

## DIGGING, LEVELLING AND RANTING: THE BIBLE AND THE CIVIL WAR SECTS

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‘The Scriptures of the Bible’, wrote the Digger leader Gerrard Winstanley in 1650, ‘were written by the experimentall hand of Shepherds, Husbandmen, Fishermen, and such inferiour men of the world’.<sup>1</sup> It was a direct challenge to the learned and tithe-funded clergy of his day, who jealously guarded their right to determine the meaning of the biblical text and preach it to the people. For Winstanley these were ‘false Prophets’, men who did not know the Scriptures ‘experimentally’ and spoke only ‘from their imagination’.<sup>2</sup> The ability truly to discern the meaning of Scripture lay with ‘inferior’ people like himself, the equivalents of the original authors.

The principle that the Scriptures derived from and spoke to ordinary people was fundamental for Winstanley and others who resented the clergy’s role in preaching up the system which they saw as iniquitous, unjust and inequitable. One of the leading Levellers, William Walwyn, also noted that God did not choose the learned to be his ‘Prophets and publishers of the Gospell; but Heards-men, Fisher-men, Tent-makers, Toll-gatherers, etc’, and shared Winstanley’s concern that, although the people now had the Scriptures in their own tongue, they were still being warned by the clergy not to trust their own understanding. ‘What are you the better for having the Scripture in your own language ...[if]... you must have an university man to interpret the English’, Walwyn asked; ‘Let me prevail with you to free yourselves from

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<sup>1</sup> Gerrard Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* (1650) in Thomas N. Corns, Ann Hughes and David Loewenstein, eds, *The Complete Works of Gerrard Winstanley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) (hereafter CW), vol II, 200.

<sup>2</sup> Winstanley, *Truth Lifting up his Head above Scandals* (1648), CW, I, 432.

this bondage'.<sup>3</sup> Like Winstanley, Walwyn argued that laypeople could 'come to a good and right understanding' of the Bible themselves without the aid of a priest; just as they were perfectly able to understand and participate in politics if they were given the opportunity, so they could comprehend the Bible themselves if they 'would but take boldness to themselves and not distrust their own understandings.'<sup>4</sup>

For Walwyn and Winstanley, the right of the 'untutored' to interpret Scripture for themselves must be asserted because the clergy used it to maintain their dominance over the people, preaching a gospel suited to their 'covetous, ambitious, and persecuting spirit'.<sup>5</sup> Winstanley was clear that the university-educated divines had deliberately overlain the 'plaine language' employed by the original writers 'with their darke interpretation, and glosses', not just to make a show of their learning but to ensure that their rich benefactors continued to enjoy their privileged access to the land. Whereas the Bible spoke of the Earth and its fruits having been created for all to enjoy in equal measure, the 'beneficed clergy', by obscuring the straightforward meaning of the text, 'deceive the simple, and makes a prey of the poore, and cosens them of the Earth, and of the tenth of their labors'.<sup>6</sup>

The mid-seventeenth century, then, was a period when the Bible became a site of class struggle, with the counterparts of its original lowly authors vying with the learned and scholarly for ownership and control of a text. At stake was the question whether Scripture sanctified the existing system of land ownership and government

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<sup>3</sup> William Walwyn, *The Power of Love* (1643); cited in Hill, *The English Bible*, 200.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Brian Manning, 'The Levellers and Religion' in J F McGregor and B Reay, eds, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 65-6.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Manning, 'The Levellers and Religion', 84.

<sup>6</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* in CW, II, 200.

or advocated measures to bring in a different order. All the while biblical exposition remained in the hands of the university-educated clergy – a situation which successive monarchs and bishops of the Anglican Church sought to preserve – a degree of consistency regarding its ‘meaning’ could be maintained and heretical opinions, at least to some extent,<sup>7</sup> kept in check. As Charles himself recognised, ‘people are governed by the pulpit more than the sword in times of peace’.<sup>8</sup> Now, with the breakdown of censorship and abolition of the church courts in the early 1640s, the heretical and subversive ideas which two centuries of popular Bible-reading had generated could be discussed and preached more freely. Passages relating to God having ‘brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly’ (Luke 1.52) might well now be used by unlettered preachers to encourage a re-enactment of such revolutionary upheavals, to maintain the *status quo* it was vital to try to ensure that the Bible was not read and discussed other than in the pulpit. Winstanley would not have been alone, in the months leading up to Charles’ execution, in understanding that God’s promise in Haggai 2.7 to ‘shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come’ to have contemporary relevance. God, Winstanley wrote,

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the practice of separating from the Established Church may have begun as far back as the 1530s, and Dutch Anabaptists were known to be meeting in England in the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary. The ideas which Diggers, Ranters and others promulgated openly in the 1640s and 1650s were not unknown to previous generations of English people, as we know from accounts of John Ball, Lollards, the Family of Love and others. See my *Radical Religion in Cromwell’s England: A Concise History From the English Civil War to the End of the Commonwealth*, (London: I B Tauris, 2011) for a fuller discussion of this.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Pauline Gregg, *King Charles I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 409. Thomas More in Henry VIII’s reign and Archbishop Whitgift in Elizabeth’s had also warned of the consequences of popular interpretation of Scripture.

will yet shake, Kings, Parliaments, Armies, Counties, Kingdomes, Universities, humane learnings, studies, yea, shake rich men and poore men, and throwes down every thing that stands in his way opposing him in his work.<sup>9</sup>

