniformity of the scriptures across time and space. This textual and canonical scriptural diversity and plurality provide key testimony to support Thatcher's proposition that 'Christian people are *not* the people of a book' (138, Thatcher's italics).