

# The Bible in the North: Commodity and Content on the Secular Market

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Understanding biblical texts in context usually entails an awareness of the times and places in which these texts first emerged and were first encountered. In this article, I aim to make a case for more contextual work on the Bible in the Northern parts of the contemporary world. After discussing contexts in relation to the Bible, I turn to the Global North and questions of secularization, before providing examples of the way the Bible operates as commodity and content on the secular marketplace in Norway. Rather than hyperlocal research into the details of Bible use in regions that might be considered “the North,” I argue that analysing the Bible in the North requires attention to the way Bibles and biblical texts circulate and change as part of global flows.

## THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

There is nothing new about calls to consider biblical texts in our own contemporary contexts. In her presidential address for the Society of Biblical Literature in 1988, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza emphasised that “context is as important as text.”<sup>1</sup> “What we see depends on where we stand.”<sup>2</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza asked the biblical studies guild: “Do we

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 107/1 (1988): (3–17) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ethics,” 5.

... teach our students to ask in a disciplined way how our scholarship is conditioned by its social location and how it serves political functions?”<sup>3</sup> She used the address to continue the critique so many feminist biblical scholars have levelled against the “scientist ethos of value-free detached inquiry” that reigns in biblical studies in its dominant historical-critical mould.<sup>4</sup> Biblical scholars should be asking: “How is meaning constructed? Whose interests are served? What kind of worlds are envisioned? What roles, duties, and values are advocated? Which social-political practices are legitimated?”<sup>5</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza was calling for critical attention to the standpoint of the scholar, while highlighting the fact that the kinds of questions scholars consider worth asking are linked to their own context. In other words, the research question, the results of research, and the scholar’s context are all inextricably linked.

A similar point about the connection between traditional emphases on ancient context and the results of biblical scholarship is made by Vincent Wimbush. Reacting against his training in biblical studies, Wimbush has called for “a larger, more rounded and layered history of scriptures, not the history of the lexical content meanings or the historical backgrounds of those characters and events referenced in the texts, but the psychology, the phenomenology, the sociology, the anthropology, the invention and uses, and the political consequences of the uses of the texts.”<sup>6</sup> Wimbush pioneered this kind of work already in the late 1990s. His monumental edited volume, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, published in 2000, comes to over 800 pages of research into the diversity of Bible use amongst African-Americans.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ethics,” 10.

<sup>4</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ethics,” 10.

<sup>5</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ethics,” 14.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Wimbush, *White Men’s Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000).

More recently, also from a US-American vantage point, Wongi Park's multiracial biblical studies project follows earlier feminist and postcolonial biblical scholarship in calling for an expansion of biblical studies beyond the focus on antiquity.<sup>8</sup> The "sheer dominance of historical criticism," as Park puts it, has left its mark on the field of biblical studies.<sup>9</sup> Historical criticism continues to characterize biblical scholarship as the norm and as normative.<sup>10</sup> As Park has discussed, historical criticism or the historical-critical method—though by no means a monolithic singular method—functions as the key entry point to biblical studies.<sup>11</sup> It is the "industry standard" at virtually every institution of higher education at least in the Global North.<sup>12</sup> Historical criticism enjoys a privileged status as "an invisible norm that renders other approaches as aberration."<sup>13</sup> Park argues that there is a connection between the privileging of Eurocentric methods in the discipline of biblical studies and the fact that the discipline is dominated by white scholars, particularly white, male scholars. Biblical studies in the United States and Europe is, he points out, "profoundly monoracial."<sup>14</sup> As Park argues, whiteness is not only connected to the skin colour of particular people, rather it extends to "the very methods and tools of dominant biblical scholarship."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wongi Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," *JBL* 140/3 (2021): 435–459. Park convened a virtual event over several days with scholars from across the globe, and is editing a volume on multiracial biblical studies, to be published with SBL Press.

<sup>9</sup> Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 445.

<sup>10</sup> Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 445.

<sup>11</sup> Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 446.

<sup>12</sup> Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 446.

<sup>13</sup> Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 446.

<sup>14</sup> Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 437. Park undertakes a demographic analysis of the membership of the Society of Biblical Literature, the largest professional biblical studies society, focusing on members in the US. Racial and ethnic minorities make up only 14.38%, while women make up approximately 25%. Although this only gives a snapshot of a part of the discipline of biblical studies, it nonetheless indicates the way biblical scholarship is "male dominated and, even more so, White dominated" (442).