As Christopher Hill observes, the political upheaval of the 1640s and its consequences ‘shattered the universal acceptance of the Bible as an infallible text whose pronouncements were to be followed implicitly;<sup>10</sup> and this was a period, as Nigel Smith suggests, when ‘the Bible was stretched to uses and interpretations with a density which had not occurred before in England.’<sup>11</sup> The Geneva Bible, first published in 1560 but printed as late as 1644, spelt out for its readers the subversive implications of various texts in its marginal notes, although the Authorised Version was plain enough when it spoke of the fate of corrupt rulers or the eventual triumph of the saints. And it was not only the lower orders who found insurrectionary impulses supported in Scripture: among the passages it is known that Oliver Cromwell studied in the months leading up to the trial of Charles was the account in Judges chapters 6-8 of Gideon, a farmer called by God to shake up and lead the armies of Israel to overcome their foes and execute their kings.<sup>12</sup>

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During the traumatic years of civil war, the Bible was the go-to source for wisdom concerning the drift of events. Widely available to laity and clergy alike in the

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<sup>9</sup> Winstanley, *The Breaking of the Day of God* (1648) in CW, I, 180.

<sup>10</sup> Hill, *The English Bible*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Nigel Smith, *Literature & Revolution in England, 1640-1660* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994) 117.

<sup>12</sup> John Morrill, *Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 44-5.

vernacular, it shaped thinking and manners in all areas of life. People turned to Scripture to validate positions and settle arguments, citing chapter and verse to convince an opponent or persuade a sceptic. Even political theorists of the period usually thought of as 'secular', like Thomas Hobbes and James Harrington, cited Scripture frequently. 'Biblical reference helped authors of every sort of treatise to communicate with their readers to an extent inconceivable to most modern readers', writes Elizabeth Tuttle.<sup>13</sup> In fact, so widespread was knowledge of the Bible that a preacher or writer need only refer to the name of a character or episode to make their point – a distinct advantage when it might be thought wise not to make one's point too explicitly! Those who came together to promote particular causes or challenge the established order, such as Levellers, Diggers and Ranters, used biblical verses extensively to support their claims; their core ideas, which included (in the case of the Levellers) extending the franchise and enshrining freedom of religion, and (for Diggers) encouraging the landless to work together communally on the common land in order to make the earth once more a 'common treasury', drew heavily for support on verses from Genesis through to Revelation. The writings of Levellers, Diggers and Ranters proved the case for those keen to outlaw discussion of the Bible in homes and taverns.

The Bible, Christopher Hill has written, 'was everywhere in the lives of men, women and children' in the 1640s.<sup>14</sup> It was not simply a book to be read or listened to, its messages continually confronted people, not only in the church services they were required to attend but on the walls of homes and taverns and in the words of ballads

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1993) 38.

and plays. By the middle of the seventeenth century, asserts Hill, English men and women had become so used to an 'emphasis on the sovereignty of the Scriptures as the unique source of divine wisdom on all subjects' that, when caught in the midst of unprecedented political and constitutional upheaval, and forced to 'improvise' in the absence of ideological treatises such as were available to people in 'revolutionary' situations in later centuries, '[t]he Bible in English was the book to which they naturally turned for guidance. It was God's Word, whose authority no one could reject.'<sup>15</sup>

If the Bible was both the principal source of political ideas and provided the grammar for their articulation, it also supplied the key to the bigger purpose toward which a political project might be directed. As Katz has argued, men and women in the mid-seventeenth century believed themselves to be caught up in a sophisticated divine plan which was more or less complete, and thus they took it for granted

that God was continuously intervening in worldly affairs, sowing small clues directing mankind's attention to His pleasure. Apart from conspicuous and meaningful signs and 'providences', the largest single collection of clues was to be found in God's last words, His legacy to mankind – the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly Cromwell was not alone in concluding, as he surveyed events in the months immediately before the trial and execution of the king, that 'these things that have lately come to pass have been the wonderful works of God, breaking the rod of the oppressor as in the day of Midian' (a reference to Isaiah 9.4). The Lord,

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<sup>15</sup> Hill, *The English Bible*, 38-9; 18; 8.

<sup>16</sup> Katz, *God's Last Words*, 52.

Cromwell affirmed, 'will yet save His people and confound His enemies as in that day'.<sup>17</sup>

Belief that God was bringing history to its end was widespread, with two biblical books in particular, Daniel in the Old Testament and the Revelation of John in the New, being understood to describe figuratively the denouement of history. Both were read with particular interest amid the tumult of the 1640s and 1650s, with many who fought for Parliament being encouraged to see the war against the king in apocalyptic terms, the struggle between Christ and Antichrist. John Milton reflected a widely-held view when he spoke of Christ as 'the eternal and shortly-expected King' who would 'open the clouds to judge the several kingdoms of this world'.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps only the Fifth Monarchists actually built a political movement around an expectation that the thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth, the millennium, was imminent (the execution of Charles, with his Romish tendencies, signalling that the last of the four kingdoms mentioned in the book of Daniel had been overthrown), but a sense that Christ would presently come to reign through, with or even within his saints, informed most of the sects and movements in the years of the Civil War and Interregnum. For many the Bible proved an indispensable guide both to the *meaning* of contemporary events and the way in which they would unfold.

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Winstanley was clear that the Scriptures were an aid to understanding the present since they 'do but declare the sending downe of the spirit and how he shall rule in

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<sup>17</sup> Letter to Sir Thomas Fairfax dated 28 June 1648; cited in Morrill, *Oliver Cromwell*, 44.

