

Biblical Scholarship and Political Propaganda in First World War Britain

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On 4 August 1914 Great Britain declared war on Germany, and plunged into the most destructive conflict the world had yet seen. Whatever the deeper reasons may have been, the presenting issue was the German invasion of Belgium in contravention of the 1839 *Treaty of London*, which all the major European powers had signed. This “scrap of paper,” as the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg dismissed it, guaranteed Belgian neutrality and provided the British government with the legal and moral pretext it required to declare war on Germany.

It was important for all the belligerent nations to claim the moral high ground, and this defence of the Belgian underdog played well with the British public. Despite contemporary complaints about the loss of biblical literacy, a version of the so-called “cultural Bible” was alive and well in wartime Britain, ready to serve nation and empire.¹ It did not take much for the biblically-formed imagination to see “plucky little Belgium” in the role of a modern David ranged against the Goliath of German militarism. The *Daily Express* published a comment piece on August 8, 1914 with the headlines “David and Goliath – The Effect of the Belgian Blow at Germany – ‘Slain Giant’,” and the day before, a

¹ On the cultural Bible, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). On the use of the Bible more widely in the English-speaking world, see Nathan MacDonald, “The Bible in America and Britain at War,” *JBRec* 4/2 (2017): 175–180, and the individual essays in that special issue of the journal.

leader in the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* read: “The Belgian people have thrown themselves with heroic devotion against the path of the colossal assailant, and up till the present, history is repeating the story of David and Goliath.”²

Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, too, could be pressed into service, and was so by no less a person than David Lloyd George (1863–1945), Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister) in 1914, and later Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922. In a November 1914 speech, Lloyd George demanded a new version of the story:

It must be revised for Belgian use and read, “Who is thy neighbour? Thy neighbour is he who falls on thee like a thief, strips thee and wounds thee, and leaves thee half dead.” That is Germany’s version of duty to a neighbour. If Britain, after passing her word, had left that little country bleeding on the roadside, without attempting to rescue her, the infamy of Germany would have been shared by the British Empire.³

If newspaper editors and politicians were able to turn Belgium into the young David or the Good Samaritan into a model for the British Expeditionary Forces, it is no surprise that British biblical scholars could also put their professional expertise to the service of king and country. They were, like their colleagues across Europe, caught up in a “national mobilization” of civil society that paralleled the military mobilization of millions of soldiers. As John Horne puts it, “in most cases, the war was

² “David and Goliath,” *Daily Express* (August 8, 1914); “German Perfidy,” *Aberdeen Daily Journal* (August 7, 1914). On small nations and British wartime propaganda, see David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: The National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 141.

³ See David Lloyd George, *Through Terror to Triumph: Speeches and Pronouncements of the Right Hon. David Lloyd George, M. P., Since the Beginning of the War, Arranged by F. L. Stevenson* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 53–54. For discussion of the possibility that a “Good Samaritan Complex” is typical of the way that more recent British politicians have used the Bible, see James Crossley, “We Don’t Do Babylon: Erin Runions in English Political Discourse,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 11/2 (2015): 61–76 (esp. 69–74).

held to involve not only the physical and territorial integrity of the national community, but its instinctive values, ways of life, and political institutions.”⁴ Academics across all disciplines were swift to defend these national values, as were churchmen, whose pulpits gave them regular opportunities to engage with a broad cross-section of society. Biblical studies has always, for better or worse, straddled these two worlds, and in 1914–1918 biblical scholars therefore had a dual role to play: both as those who could most easily communicate with clergy and preachers, and as public intellectuals in a wider sense.⁵

For scholars to give the Bible a contemporary voice was by no means straightforward, especially since they had recently spent so much energy on explaining its meaning within its ancient context. Indeed, might not modern biblical scholarship’s resolute focus on historical questions have made it ill-suited to address present-day issues? There were conservative voices on the Allied side, at least, who felt that the critical approach to the Bible was itself compromised by Germanic rationalism and militarism.⁶ And indeed much of the output of British biblical specialists during this period is more concerned with the general rights and wrongs of Britain’s entry into the war or with the Christian response to it than with the specifics of exegesis. Special mention might be made of the propaganda tour of America made by the Scottish Old Testament schol-

⁴ John Horne, “Mobilizing for ‘Total War,’ 1914–1918,” in *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe During the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 3.

⁵ On biblical scholarship during the war, see the collection of essays in Andrew Mein, Nathan MacDonald, and Matthew A. Collins, eds., *The First World War and the Mobilization of Biblical Scholarship* (Scriptural Traces, 15; London: T&T Clark, 2019).