<sup>15</sup> Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 444–445.

The slowness of contextual biblical scholarship to take hold is arguably connected to entrenched ideas about whiteness as neutral and normative, a mark of universality rather than a sign of national, ethnic, or other contextual factors. Biblical scholars have been making this point for a while. Randall Bailey has pointedly asked whether it is only darker people who are contextual? When will the “white voice” become contextualised and put on a level playing field with other contextual voices?<sup>16</sup> Louise Lawrence has similarly commented on “a certain forgetting of ‘place’ by biblical interpreters,” where Western historical criticism passes as “context-less.”<sup>17</sup> In Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia’s words, the “pretence that difference makes no difference, is itself premised on a particular set of differences in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality.”<sup>18</sup> Envisioning the future of a more diverse discipline, Park calls for a turn away from “continuing in a scholarly mode of disinterest and decontextualization,” urging rather that “the social, religious, and institutional locations and communities we inhabit can be foregrounded and theorized as an essential part of the interpretive task.”<sup>19</sup>

Against this background, several signs of potentially growing interest in the Bible in contemporary Nordic contexts have appeared in recent years, not least the volume published last year, called *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, edited by Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu. This book

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<sup>16</sup> Randall Bailey, “Whatever Happened to Good Old White Boys? A Review of the Global Bible Commentary,” available online at [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/ans/religious\\_studies/GBC/proscons.htm](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/ans/religious_studies/GBC/proscons.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Louise Lawrence, “Being ‘Hefted’: Reflections on Place, Stories, and Contextual Bible Study,” *The Expository Times* 118/11 (2007): 530–535 (531).

<sup>18</sup> Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, “Toward Minority Criticism: Framework, Contours, Dynamics,” in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, eds. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 3–43 (7).

<sup>19</sup> Park, “Multiracial Biblical Studies,” 458.

gathers research on the Bible in the Nordic countries, asking whether there is such a thing as a “Nordic Bible,” and whether it is possible to identify particular tendencies and trends of interpretation “in the public Bible reception practices of the Nordic countries?”<sup>20</sup> To turn to our own context in Sweden, only two years ago, in *SEÅ* of that year, Hanna Stenström pointed to work on the Bible in contemporary politics as a growing area of research in Sweden.<sup>21</sup> Göran Eidevall’s retirement lecture from Uppsala, published last year, argues for the relevance of reception studies for the future of the field.<sup>22</sup>

“The North” is, of course, no singular or straightforward context. Paying attention to the plurality of the North and its different dynamics across the globe is, I would suggest, fruitful for research into contextual biblical scholarship, rather than a problem to be solved through the disciplining work of definitions. Biblical scholars who examine the Bible in the North of England, say Leeds, do not need to be excluded just because “more” Northern contexts exist, such as Lerwick or Longyearbyen. It is crucial to hold on to the fact that “the North” is a necessarily plural designation that comes with different dynamics. This becomes clear when thinking about “the North” on a much larger scale, in terms of the Global North.

## THE GLOBAL NORTH

Dividing the world between the Global North and the Global South gained traction in the late twentieth century. “The Global North” is in

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<sup>20</sup> Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu, “Preface,” in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, eds. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023), v–vi (v).

<sup>21</sup> Hanna Stenström, “Bibeln i politiken: Ett växande forskningsfält,” *SEÅ* 87 (2022), 1–27 (3–4).

<sup>22</sup> Göran Eidevall, “Tio år senare: Tankar om bibelvetenskapens framtid – Avskedsföreläsning 10 november 2022,” *SEÅ* 88 (2023), 91–105 (98–99).

many ways an odd term that does not spell out a precise geographical terrain, but is used to designate relative social, cultural, political, and economic power in parts of the world.<sup>23</sup> In the late twentieth century, the Global North came to replace previous terms to divide the world, such as First, Second, and Third World, or developing and developed nations.<sup>24</sup>