<sup>18</sup> John Milton, *Complete Prose Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) I, 616.

the earth in the latter dayes'.<sup>19</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, Winstanley was concerned less to ascertain the original 'intention' of the biblical writers, or the precise meaning of the words, than how the text can become a catalyst for discerning the divine way in the present. He was also clear that, if the divine will is to be observed on the pages of Scripture, it was necessary for the reader to experience, as did the original writers themselves, the presence of Christ within. Winstanley was deeply distrustful of scholars who attempted to create a distance between text and reader, stressing, as Christopher Rowland has written, 'the centrality of "experimental knowledge" in contrast to the abstract reflection on the Bible and the secondary application of it.'<sup>20</sup> The Scriptures 'were writ not from imagination of flesh, but from pure experience', Winstanley affirms, and

we are taught thereby to waite upon the Father with a meek and obedient spirit, till he teach us, and feed us with sincere milk, as he taught them, that wrote these Scriptures.<sup>21</sup>

To have an obedient spirit was to be prepared to act in accordance with the divine will: the very work of digging the commons, Winstanley tells us in the Diggers' first manifesto, was undertaken in obedience to the Spirit's instruction 'Work together, Eat Bread together, Declare this all abroad'.<sup>22</sup> Action was central to Winstanley's

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<sup>19</sup> Winstanley, *Truth lifting up his head above scandals* (1648) in CW, I, 435.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) xx

<sup>21</sup> Winstanley, *Truth lifting up his head* in CW, I, 435.

<sup>22</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers of England* (1649) in CW, II, 14.



whole understanding of Scripture: as he put it a few months after the digging commenced, ‘action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing.’<sup>23</sup>

Ordinary people should therefore not rely upon so-called ‘learned’ divines to teach them, for it is the Spirit who will lead them into all truth. When you have ‘a teacher within your selves (which is the Spirit)... you shall not need to run after men for instruction’, Winstanley argued in one of his pre-Digging tracts.<sup>24</sup> Like Ranters, Winstanley held that book-learning was as nothing compared to what one could receive by experience or revelation, and he considered the historical accounts in the Bible no substitute for the indwelling of the living ‘word’ within. The Bible was written by ordinary people recounting their experiences, and readers should know God and Christ ‘experimentally’ themselves.

Winstanley’s latest editors, Tom Corns, Ann Hughes and David Loewenstein, describe their subject as ‘a self-proclaimed prophet inspired by the spirit within and moved “by Vision, Voyce and Revelation”’, a writer who ‘makes idiosyncratic use of the Bible and its potent myths throughout his works’.<sup>25</sup> Winstanley is certainly a master of allegory (perhaps second only to his contemporary, John Bunyan), seeing the great dramas of Scripture – the Garden of Eden and its aftermath, the Exodus from Egypt, the visions of Daniel and Revelation – in original and inspiring ways. Scripture, for Winstanley, becomes a tool for discerning both the ‘external’ struggle, between the forces of oppression seeking to uphold the *status quo* and those in bondage to the system, and the (inextricably linked) struggle within the individual as

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<sup>23</sup> Winstanley, *A Watch-Word to the City of London, and the Armie* (1649) in CW, II, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradise* (1648) in CW, I, 314.

<sup>25</sup> Corns, Hughes and Loewenstein, ‘Introduction’ in CW, I, 60.

he or she seeks to overcome their consciousness of sin (which Winstanley called 'Imagination' and which was deliberately generated by the clergy's teaching).

Winstanley encouraged his readers to overcome this by gaining an awareness that they have the creator indwelling them and are a perfect creature of themselves, able to judge all things by their own experience.

Winstanley was critical of approaches to the Bible which do not get beyond reading it as an account of past history, since for him the biblical narrative continues to be lived out in the present as the rich and the powerful struggle to subjugate the poor and the weak: Cain is still murdering Abel, Esau still seeking Jacob's birthright, Ishmael still at odds with Isaac. For Winstanley and his short-lived Digger movement, which had an active commitment to seeing that *all*, not just the wealthy and powerful, could have access to the land, identification with the 'younger brother' was a powerful motivating factor. Winstanley (like Levellers and others) used the Exodus narrative powerfully, his final tract, addressed to Cromwell, noting how the general was head of a people 'who have cast out an Oppressing *Pharaoh*'.<sup>26</sup>

Even more frequently, Winstanley invoked 'Adam' who, though he may have 'lived upon earth many thousand years ago', was also to be seen 'every day before our eyes walking up and down the street' in the form of those who live 'upon the objects of the creation, and not in and upon the spirit that made the creation'.<sup>27</sup> Adam was symbolic of that hypocrisy, subtlety, 'lying imagination' and self-love that leads to 'all

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<sup>26</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652) in CW, II, 279. See John Coffey, 'England's Exodus: The Civil War as War of Liberation', paper given at conference 'The Last of the Wars of Religion: A Salute to John Morrill', University of Hull, 12 July 2008, and idem., *Exodus and Liberation: Deliverance Politics from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) chapter 1, for a discussion of the use of the Exodus motif during the civil war period and beyond.