⁶ There does seem to have been considerable interest amongst theologians in whether modern biblical scholarship was fundamentally tainted by German militarism, although the debate does not run to the particulars of exegesis. See Charles E. Bailey, “The British Protestant Theologians and the War: Germanophobia Unleashed,” *HTR* 77/2 (1984): 195–221; Mark D. Chapman, *Theology at War and Peace: English Theology and Germany in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2017).

ar George Adam Smith in the spring and early summer of 1918, where he covered more than 20,000 miles and gave 127 presentations.⁷ By contrast with Germany, there were fewer books or pamphlets directly addressing the relationship between the Bible and the war, but there were numerous contributions to periodicals like *The Expository Times* or *The Expositor* which had an audience of clergy and preachers. There was also a lively church press, through which scholars could reach a wider audience.

It is this more “biblical” literature that I shall address in this essay. The Bible is rarely more political than when it goes to war, and the war gives us a rare opportunity to see biblical scholars making their politics explicit. My aim is not to give a complete account of the activities of British biblical scholars during the war, but to explore some of the distinctive ways in which their writing on biblical subjects was informed by their experience of the war, and especially by the themes of Allied propaganda.

IN DEFENCE OF WAR

From the outset, it was crucial to the British war effort to present the war as just. The historian Catriona Pennell summarizes the main concerns of a speech by the Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith on 6 August 1914 as “national honour, rule of law, justice, the rights of small nations, fair play, and standing up to bullies.”⁸ Such themes became prominent across a wide range of media in the early months of the

⁷ George Adam Smith, *Our Common Conscience: Addresses Delivered in America During the Great War* (New York: Doran, 1919); cf. Iain D. Campbell, *Fixing the Indemnity: The Life and Work of Sir George Adam Smith (1856–1942)* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004); MacDonald, “The Bible,” 176–177.

⁸ Catriona Pennell, “Making Sense of the War (Great Britain and Ireland),” in *1914–1918 Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2015), n. p.

war, and were quickly joined by a sense of the war as a battle against the forces of evil. Clergy and religious leaders picked up the motifs of crusade and holy war with alacrity, and Shakespeare's "God of Battles" was increasingly aligned with the biblical "Lord of Hosts."⁹ The language of biblical scholars is normally a little more temperate than this, but the theme of holy war is present in the preaching of George Adam Smith (1856–1942), perhaps the best-known British Old Testament scholar of his generation. Smith certainly put all his weight behind the war effort. In 1915 he published under the title *War and Peace* two sermons which he had preached at the University of Aberdeen in late 1914. Here he is much taken up with a recitation of the British case for war: "there never was a war more just," he claims, but he also develops the idea of the holiness of this war:

Where men battle for justice or liberty of conscience, where with deeper sacrifice they uphold the freedom and integrity of other peoples; where they strive for the deliverance of the oppressed; where they repel from civilisation the assaults whether of barbarism or to a falsely vaunted and immoral culture—there war becomes a sacrament ...¹⁰

It was relatively easy for Old Testament scholars to put their book to work, given its national and military ethos. The New Testament was more challenging, and the words of Jesus especially so. What did it mean to "love your enemies" or to "turn the other cheek" in wartime? In this context, Burnett Hillman Streeter's pamphlet *War, This War, and the Sermon on the Mount*, is something of a *tour de force*.¹¹ Streeter (1876–

⁹ Stuart Bell, *Faith in Conflict: The Impact of the Great War on the Faith of the People of Britain* (Solihull: Helion, 2017), chapter 3; also A. J. Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: A Study in Clerical Nationalism* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

¹⁰ George Adam Smith, *War and Peace: Two Sermons in King's College Chapel, University of Aberdeen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 13.

¹¹ Burnett Hillman Streeter, *War, This War, and the Sermon on the Mount* (Papers for War Time, 20; London: Oxford University Press, 1915). I am grateful to both Daniel Inman and Nathan MacDonald for drawing my attention to this particular pamphlet, as well as to the more measured reading by William Temple (see below).

1937) is best known for his work on the synoptic problem, and it is to the Gospel of Matthew that he turns for inspiration. His 1915 pamphlet begins by asking whether it is tenable to believe that “the country was and is morally bound to fight this war,” especially in the light of the apparent pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout this paper he makes a robust defence of war, which is a symptom of evil rather than its cause. Streeter presents Christianity in strikingly military, even militaristic terms, and he picks up the popular motifs of chivalry and war as a righteous crusade:

Christianity is neither a code of law nor a system of ethics; it is a summons to adventure. Christ came not as Lawgiver or Sage, not as a superior Moses or a superior Confucius, but as Captain of a forlorn hope. Christianity and Prussianism are at one and the same time closely akin and bitterly opposed. Both strive for the empire of the world and the dominance of their own *Kultur*. Both call for hardness and discipline. Both elicit heroism and sacrifice. But to the Christian world-empire means the Kingdom of God, and its *Kultur* the spirit of liberty and love. As the aims differ, so necessarily do the methods employed; but Christianity is war. Every follower of Christ must serve on some crusade. Thus the Sermon on the Mount is not to be read as a set of rules and regulations but as a battle song — the Canticle of the Knighthood of the Cross — not its letter but its spirit matters.¹²