The Global North is usually thought to include the United States, Canada, England, the European Union countries, as well as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and some countries in the southern hemisphere, namely Australia, and New Zealand. The Global South, on the other hand, would include formerly colonized countries in Africa and Latin America, as well as the Middle East, Brazil, India, and parts of Asia.<sup>25</sup> Simplistically put, this division between North and South is an image of a world marked as rich and poor, producer and consumer, powerful and powerless—and also significantly, more-secular and more-religious. It is also a designation—like developed and developing nations, or First and Third Worlds, or West and rest—that is linked to the historical relationship between colonial powers and colonized people.<sup>26</sup>

Colonial contexts are of course crucially entangled in the history of the Bible. Colonizing nations from the Global North famously exported Bibles to the Global South to aid in the so-called “civilizing missions” of the colonial enterprises.<sup>27</sup> Musa Dube has cautioned Western scholars in

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<sup>23</sup> For an overview of what is meant by the Global North, see Lara Braff and Katie Nelson, “The Global North: Introducing the Region,” in *Gendered Lives: Global Issues*, eds., Nadine T. Fernandez and Katie Nelson (New York: SUNY, 2022), 289–303.

<sup>24</sup> Braff and Nelson, “The Global North,” 290.

<sup>25</sup> Braff and Nelson, “The Global North,” 290.

<sup>26</sup> Braff and Nelson, “The Global North,” 289–290.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance, Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollon, 1990), and Yvonne Sherwood, “Comparing the ‘Telegraph Bible’ of the Late British Empire to the Chaotic Bible of the Sixteenth Century Spanish Empire: Beyond the Canaan Mandate into Anxious Parables of the Land,” in *In the Name of God: The Bible in the*

particular “to be aware of their history of hegemonic power and to scrutinize their current interpretations to avoid repetition of the victimizing of non-Western races.”<sup>28</sup> The Bible is “a Western book and the West is an imperial center.”<sup>29</sup> But the Bible also belongs to those whose lands were taken and who had Christian scripture thrust upon them. Following Dube, the Bible could be said to have multiple belongings, though it will always be marked by its use as a tool of European imperialism.<sup>30</sup> Whether we speak of the West, First World, developed countries, or the Global North, Dube is making the point that engaging with the Bible is to be entangled in the “formidable web of domination and subordination at work” in colonial histories of Bible use.<sup>31</sup> Without a critical awareness of the history of colonial Bible use, our own contemporary contexts and the way they are connected to this history, biblical scholars risk remaining “inscribed within the imperial ideology of domination.”<sup>32</sup>

As scholars have been arguing, there are problems in framing the globe in terms of a Global North that becomes synonymous with privilege and progress, including high levels of secularization, versus a Global South, associated with poverty, political instability, and high levels of religiosity. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for instance, critiqued the Global North-Global South division by drawing attention to the way social and cultural flows travel globally in different directions, im-

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*Colonial Discourse of Empire*, eds., C. L. Crouch and Jonathan Stökl (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 5–62.

<sup>28</sup> Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 16.

<sup>29</sup> Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 3; see also, Musa Dube and R. S. Wafula, eds., *Postcoloniality, Translation and the Bible in Africa* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, “Mapping the Postcolonial Optic,” in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, eds., Fernando F. Segovia and Stephen D. Moore (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 23–78 (69).

<sup>32</sup> Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 38.

pacting nations and people in a diversity of ways.<sup>33</sup> It is not simply a matter of a one-way relationship between a powerful Global North acting upon a powerless Global South. Different flows between North and South are multiple and travel both ways, despite ongoing practices of extraction and violence, persistent power-imbalances, and entrenched inequalities. Appadurai wrote about different global “scapes” to describe the flows that better capture the dynamism of global relations: *ethnoscape* (the movement of people); *financescape* (the movement of money); *technoscape* (the movement of technologies); *mediascapes* (the movement of media); *ideoscapes* (the movement of ideas).<sup>34</sup> We could add one more scape to Appadurai’s scapes: *biblioscapes*—to designate the movement of books, or more specifically, of Bibles.