<sup>27</sup> Winstanley, *Truth lifting up his head* in CW, I, 427.

unrighteous outward acting' in humanity: 'he sits down in the chair of Magistracy, in some above others', giving rise to tyranny.<sup>28</sup> He was 'the first power that appears to act and rule in every man' and, like Esau, gets the birthright which 'by the Law of equity was more properly Jacob's'. But the point for Winstanley was that, just as Jacob in the end prevails, so the 'Adam' that dwells in each person will be overcome by the rising of the second Adam, 'the power of Christ', 'the Son bringing honour and peace'; and 'this second man is the spirituall man, that judges all things according to the law of equity and reason.'<sup>29</sup>

Other biblical figures and images epitomize the present human condition: Judas represents the 'power of covetousness'; Ahab's eagerness to acquire Naboth's vineyard symbolizes landlords desiring possession of the common land; the Garden of Eden is the human spirit or heart.<sup>30</sup> Winstanley's allegorizing imagination', writes John R. Knott,

transmuted historical figures – Cain, Jacob and Esau, Abraham – into actors in a cosmic struggle between the forces of the flesh and those of the Spirit, between covetousness and love, that he saw raging in the world and in the soul of man.<sup>31</sup>

Other writings with which Winstanley may or may not have been associated, also adopted this approach, the tract *More Light Shining in Buckingham-shire* deducing

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<sup>28</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes* in CW, I, 481.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 499-502.

<sup>30</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* in CW, II, 205 (cf. I, 538); *idem*, *An Appeale to the House of Commons* (1649) in CW, II, 72; *idem*, *Fire in the Bush* in CW, II, 172.

<sup>31</sup> John R. Knott, *The Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Responses to the Bible* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 88.

from the character of Nimrod that ‘the whole Scriptures declare Kings to be no better than Tyrants and Usurpers’,<sup>32</sup> and the Iver Diggers’ 1650 ‘broadside’ asserting that ‘Cain is still alive in all great Landlords’.<sup>33</sup> It is almost as if, as David Loewenstein has argued, ‘from Winstanley’s visionary perspective, all of biblical history can be discerned within the self.’<sup>34</sup> As Winstanley himself put it, ‘Whether there was any such outward things or no, it matters not much, if thou seest all within, this will be thy life.’<sup>35</sup>

Winstanley’s writings are saturated with biblical references, all painstakingly reproduced in full by Corns, Hughes and Loewenstein in the endnotes to their Oxford University Press collection. It was vital for Winstanley that the Diggers’ central task of bringing the earth once more into common ownership be shown to be thoroughly grounded in Scripture – not least because his opponents once challenged him on that very point<sup>36</sup> – hence his challenge to those who preached but did not live the gospel to ‘search the Scriptures, you that stand up to be Teachers, that say I deny the Scriptures, and let them judge me, whether I deny them or no’.<sup>37</sup> On one occasion in *A Declaration to the Powers of England* (more commonly known as *The*

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<sup>32</sup> *More Light Shining in Buckingham-shire* (1649) in George H. Sabine, ed, *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1941) 629.

<sup>33</sup> *A Declaration of the grounds and reasons* (1650) in Andrew Hopton, ed, *Digger Tracts 1649-50* (London: Aporia Press, 1989) 31.

<sup>34</sup> David Loewenstein, ‘Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers’ in Laura Lunger Knoppers, ed, *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 338.

<sup>35</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* in CW, II, 188.

<sup>36</sup> Winstanley mentions a challenge by the local lord of the manor, Parson John Platt, in the preface to *An Humble Request* (1650) in CW, II, 256; cf John Gurney, *Gerrard Winstanley: The Digger’s Life and Legacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2013) 82.

<sup>37</sup> Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousnes* (1649) in CW, II, 487.

*True Levellers Standard Advanced*) he backed up this claim about the Diggers' work being scriptural by citing no fewer than sixteen biblical passages drawn from fourteen different books (thirteen from the Old Testament and one from the New).<sup>38</sup> Earlier in this tract he showed his project to be rooted in the Creation narrative in Genesis, asserting that

In the beginning of time, the great Creator Reason, made the earth to be a common Treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes, and Man, the Lord that was to govern this Creation... but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another.<sup>39</sup>

Expanding upon this in *The Fire in the Bush*, Winstanley argued that, originally when 'the whole Earth was common to all without exception', the stronger helped the weaker by working harder.<sup>40</sup> What ended this idyllic early arrangement was 'the Fall', but, taking a characteristically unorthodox approach to the biblical texts, Winstanley sees the original desire by the strong to fence off portions of the land for themselves, and deny others access to it, not as a *consequence* of Adam's sin but the first step of the Fall – to be followed by the second, the 'outward action', in which the desire becomes actualized.<sup>41</sup>

It was Winstanley's singular interpretation of the Fall which compelled him to believe that common ownership of the earth was again possible. Greed, envy and selfishness were not hard-wired in human beings as a consequence of the Fall,

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<sup>38</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers of England* in CW, II, 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* in CW, II, 215.

<sup>41</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* in CW, II, 215-6.

rather human nature was largely shaped by the prevailing social conditions – the ‘inward bondages of the minde are all occasioned by the outward bondage, that one sort of people lay upon another’, as he puts it in his last tract,<sup>42</sup> Hence, once private property was abolished, and God – or ‘Reason’, the term Winstanley preferred for God – reigned once more in the human heart, so the prelapsarian community might again be realizable.