As he gets further into the exegetical details, he argues that love of enemies is not always best served by turning the other cheek. Even if force is only rarely a better solution than persuasion, the “coarser way” is sometimes justified. The deliverance of the oppressed often demands a forceful response, and the prevention of wrongdoing is a profound Christian duty. Thus, he says, “the knight-errant riding the world in search of distressed damsels to succour is as good a Christian as the Quaker literally turning the other cheek.”¹³

Streeter acknowledges that in the past Christians exaggerated the moral value of punishment, but he condemns the “almost Manichaeian”

¹² Streeter, *Sermon*, 3.

¹³ Streeter, *Sermon*, 5.

outlook of pacifists who believe that force is inherently evil. In an imperfect world “discipline must precede liberty and the Gospel must follow the Law.”¹⁴ This particular war has been forced on the Allies by German *hubris*, and in the absence of appropriate international law, even a kind of lynch-mob justice is better than no intervention at all.

The central section of Streeter’s paper drifts away from Matthew’s text and into broad questions of law and justice. At the end, though, he returns to that most difficult text, “Love your enemies,” asking grimly, “How can I be said to love those whom I will to bayonet?” His answer is that even the bayonet can answer the demands of love, and one is better to kill innocents who serve an evil cause than to allow millions of Belgians and Frenchmen to suffer tyrannical oppression:

If the soldier is convinced that with the course for which he is fighting is involved the welfare of humanity as a whole, including, therefore, in the long run that of Germany also, he cannot only shoot the German in the trenches opposite without any feeling of personal dislike, but he can do so for the love of man. And this is not only possible, it is what in nine cases out of ten is actually being done.¹⁵

In Streeter’s hands, the Sermon on the Mount is anything but a pacifist document. Rather, it offers a gospel of liberal intervention and the soldier’s tough love.

A rather different take on Sermon on the Mount can be found in William Temple’s *Christianity and War*, which he published as the first of the “Papers for War Time.”¹⁶ Temple opens on a note of perplexity, as he asks the question, “In a world gone pagan, what is a Christian to do?” Temple is better known as a theologian than a biblical scholar, and there is less exegesis than in Streeter’s work, but he does attend to Jesus’ teaching on resistance and love of enemies. Temple believes the war is

¹⁴ Streeter, *Sermon*, 6.

¹⁵ Streeter, *Sermon*, 16.

¹⁶ William Temple, *Christianity and War* (Papers for War Time, 1; London: Oxford University Press, 1915).

justified, and rejects the pacifist “non-resistance” associated with Tolstoy and the Quakers. He points to Jesus’ actions alongside his words: “He did not resist physically; but he did resist the evil of his day,” even if that meant going into the fight unarmed.¹⁷ What, then, does it mean to love your enemies? Responding to reports of German atrocities, Temple rebukes the press for “gratifying and intensifying the lust of hate” and demands truthfulness above all. Christians should resist the desire for reprisals, shunning “an eye for an eye” and knowing that their enemies are also children of God. Moreover, war should be waged in a spirit of penitence: Prussian militarism may be bad, but British commercialism shares a similar “spirit of grab and push,” which is shallow and oppressive: “we must fight in penitence, and in the resolve to purge it from ourselves in every shape.”¹⁸ Above all, prayer for enemies should be genuine:

Either we must rewrite the old words to run “Do good to them that hate you, after you have taught them a good lesson; pray for them that persecute you, when they are wounded”—or else we must change our whole attitude to our enemies, alike in action and prayer.¹⁹

Both Streeter and Temple argue that the war the lesser of two evils, and both reject a pacifist interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, but Temple’s account is far more measured and reflective, and entirely without patriotic bombast. The line that these scholars walk between patriotic support and prophetic challenge is one that we shall return to repeatedly as we examine further examples.

THE ASSYRIAN HUN: MILITARISM, *KULTUR*, AND ATROCITY

If the war was from the outset seen as a grand battle between good and evil, it is no surprise that much propaganda was directed against the

¹⁷ Temple, *Christianity and War*, 6–7.

¹⁸ Temple, *Christianity and War*, 9.