Woven into this vision is the biblical promise of the Second Coming of Christ, the overpowering of the ‘first Adam’ by the second. For Winstanley, though, Christ would not appear in a sudden or dramatic way ‘in the clouds’, or even as an individual person at all, but ‘rise up’ in men and women, reawakening them to the rule of Reason within and leading them to embrace the principle of community lost since the Fall. Thus Winstanley can equate the Second Coming with the gradual transformation of humanity – and, in another unorthodox twist, with Christ’s resurrection. To expect Christ to ‘come in one single person’ is to ‘mistake the resurrection of Christ... you must see, feel and know from himself his own resurrection within you.’ Christ ‘is now rising and spreading himself in these his sons and daughters, and so rising from one to many persons, till he enlighten the whole creation...’<sup>43</sup>

Like many in his day, Winstanley looked to the apocalyptic visions in Daniel and Revelation to shed light upon the power struggle unfolding in his own day. Thus the four beasts which Daniel saw rise out of the sea were those forces which, for Winstanley, were united in oppressing the poor and landless: ‘Kingly power’, ‘selfish

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<sup>42</sup> Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom* in CW, II, 296.

<sup>43</sup> Winstanley, *The Saints Paradise* in CW, I, 356.

Lawes', 'the thieving Art of buying and selling, the Earth with her fruits to one another', 'the Imaginary Clergy-Power'. However, while these may appear to flourish for a time, oppressing and burdening the creation, they will 'run into the Sea againe, and be swallowed up in those waters; that is, into Mankinde, who shall be abundantly inlightned' at the glorious appearance of Christ.<sup>44</sup>

Again like many of his contemporaries, Winstanley found biblical allusions to the figurative period '42 months', '1260 days' and 'a time, times and, dividing of time' (which appear in both Daniel and Revelation and which were held to signify three and a half years) helpful in confirming his understanding that he was living in the last days. This period of time, that during which the Beast will be allowed to exercise power before the reign of Christ (Rev. 13.5), appears in a number of Winstanley's writings, though unlike many other millenarians of his day he is never to be found offering a precise date or time by when he imagines the millennium will be instituted. But of the coming 'common treasury' of Earth, he was in no doubt:

all the Prophetes, Visions, and Revelations of Scriptures, of Prophets, and Apostles, concerning the calling of the Jews, the Restauration of Israel, and making of that people, the Inheritors of the whole earth, doth all seat themselves in this work of making the Earth a Common Treasury.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Winstanley, *Fire in the Bush* in CW, II, 190-2.

<sup>45</sup> Winstanley, *A Declaration to the Powers of England* in CW, II, 14. In his very first tract, *The Myserie of God* (1648), Winstanley links his conception of the millennium to a 'dispensationalist' view in which history is divided into seven stages. However, his interest in this particular schema appears to have waned thereafter.

While biblical language features often in Leveller writings, their propensity to argue the case for political rights from natural law has led often to suggestions that its inclusion was largely rhetorical. Thus H N Brailsford, author of a seminal history of the movement, feels able to offer what he calls a summary of the ‘whole philosophy of liberal democracy’ promulgated by another Leveller leader, John Lilburne, in the form of a substantial extract from his *The Free Man’s Freedom Vindicated* (1646), ‘stripped of ... all its biblical quotations’.<sup>46</sup> Yet Leveller spokespeople like Lilburne and Richard Overton suggest in their writings that they had much more than a passing interest in religion, and appear to see no necessary contradiction in arguing for the essential rationality of human beings and the implanting of that rationality in them by God. As Overton argued in his *An Appeale From the degenerate Representative Body* (1647) ‘God is not a God of irrationality... Therefore all his communications are reasonable and just, and what is so, is of God’; and William Bray thought a person could claim to have been treated unjustly if he or she were handled ‘contrary to law, reason, or Christianity’, that any law made ‘contrary to Law and Scripture’ and to ‘the Laws of God, or Nature’ was a mere nullity, ‘unjust in it self, and voyd’.<sup>47</sup>

Colin Mason has suggested that, influenced by their reading of Luther, Levellers developed a concept of individual rights and freedom rooted in the doctrine that Christ died to redeem humanity. Unlike Calvinists, who held to some notion of rule by an ‘elect’, Levellers believed in the potential of all people to become believers, such

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<sup>46</sup> H N Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1976) 119

<sup>47</sup> William Bray, *Innocency and the blood of the slain Souldiers* (1649) 9; cited in Colin Mason, ‘Political Theology and the Levellers: A discussion of the theological sources of the political thought of the Levellers and of some implications for modern understandings of political liberalism’, University of Durham PhD thesis, 2009, 185.



that ‘no one has the right to rule and no one is to be treated as irredeemably “lost” and unfree’. All are made free in Christ because Christ died for all, and this freedom in Christ becomes the basis of *political* freedom.<sup>48</sup> Equality under the law was rooted for Levellers in our equality in Christ: as the Leveller women’s petition of 1649 puts it, ‘we are assured of our creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ equal unto men, as also of a proportionate share in the freedoms of this Commonwealth.’<sup>49</sup> As Brian Manning points out, Levellers did not segregate the sphere of nature from the sphere of religion but thought ‘natural law embraced much of the moral law of the Bible.’<sup>50</sup>

Christ’s death also freed us from the claims of the Old Testament, in particular the demands of the Law, Levellers argued. For Walwyn, all were ‘justified freely by [God’s] grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ’,<sup>51</sup> a grace that freed us from the old Law to follow Christ’s new commandment to love. This approach to the Old Testament also informed Leveller thinking on toleration. The traditional view, held by those who defended the concept of a national church, was that practices found in the Old Testament were forerunners or ‘shadows’ of practices followed by the church – so circumcision prefigured baptism, and the state of Israel, the church. Thus as Israel had been governed by kings charged with maintaining holy living by compulsion, so the church had a similar task to ensure that true religion was adhered

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<sup>48</sup> Mason, ‘Political Theology and the Levellers’, 116.

<sup>49</sup> *A Petition of Women* (1649) in A S P Woodhouse, ed, *Puritanism and Liberty* (London: J M Dent, 1938) 367-9.

<sup>50</sup> Manning, ‘The Levellers and Religion’, 80.

<sup>51</sup> Walwyn, *The Power of Love* (1643) in Jack McMichael and Barbara Taft, eds, *The Writings of William Walwyn* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 89-90; cited in Mason, ‘Political Theology and the Levellers’, 109.

to in the present age. To Levellers, however, many of whom were or had close links to Baptists, this link could not be maintained since the church was essentially a voluntary assembly sustained by faith; and in arguing against compulsion by the state in matters of belief and religious practice Levellers even went so far as to promote religious toleration for Jews, Muslims and people accused of atheism and idolatry. This was a radically consistent position when celebrating the Catholic Mass was a criminal offence.

At Putney, where Levellers debated their case with Cromwell, Ireton and other army leaders in 1647, Thomas Collier drew an argument for the civil powers having no power over religious matters from the New Testament account of the woman taken in adultery. In this narrative Christ, by suggesting that only those of the woman's accusers who are 'without sin' should stone her death, appears to give priority to a new ethic over the law of Moses.<sup>52</sup> The Leveller leader John Wildman argued quite directly at Putney that nothing can be found in the word of God regarding 'what is fitt to bee done in civill matters'.<sup>53</sup> It was but a short step to argue that church and state should have different spheres of competence and that it was not the duty of the magistrate to compel or restrict in matters of religion.

Walwyn thought Scripture contained much of value, insights that the Apostles have left us regarding the mind and will of God. He entitled a tract denying a charge of atheism *A still and soft voice from the Scriptures, witnessing them to be the word of God*, and claimed that 'All those passages therein that declare the nature of God, viz. his grace and goodness to men, I believe are the word of God' – though 'the

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<sup>52</sup> C H Firth, ed, *The Clarke Papers* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1992), II, 126.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* I, 384.

Scripture is plainly and directly contradictory to itself.<sup>54</sup> Overton also used biblical texts to testify to his faith: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' (Job 19.25), 'I know my life is hid in Christ' (Col. 3.3). But primarily Levellers thought Scripture showed Christianity to be *practical*: the Bible 'plainly set forth' the works which were 'most pleasing to God', and these included 'Feeding the hungry, Cloathing the naked, visiting and comforting of the sicke', tending to the fatherless, widows and the aged, 'delivering of Prisoners' and 'supporting of poore families'.<sup>55</sup> In one of his many ripostes to his harshest critic, *A Whisper in the eare of Mr Thomas Edwards, Minister* (1646), Walwyn emphasizes the practical nature of Scripture: 'I carry with me in all places a touch-stone that tryeth all things', Walwyn wrote, 'and labours to hold nothing but what upon plain grounds appeareth good and useful.'<sup>56</sup>

As Manning has argued, 'the principle which linked the religious beliefs of the Levellers to political action was the "golden rule"',<sup>57</sup> which is found in a number of sources including Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matt. 7.12). Lilburne affirmed that God had engraved this rule upon his heart as a younger man, but the point for the Levellers was that it did not apply to believers only but was the basic principle that made civil society possible.<sup>58</sup> As John Wildman puts it in his *Truths triumph* (1648), it is the command of God 'that every man should seek the good of his neighbour.'<sup>59</sup> Two tracts often

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<sup>54</sup> Cited in Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, 69-70.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Manning, 'The Levellers and Religion', 72-3.

<sup>56</sup> William Walwyn, *A Whisper in the eare of Mr Thomas Edwards, Minister* (1646).

<sup>57</sup> Manning, 'The Levellers and Religion', 71.

<sup>58</sup> Manning, 'The Levellers and Religion', 72.

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Manning, 'The Levellers and Religion', 70.

associated with the Levellers, *Light Shining in Buckingham-shire* (1648) and *More Light Shining in Buckingham-shire* (1649), both highlight the importance of ‘that golden rule or law, which we call equitie’ and ‘that excellent Rule of right Reason’.<sup>60</sup>

Despite their nomenclature – which they did not choose themselves – Levellers did not share the Diggers’ enthusiasm to see the land commonly owned; indeed, in their third ‘Agreement of the Free People of England’ (1649) they explicitly state that no representative of the people should have any power to ‘level mens Estates, destroy Propriety, or make all things Common’ (Article 30).<sup>61</sup> Walwyn recognizes that the New Testament records the first Christians selling their possessions, distributing the proceeds and having ‘all things in common’ (Acts 2.44-5) but argues that this was a voluntary act rather than a duty or ‘the Injunction of any Constitution’, was short-lived, and occurred ‘inn but two or three places’.<sup>62</sup>

Mason estimates that, alongside Magna Carta and Coke’s *Institutes of the Laws of England*, the Bible is the most quoted source in Levellers writings.<sup>63</sup> If the Levellers were – as they acknowledge themselves in their writings – frequently attacked as atheists and deniers of Scripture, their frequent citation of biblical texts at least places the burden of proof with their detractors – as does Walwyn’s assertion that

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<sup>60</sup> Sabine, *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, 611, 627.

<sup>61</sup> A L Morton, ed, *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writings* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) 276.