¹⁹ Temple, *Christianity and War*, 9–10.

evils of the enemy. On both sides, the struggle between conflicting values was often seen through the contrasting terms “Civilization” and “Culture.” German writers saw the war as defence of German *Kultur* against the degenerate and multi-ethnic “civilization” of the British, French, and Russian Empires.²⁰ In turn, Allied propagandists were defending Western the liberal values of Western “civilization” against the militarism of an amoral state, whose only watchword was “might is right.” British politicians, newspaper editors, and preachers inveighed against militarism, “Prussianism,” “Kaiserism,” and increasingly barbarism and “frightfulness.”²¹ As part of their advance into Belgium and northern France in the late summer of 1914, German soldiers killed thousands of non-combatants, including women and children. This only confirmed existing prejudices about the amorality of German militarism, and the Allies were further outraged by “cultural atrocities” such as burning of the University Library at Leuven or the shelling of the cathedral at Reims.²² By late 1914 the British had come to recognize the German term *Kultur* as shorthand for everything they were fighting against.

²⁰ Annette Becker, “Faith, Ideologies, and the ‘Cultures of War,’” in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); for biblical examples of this see Andrew Mein, “Psalms, Patriotism and Propaganda: A Favourite Book in Wartime Biblical Scholarship,” in *The First World War and the Mobilization of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Andrew Mein, Nathan MacDonald, and Matthew A. Collins (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

²¹ On the prominence of “frightfulness” see Lynda Muggleston, “Alien Enemies: The Politics of Being Frightful,” *English Words in War-Time* (16 March 2015). Online: <https://wordsinwartime.wordpress.com/2015/03/16/alien-enemies-the-politics-of-being-frightful/>.

²² Eberhard Demm, *Censorship and Propaganda in World War 1: A Comprehensive History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 40; on reports of these events in the British press, and especially the *Daily Mail*, see Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 50–53.

The image of a small nation threatened by ruthless imperial forces is, of course, familiar to readers of the Bible. Scholars easily drew analogies with Israel's great enemies, the Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylonia, whose military prowess and violent expansionism are so vividly described in the prophets and historical books of the Old Testament. Assyria, especially, was a byword for military power and brutality and hence an appropriate cipher for Germany, not least when the issue of German atrocities was so prominent. German destructive power is regularly paralleled with the "total war" of the Assyrian empire. Thus, the Glasgow Old Testament scholar John Edgar McFadyen (1870–1933) makes the connection in his 1915 pamphlet *The Bible and the War*. Isaiah 5:26–29, as it describes the swiftly advancing Assyrian army "reminds us of nothing so much as too that seemingly irresistible rush of the German armies towards Paris within a month after the war began."²³ And George Adam Smith, on his lecture tour of America, is predictably robust in his use of the analogy. His image of the Mesopotamian empires owes at least as much to current events as to biblical or archaeological evidence, and he hits almost all the key notes of propaganda in only one (admittedly lengthy) sentence:

When Assyria and Babylon successively sought the conquest of the world in a spirit like that of Germany today; when, boasting their superior culture, they claimed the right to impose it by force of arms on other peoples; when they denied the claims of the smaller nations to a separate existence; when they marched their armies forth, as the Kaiser marched his, in the name of a sheerly national god; when they avowed a policy of "frightfulness," and carried this out with massacres and deportations of civilians, as Germany has done, and when they achieved their ends and did conquer the world, it was even then (as we remembered) that the profoundest thoughts of God's nature and will were formed in His prophets' minds, and the widest visions of His Providence opened to their eyes.²⁴

²³ John Edgar McFadyen, *The Bible and the War* (Stirling: Drummond's Tract Depot, 1915), 7.

²⁴ Smith, *Common Conscience*, 160–161.

Smith had already turned to the example of Assyria in the first of his *War and Peace* sermons, where he takes Isaiah 30:15 as his text: “In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.” In Smith’s hands this is no manifesto for quietism or pacifism. Set in the context of the prophet’s life, and especially the story of Jerusalem’s deliverance from Sennacherib’s army (Isa 36–37; 2 Kgs 18–19), it reflects the prophet’s confidence in Israel’s military strength:

[Isaiah] ventured his faith upon, and he lived to see it vindicated by, the defence of the last unsundered fortress of his people and the defiance at arms of an arrogant and remorseless tyrant. But for the wall and garrison of Jerusalem Isaiah could never have dared the Assyrian, and the latter, as he saw, would have crushed the Jewish Church with the religion and civilisation for which it alone stood on earth.²⁵

It is not difficult to see the players of 1914 CE lurking behind his description of the events of 701 BCE, with his mention of arrogance and tyranny, and of war as the defence of civilization. That Smith commends Isaiah’s faith in “the wall and garrison of Jerusalem” here is striking because it is in sharp contrast to his earlier treatment of the same material. In his 1888 commentary on Isaiah, he is at pains to emphasize the miraculous nature of the deliverance:

Now, with regard to the method of Jerusalem’s deliverance, *Isaiah has uniformly described this as happening not by human battle*. From the beginning he said that Israel should be delivered in the last extremity of their weakness (vi. 13). On the Assyrian’s arrival over against the city, Jehovah is to lop him off (x. 33). When her enemies have invested Jerusalem, Jehovah is to come down in thunder and a hurricane and sweep them away (after 705, xxix. 5–8). They are to be suddenly disappointed, like a hungry man waking from a dream of food. *A beautiful promise is given of the raising of the siege without mention of struggle or any weapon* (xxx. 20–26).²⁶

²⁵ Smith, *War and Peace*, 10.

²⁶ George Adam Smith, *The Book of Isaiah, Volume 1: Isaiah 1–39* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1888), 370–371; my italics.

The contrast gives us a fascinating insight into the way the experience of war could push scholars into new, perhaps strained, readings of biblical texts, to align them more closely with the needs of the moment.

Another good example of what we might call “the Assyrian Hun” is a 1918 article by George Buchanan Gray (1865–1922; Professor of Old Testament at Mansfield College, Oxford). Gray’s theme is that the prophets condemn “profane nations” which live in neglect of God’s plan that “the nation no less than the individual was made for divine ends.” The essay is noteworthy not least because Gray has read Hermann Gunkel’s heavily propagandistic work, *Israelitisches Heldentum*, and responds to this.²⁷ For all that “the tone and temper of Prof. Gunkel throughout his book is admirable,” he takes issue with his German colleague’s claim that ancient warfare was more terrible than that waged by his countrymen in the present:

To us who have watched the desolation of Belgium and Serbia before advancing, the wanton destruction of the fruit trees of France, before retiring German armies, the sacking of cities, the treatment of civilian populations, culminating in deportations scarcely to be distinguished from slavery, the distinction has worn thin. We are happier than Isaiah in this, that we have not witnessed so great a progress on the part of Germany towards universal conquest as Assyria had made; but we have seen enough to be unable to read the lines in which Isaiah depicts the temper and conduct of Assyria without feeling its applicability to the will, if not to the achievement of Germany.²⁸

Again, the themes of propaganda are prominent. But Gray does not reserve all his criticism for Assyria and Germany. If Assyria is the rod of divine anger, then it is an agent of divine justice, while to equate Eng-

²⁷ George Buchanan Gray, “Profane Nations,” *The Expository Times* 29/6 (1918): 250–254; cf. Hermann Gunkel, *Israelitisches Heldentum und Kriegsfrömmigkeit im Alten Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1916). Given the state of academic as well as military hostilities between the two nations, Gray is surprisingly positive about his German colleague, calling him “one of the most distinguished and sympathetic of German Biblical scholars,” and going so far as to close his essay with a lengthy quotation from Gunkel’s work.

²⁸ Gray, “Profane Nations,” 251.

land with Israel means that England can stand accused of the same neglect of social justice for which Isaiah condemned his own people. Moreover, he queries the easy analogy of the two nations, arguing that as a major world power England stands closer to the biblical Assyria than to the “entirely negligible” Judah.²⁹

Gray’s note of caution is typical of the majority of British scholars, who are rather more reticent than their German colleagues about identifying Israel and its heroes with the British people. At least in the material I have read, where German authors drew heavily on the historical books as resources for their reflection, British scholars tended to make more of the prophetic literature. In particular, one theme that often reappears is the idea that the war is a prophetic challenge, a crisis that demands repentance.

For McFadyen one of the principal lessons of the war is the stability of the moral order, which we discover primarily through the prophetic literature. In this context, McFadyen also raises the possibility that the war is a judgment on Britain. Thus, Isaiah regards the Assyrian invasion as “divinely sent to chastise Israel” for its sins: “the vices of that old Hebrew civilization pass before us—and how familiar they look—land-grabbing, drunkenness, scepticism, arrogance, indifference to moral distinctions.”³⁰ These are also characteristic of modern Europe, and he emphasizes one particular example which is very much of his time: drink. Isaiah inveighs against “those who menace the national welfare by their devotion to strong drink,” a crucial moral concern which the war has brought our attention. McFadyen feels a kinship with the prophet when he claims that the war is ...

... at least helping to expose the folly of some of our more glaring sins, and scourging us into an appreciation of the moral conditions upon which all national welfare ultimately depends.³¹

²⁹ Gray, “Profane Nations,” 253; cf. also McFadyen, *The Bible and the War*, 20–26.

³⁰ McFadyen, *The Bible and the War*, 23.

³¹ McFadyen, *The Bible and the War*, 25.