<sup>62</sup> Walwyn, *A Manifestation* (1649) in McMichael and Taft, *The Writings of William Walwyn*, 338; cited in Mason, ‘Political Theology and the Levellers’, 226-7.

<sup>63</sup> Mason, ‘Political Theology and the Levellers’, 8, 204.

'we have no Preacher of the Gospel but the Scriptures ... the infallible word of God.'<sup>64</sup>

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Ranters shared with Diggers and Levellers a disdain for the so-called wisdom of the formally-educated priesthood:

better scholars they, that have their lessons without book, and can read God (not by rote) but plainly and perfectly ... within book, and without book, and as well without book, as within book...'

wrote the most notorious of the Ranters, Abiezer Coope, early in 1649.<sup>65</sup> Like Winstanley, Coppe stressed the importance of an experience of God in order to understand God's communication, even if he was concerned primarily with God's presence within *himself* than within people in general. Coppe explicitly claims authority for interpreting and preaching the Word of God, asserting in various places 'the word of the Lord came expressly to me' and employing the expression 'thus saith the Lord' with notable frequency. The sub-title of his major tract *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649) reads 'A Word from the Lord to all the Great Ones of the Earth...' and he is not averse to using terms such as 'excellent majesty' and 'almightiness' self-descriptively.<sup>66</sup> Richard Coppin, whose 1649 treatise *Divine Teachings* boasted a

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<sup>64</sup> Walwyn, *The Vanitie of the Present Churches* (1648/9) in William Haller and Godfrey Davies, eds, *The Leveller Tracts, 1647-1653* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 261; cited in Mason, 'The Political Theology of the Levellers', 106.

<sup>65</sup> Abiezer Coppe *Some Sweet Sips of Some Spirituall Wine* (1649); cited in Christopher Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010) 173.

<sup>66</sup> Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649) in Andrew Hopton, ed, *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings* (London: Aporia Press, 1987) 15-16.

preface by Coppe, also argued that Scripture was secondary to that which could be learned from those indwelt by Christ. 'God now comes forth from the great and learned of the world, and exalts himself in the poor and ignorant', Coppin writes.<sup>67</sup>

As Coppe's terminology suggests, he is less concerned than either Winstanley or the chief Leveller writers with seeking biblical support or validation for his claims. While Winstanley went to great lengths to demonstrate how his project of digging the commons met fulfilled various injunctions in Scripture, Coppe, as Chris Rowland has written, 'being indwelt by God, did not need to refer back to any divine sanction in the Bible. Coppe's theological treatise *is* the divine word.'<sup>68</sup>

'Ranter language', Smith says in his introduction to a collection of their writings, 'comes almost entirely from the Bible.'<sup>69</sup> Certainly Coppe's writings are saturated with biblical allusions, but the purpose of these is to demonstrate how the Bible is 're-worked' in the writer's own spiritual experience. In a detailed exegesis of the Preface to *A Fiery Flying Roll*, Ariel Hessayon powerfully shows how each of the experiences described is echoed in Scripture itself. As Hessayon writes, Coppe in this chapter describes how

he lay 'trembling, sweating, and smoaking (for the space of half an houre' [Rev 8.1] before the immanent presence of the Lord. At length Coppe entreated the Lord: 'what wilt thou do with me; my most excellent majesty [Dan. 4.36] and eternall glory (in me) [cf. II Tim. 2.10] answered & sayd, Fear

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<sup>67</sup> Cited in Thomas N Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue: English Political Literature 1640-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 187.

<sup>68</sup> Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 174.

<sup>69</sup> Nigel Smith, *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Junction Books, 1983) 23.

not, I will take thee up into mine everlasting Kingdom [Psalm 145.13]. But thou shalt (first) drink a bitter cup, a bitter cup, a bitter cup; whereupon (being filled with exceeding amazement) I was throwne into the belly of hell' (Jonah 2.2).<sup>70</sup>

As Rowland observes of Coppe's writing, while

there is hardly a line which does not have some biblical allusion ... the biblical words have been woven into something new, a new word of God in which the received words mutate in a kaleidoscopic way, just as the prophetic words are digested and reappear in different combinations in the Book of Revelation.<sup>71</sup>

Ranters were antinomian, though to describe them as such is to tell only half the truth. Among their contemporaries to whom the term was sometimes (critically) applied (such as Particular Baptists), most held that the Mosaic law was no longer binding upon men and women because, if a person were among those 'elected' by God for salvation, no sin they might commit could undermine that transaction; and furthermore, being among 'the elect' did not free a person from obedience to the law, rather it impelled them to observe it more keenly. Ranters, however, argued that the law was redundant, because every man and woman had God dwelling within them and therefore they need no longer consider any actions they committed 'sinful'. If God 'indwelt' a person, Ranters claimed, then it was impossible for him or her to commit sin; sin was an entirely imaginary and humanly-created concept.

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<sup>70</sup> Ariel Hessayon, 'The Making of Abiezer Coppe', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 62:1, January 2011, 54. For a discussion of the rabbinic reading practice 'midrash' as a clue to understanding Coppe's biblical allusions see Noam Flinker, 'The Poetics of Biblical Prophecy: Abiezer Coppe's Late Converted Midrash' in Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan, eds, *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) 113-27.

<sup>71</sup> Rowland, *Blake and the Bible*, 174.