Yet another writer on this theme is George Albert Cooke (1865–1939), recently appointed as Regius Professor of Hebrew in Oxford when the war broke out. In a 1915 article, “The Prophets and War,” he follows Robertson Smith in arguing that the prophet belongs to moments of religious crisis, and goes on to outline prophetic teaching on war. The first and most important point is that God uses war to chastise his own people for their sins. In Amos, Isaiah, and Hosea the Assyrians are an aggressive expansionist power, driven by “nothing but ruthless ambition and lust of conquest,” nevertheless urged on by YHWH.³² In a later period, Jeremiah predicts the arrival of a Scythian “foe from the North,” and both he and Ezekiel go on to see Babylon as YHWH’s instrument of punishment. Cooke believes it is inappropriate to transfer this situation directly to the modern world, but there is nevertheless a principle to draw that war tests a people: “Without presumption we may believe that the present visitation is meant to convince us that, as a nation, we have much to repent of.”³³

THE POETRY OF HATE

A final area worth examining is the propaganda of hate. Only a few weeks into the war, Britain had replaced France and Russia as Germany’s arch-enemy in the minds of the German press and German public opinion. The expression “Gott strafe England!” (“God punish England!”) became a popular greeting and was printed on household articles from mugs and napkins to rings and brooches.³⁴ Perhaps the most concentrated form of this German Anglophobia was Ernst Lissauer’s notorious *Hassgesang Gegen England*, which included the refrain: “Wir lieben

³² George Albert Cooke, “The Prophets and War,” *The Expositor Eighth Series* 10 (1915): 215.

³³ Cooke, “The Prophets and War,” 217.

³⁴ Demm, *Censorship and Propaganda*, 37.

vereint, wir hassen vereint, Wir alle haben nur einen Feind: England!”³⁵ Lissauer’s work was widely pilloried in Britain, and British propagandists made much of Germany as a nation of haters.

This clearly stands behind John Pinkerton’s 1915 *The Expository Times* article with the provocative title “National Hate.” His opening words read: “We have heard much recently of a Hymn of Hate ... This is not the first century in which nations have regarded one another with hatred.”³⁶ The article itself, however, is a study of the book of Obadiah, and of the relationship between “the Hebrews and the Edomites,” two related nations with many common interests. The hatred between the nations was not simply caused by outrages such as the Edomites’ joy at the destruction of Jerusalem. It has a deeper cause, which is that the Edomites were fundamentally materialistic, “concerned mainly about what they should eat, and what they should drink, and wherewithal they should be clothed.” As such, “They had no use for a people like the Hebrews, who felt they had a destiny, and were endeavouring to have that destiny realized.”³⁷ We can see here already pre-war tropes of the gluttonous, sausage-eating German, and it is not long before Pinkerton brings his exegesis up to date:

History often repeats itself, and today the world again sees the spectacle of two kindred nations hating each other with a cordial hatred ... Yet Britons and

³⁵ “We love as one, we hate as one, we have one foe and one alone: England!”; the translation is Barbara Henderson’s, published in the *New York Times* (October 15, 1914); see further Richard Millington and Roger Smith, “‘A Few Bars of the Hymn of Hate’: The Reception of Ernst Lissauer’s ‘Haßgesang Gegen England’ in German and English,” *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature* 41/2 (2017).

³⁶ John Pinkerton, “National Hate,” *The Expository Times* 26/7 (1915): 299. Pinkerton was an Edinburgh minister and prize-winning Semitist, who had studied at the Universities of Edinburgh, Heidelberg, and Cambridge. Whether he might have fulfilled this early academic promise we shall never know, since he joined the Royal Scots as a soldier (rather than a chaplain) and was killed in action in Greece in October 1916.

³⁷ Pinkerton, “National Hate,” 300.

Germans are descended from a common Teutonic stock ... The situation that confronts us bears so many resemblances to that which existed between Israel and Edom, that a consideration of their relationship cannot but be of advantage.³⁸

He draws out several points. The first is that “the nation whose greatest inspiration is a hatred, is doomed.” History records only two significant facts about the Edomites, “(1) they were great haters, (2) they have perished.”³⁹ There is a connection between the two, since hatred warps and spoils the spiritual capacities of those who hate. If the Germans have given themselves up to hate, “such a people is working its own hurt.” His second point follows on from this, that “the saving power of a nation at a time when the hatred of other peoples is set against it is a firm belief in the justice of the government of the universe.” The Hebrew prophets reveal that God’s judgment will fall not only on Israel’s enemies, but also Israel itself: “the Justice of God which saved Israel from Edom’s hate also disciplined Israel.” However justified the British cause against Germany in a fight for “purity and honour,” the same divine justice may also punish Britain:

As long as the “white slave” haunts our streets, or the fraudulent financier our markets, our claim to be the defenders of purity and honour is in some measure weakened. We can be sure that the justice of God, which can and will protect us from the hate of a vengeful foe, will also chastise us for the sin that is in us.⁴⁰

We also see a response to hatred between nations in another of McFadyen’s wartime contributions, “The Psalter and the Present Distress,” where he discusses the imprecatory psalms, claiming that the war has brought people closer to these awful prayers:

We used to shudder at the imprecatory psalms, and let us hope we shudder still ... but we, who have seen in these latter days what antecedently we could never have believed of the horrors and the inhumanities of war, are able to understand

³⁸ Pinkerton, “National Hate,” 300.

³⁹ Pinkerton, “National Hate,” 300.

⁴⁰ Pinkerton, “National Hate,” 301.

these psalms as they have seldom been understood since the flaming words leaped from torn and bleeding hearts. We could not take their dreadful prayers upon our lips; we could not ask God to feast our eyes upon our foes, or to grant that our feet might be washed in the blood of the wicked. But too well we understand to-day the mood from which such prayer can spring.⁴¹

With another reference to Lissauer's poem, McFadyen suggests that the experience of atrocities has driven the psalmist to utter such words: "These *hymns of hate* were sung by good men whose hearts were stung by grief and cruelty into bitter vindictiveness."⁴² McFadyen even gives a rather strange misreading of Ps 137:8, when he turns the logic of the psalm on its head by proposing that it is "those who would dash children against rocks" who are the God's enemies.⁴³

It is worth contrasting McFadyen's measured approach to the imprecatory psalms with the outrage and anger shown by the British press during a rather strange incident in the summer of 1917. In the same week that London was hit by a wave of German air raids and there were widespread calls for so-called "reprisals" against German civilians, the Convocation of Canterbury, one of the Church of England's highest legislative assemblies, voted to bring in a new version of the Psalter. This Psalter omitted many of the imprecatory verses of the Psalms, including the final words part of Ps 137 and the whole of Ps 58, as no longer fit for Christian worship. The right-wing press, already tough on those clergy who were in their view insufficiently committed to the war effort, reacted with scorn and outrage. They accused the Church leadership of unpatriotic "namby-pambyism," and defended the imprecatory psalms' prayers as religious justification for reprisals against civilians.⁴⁴ A leading

⁴¹ John Edgar McFadyen, "The Psalter and the Present Distress," *The Expository Times* 28/8 (1917): 248; cf. Mein, "Psalms, Patriotism, and Propaganda."

⁴² McFadyen, "The Psalter," 248, my italics.

⁴³ McFadyen, "The Psalter," 248.

⁴⁴ For a full discussion of the episode, see my essay, "Bishops, Baby-Killers and Broken Teeth: Psalm 58 and the Air War," *JBR* 4/2 (2017).

article in the *Daily Mail* made the following defence of Ps 58, perhaps the most violent in the Psalter:

Never was there greater need of such Psalms as that which has been carelessly condemned than today. That Psalm brings to the faint-hearted a message of hope and duty. It paints with the fewest words possible what our enemies have done and the revenge which we pray we may wreak upon them for their misdeeds. ... Either war is a wicked thing of itself, and we should long ago have presented our throats cheerfully to the knives of the Germans, or we should look forward zealously to the day when we shall wash our "footsteps in the blood of the ungodly." There is no middle path, and they cannot be absolved from hypocrisy who admit the necessity of warfare and then deplore or would conceal the means.⁴⁵

Biblical scholars, even those as passionately committed to the cause as Smith and Streeter, rarely stoop to this level of jingoism. For many of them, it is precisely the "middle path" that they are trying to tread.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The scholars whose work I have discussed were almost all men of a certain age, whose experience of the actual conditions of war was limited. Their generation of British scholars had been responsible for introducing and popularising the results of critical biblical study (much of it German) at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Is their alignment of the Bible with propaganda an abandonment of their critical principles to the political heat of the moment? Perhaps so, at least in the case of direct and indirect attacks on Germany. But alongside this, it seems likely that that the war led scholars to make explicit some of the political assumptions that underpinned their scholarly works, above all the importance of the nation and national ideals for the formation of both ancient Israel and modern Europe.

⁴⁵ "Letters of an Englishman," *Daily Mail* (July 14, 1917).

British and German biblical scholarship in the early twentieth century was steeped in an understanding of nations and nationalism that informed both historical reconstruction and contemporary application. Studies of German biblical scholars during the war have emphasized how closely they aligned the heroic Israel of the pre-monarchic or Maccabean periods with the heroic Germany of the present day.⁴⁶ We can find this emphasis in some of our British authors, but on the whole, their biblical nationalism is a little less strident. The powerful emphasis on the war as God's prophetic judgment on Britain as well as Germany seems distinctive. And measured tones were by no means universal in Britain, as is obvious from the story of Convocation and the "cursing psalms." Figures like Horatio Bottomley, editor of the patriotic and rather anti-religious magazine *John Bull*, would inveigh regularly against clergy who questioned the absolute justice of the British cause, charging that they damaged the morale of soldiers and civilians alike. Even the middle path trodden by authors like Gray, McFadyen, and Cooke could seem controversially unpatriotic in wartime Britain.