Lawrence Clarkson claimed to find this teaching in Scripture, noting in his autobiography *The Lost sheep found* (1660) how he pleaded the words of Paul in Romans 14:14,

*That I know, and am perswaded by the Lord Jesus, that there was nothing unclean, but as man esteemed it, unfolding that was intended all acts, as well as meats and drinks, and therefore till you can lie with all women as one woman, and not judge it sin, you can do nothing but sin; now in Scripture I found a perfection spoken of, so that I understood no man could attain perfection but this way...'*<sup>72</sup>

Clarkson cited another of St Paul's aphorisms, 'To the pure all things are pure' (Titus 1.15) in defence of his position, arguing that

if Reason were admitted, and thereby Scripture interpreted, then they should observe in that Act they call Honesty, to be Adultry, and that Act so called Adultry, to have as much honesty as the other, for with God they are but one, and that one Act holy, just, and good as God.<sup>73</sup>

'What act so-ever is done by thee in light and love', Clarkson concluded,

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<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Clarkson, *A Lost sheep found* (1660) in Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin, 1970) 310.

<sup>73</sup> Lawrence Clarkson, *A Single Eye All Light, no Darkness* (1650) in Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 312.



is light and lovely, though it be that act called adultery ... No matter what Scripture, saints or churches say, if that within thee do not condemn thee, thou shalt not be condemned.<sup>74</sup>

Clarkson appears to have lived consistently with his beliefs, finding no shortage of women anxious for his services; and contemporary reports by their many detractors positively ooze with tales of the Ranters' sexual immorality – to the extent, as Hill wryly notes, that the counter-attack was almost as threatening to orthodoxy as anything the Ranters themselves wrote!<sup>75</sup> Operating on the premise, articulated by Clarkson, 'till acted that so called Sin, thou art not delivered from the power of sin',<sup>76</sup> Ranters showed no restraint in indulging whatever their particular calling, often to the horror of those observing.

Ranters took to extremes, not only their antinomianism, but their licence to interpret the Bible as they liked. Abiezer Coppe was adept at using strange or unwholesome stories in Scripture to suit his purpose, speaking approvingly of Hosea 'who went into a whore',<sup>77</sup> and expressing a preference for seeing 'the spirit of Nehemiah (in any form of man, or woman)... making others fall a swearing' to hearing a zealous minister 'pray, preach or exercise.'<sup>78</sup> Coppe's take on Christ's promise to come as a 'thief in the night' – when he will command the rich to give his money to the poor and

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<sup>74</sup> Lawrence Clarkson, *A Single Eye*; cited in Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 215.

<sup>75</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Nation of Change and Novelty: Radical politics, religion and literature in seventeenth-century England* (London: Routledge, 1990) 184.

<sup>76</sup> Clarkson, *A Single Eye*, in Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 315.

<sup>77</sup> Coppe, *A Second Fiery Flying Roule* in Hopton, ed, *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings*, 42.

<sup>78</sup> Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll* in Hopton, ed, *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings*, 27.

the outcast – is both highly creative and an arguably more striking example than even Winstanley can offer of using Scripture to challenge the legitimacy of the socio-economic order.<sup>79</sup> Coppe used passages like Mary's Magnificat, the account of the Jerusalem church holding all things in common in Acts, and James' fulminations against the rich, to similar effect. Both Coppe and Clarkson based their highly libertarian sexual ethic on passages in the Bible as well as on direct revelations from on high, Clarkson admitting in *The Lost sheep found* that passages from the Song of Solomon were used as a ritual invocation at Ranter orgies.<sup>80</sup> In the highly-charged atmosphere of the early 1650s it is little surprise that Parliament sought to rein in Ranterish activities and suppress their writings.

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Much ink has been spilt debating the significance of biblical references in the writings of the Levellers, Diggers and others. For several decades following the Second World War there was a tendency among scholars of the seventeenth-century to see Winstanley and other 'radicals' as essentially 'secular' and modern' in their attitude, driven only to cite Scripture by the conditions of the time. Had people such as Winstanley lived fifty years later than they did, the argument went, they would probably have expressed their ideas in the language of rational deism, saving us the trouble of having to penetrate through their religious verbiage in order to discover the 'real' ideas they wished to communicate beneath.

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<sup>79</sup> Coppe, *A Second Fiery Flying Roule* in Hopton, ed, *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings*, 37.

<sup>80</sup> Clarkson, *the lost sheep found* – check ref.

In one sense this was always a sterile debate, since, as we have observed, this was an age when the Bible was central to intellectual and moral life and provided the measure of all things: it necessarily informed people's thinking and language. The argument that political ideas could somehow be separated from the language in which they are expressed was also problematic, and the possibility that sincere religious convictions might underlie the biblical citations of the Levellers and Diggers is now more seriously entertained and the fusing of (as we define them) 'religious' and 'political' principles in their writings acknowledged without demur. Thus Winstanley's understanding of the alienation of the 'poor oppressed people of England' (as he described the Diggers) can be understood as at the same time economic, political and spiritual, and the Levellers' employment of, for example, both natural law and the creation narratives of Genesis to develop their ideas about liberty, accepted as *prima facie* representing a coherence of view and adding to the richness and depth of their writers' thought.

John Coffey has argued that, when people in the 1640s spoke of the Civil War as 'England's Exodus' and Cromwell as the 'new' Moses to lead them to the 'promised land', they saw that event, like the editors of the Geneva Bible, both as a metaphor for their experience, and themselves also, like the Israelites of old, under the delivering hand of God. 'Crucially', as Coffey argues, this was a biblical story 'that could capture the imagination and put fire in the belly.'<sup>81</sup> It was by no means alone.

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<sup>81</sup> John Coffey, 'England's Exodus'.