One reason for a slightly less clear identification of the nation with Israel in Britain may have itself been a desire on the part of British scholars to distance themselves from the notion of a national God. This had considerable currency in Germany in the early part of the war, but was widely mocked in Britain and France.⁴⁷ Another is the relatively looser ties between academic theology and the state. To put it bluntly, German professors were (and remain) civil servants; British professors were not, but worked in a range of institutions across a range of ecclesial

⁴⁶ On German Old Testament scholarship, see the essays by Bormann, Kurtz, MacDonald, Mein, and Heschel in Mein, MacDonald, and Collins, *First World War*; Gordon Mitchell, "War, Folklore and the Mystery of a Disappearing Book," *JSOT* 68 (1995): 113–119; cf. also Paul M. Kurtz, "The Way of War: Wellhausen, Israel, and Bellicose *Reiche*," *ZAW* 127/1 (2015): 1–19.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Gregory Moore, "The Super-Hun and the Super-State: Allied Propaganda and German Philosophy During the First World War," *German Life and Letters* 54/4 (2001): 310–330 (313–314).

contexts, and were much more likely than their German colleagues to be preachers and pastors.⁴⁸ A final reason for a more moderate tone Britain and the Empire is the strong presence of the nonconformist tradition within British biblical scholarship, which was traditionally much more sceptical of the relationship between church and state. Charles Bailey comments that despite a Germanophobia that was rife amongst British theologians during the war, “the least chauvinistic were the liberal Free Churchmen, who felt less automatic loyalty to the state [than the Anglicans] and little, if any, antipathy towards German higher criticism.”⁴⁹

We should not, however, mistake a less strident biblical nationalism for the absence of nationalism. British scholars, like their German colleagues had long found the concepts of the nation and of patriotism crucial for bridging the gap between ancient texts and the modern world. Even before the war, a scholar like McFadyen could claim that a historical approach to the national religion of Israel reveals its uniqueness as “substantially the religion of the progressive nations of the world to-day,” and that criticism could bring the prophets closer to the contemporary world, revealing them as political figures who “believed that their message, if obeyed, would conserve the national prestige, if not power, and give the people a place worthy of the calling wherewith God had called them.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ McFadyen had made this point already in 1903: John Edgar McFadyen, *Old Testament Criticism and the Christian Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), 22.

⁴⁹ Bailey, “British Protestant Theologians,” 220. The very few pacifists among British biblical scholars were nonconformists, notably the Congregationalists C. J. Cadoux and C. H. Dodd, both of whom were present at the founding meeting of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in December 1914. Other nonconformists, while not pacifists themselves, nevertheless fiercely defended the rights of those who refused to serve in the army on religious grounds: see e.g. the Primitive Methodist A. S. Peake’s *Prisoners of Hope: The Problem of the Conscientious Objector* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918).

⁵⁰ McFadyen, *Old Testament Criticism*, 246, 351.

The story of biblical scholarship during the First World War is something of a cautionary tale, and this is just as true for Britain as it is for Germany. British biblical scholars, like their peers across Europe, were caught up in the national mobilization of 1914. They used their position as prominent churchmen and public intellectuals to throw their weight behind the national cause, and in many cases they deployed their professional expertise to mobilize the Bible for war too. Much of what they did in this vein was deeply informed by the principal themes of British propaganda. In their hands, the Bible provided authority and justification for Britain's "liberal intervention" on behalf of Belgium, and even the Sermon on the Mount could become a recruiting sergeant hammering home the legitimacy of this noble cause. The Bible was also a stick with which writers could beat the amoral German state, with its doctrines of "Prussianism and militarism," and its wicked atrocities against civilians.

Beyond the surface level of political propaganda, the crisis of the Great War also encouraged scholars to reveal the politics of their scholarship. We see explicitly what was previously only implicit, and it is rarely a pretty sight. We may laugh or recoil in horror (or both!), and indeed more or less all this material produced during the war has actually been written out of the standard history of scholarship.⁵¹ But the story of biblical scholarship during the Great War should nevertheless encourage us to question the ways in which the practice and assumptions of our discipline are still beholden to the political and ideological currents that informed our predecessors of one hundred years ago.

⁵¹ On the German case see, e.g., Nathan MacDonald, "Holy War and the Great War in German Protestant Old Testament Scholarship," in *The First World War and the Mobilization of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Andrew Mein, Nathan MacDonald, and Matthew A. Collins (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), 135–161.