The use of the Bible during colonialism is a case in point for Appadurai’s argument about the movement between the Global North and the Global South. Exporting Bibles to the Global South during colonialism was not a one-way interaction between colonizer and colonized. Johnson Kiriaku Kinyua, for instance, explains the way colonizers set out to translate their English Bible into vernacular African languages to missionize and “civilize” colonized peoples.<sup>35</sup> Unsurprisingly, the translation efforts were hierarchically ordered, with measures put in place to limit the power of Africans themselves to impact the translation process.<sup>36</sup> Translation functioned as a “hegemonic process that facilitated the domestication as well as homogenization of the idiom through the predetermined process of cooption and expansion of the linguistic

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<sup>33</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>34</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity*, 33–36.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson Kiriaku Kinyua, “A Postcolonial Analysis of Bible Translation and its Effectiveness in Shaping and Enhancing the Discourse of Colonialism and the Discourse of Resistance: The Gikūyū New Testament – A Case Study,” in *Postcoloniality, Translation and the Bible in Africa*, eds., Musa Dube and R. S. Wafula (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), 57–93.

<sup>36</sup> Kinyua, “Postcolonial Analysis,” 69, 72–73.



tools.”<sup>37</sup> However, as Kiriaku Kinyua points out, the “untranslatability of African religious terminologies opened an interstice that transformed the colonized from the passive victims of translation to active translators” who recognized that they had forms of power to affect the Bible imposed on them.<sup>38</sup> “Translation became a performative act of decolonization.”<sup>39</sup> Bibles were exported from the Global North as part of the colonial subjugation of peoples in the Global South, then, but Bibles did not remain untouched by these encounters. As Dube articulates, “the use of African languages and concepts” rewrite the biblical text and “giving it a new meaning.”<sup>40</sup> As new translations of Bibles emerged—and “savage readings” as Dube puts it<sup>41</sup>—Bibles began to circulate in unforeseen and unforeseeable ways, biblical texts took on new forms and resonances.<sup>42</sup>

In terms of context, then, the Bible could be said to have multiple belongings. Contextual awareness of Bible use entails an awareness of *movement*. Bibles are on the move, within particular geographical re-

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<sup>37</sup> Kinyua, “Postcolonial Analysis,” 81.

<sup>38</sup> Kinyua, “Postcolonial Analysis,” 83.

<sup>39</sup> Kinyua, “Postcolonial Analysis,” 83.

<sup>40</sup> Musa Dube, “Introduction: Silenced, Nights, Bible Translation and the African Contact Zones,” in *Postcoloniality, Translation and the Bible in Africa*, eds. Musa Dube and R. S. Wafula (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), ##–## (xxiv). During her presidential address at the SBL Annual Meeting in 2023, Dube called for more space to be given to contextual work on the Bible in the discipline of biblical studies.

<sup>41</sup> Dube, “Introduction,” xxiv.

<sup>42</sup> Dube, “Introduction,” 90. Similar processes can be seen with the way biblical texts were used to justify slavery in different parts of the Global North, such as the US and the UK. Bibles were used to justify slavery, but Bibles were also used to resist racial subjugation, to speak back (or sing back), such as in the civil rights campaigns of Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer. Vincent Harding, “The Anointed Ones: Hamer, King, and the Bible in the Southern Freedom Movement,” in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 537–545. See also, Vincent L. Wimbush, *White Men’s Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

gions and borders of nation-states and across borders. Biblical content is mined for different purposes that are both locally specific and globally connected. Speaking of biblioscapes—following Apaduraj—marks the way Bibles are not singular objects tied to one context. Bibles change and are on the move, in terms of what physical copies of Bibles are produced and in terms of how the content of biblical texts is translated, understood, and put to use.

### SECULAR CONTEXTS

If the Global North tends to be perceived as more secular than the Global South, then it could be argued that an emphasis on the circulation of biblical content and the movement of Bibles in the Northern parts of the world will have limited results. While contemporary Northern America offers some obvious opportunities for examining the Bible in context, such as the former US president Donald Trump brandishing a Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington DC in 2020, or the former US Attorney-General, Jeff Sessions, quoting Romans 13 to argue for the separation of migrant children from their parents in 2018,<sup>43</sup> it is perhaps less clear where to look for biblioscapes in Europe, in Northern Europe, or the Nordic countries.

Secularization has been characterized as “a slow process of generational change in which people gradually lose interest in things that mattered to their parents and in which the possibilities for belief and practice expand while the salience of any of those beliefs and practices declines.”<sup>44</sup> The secularization theorist Steve Bruce uses the metaphor of

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<sup>43</sup> Martin, Pengelly, “A Photo Op as Protests Swirled: How Trump Came to Walk to the Church,” *The Guardian*, 2 June 2020 (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/02/trump-washington-walk-to-the-church-photo-op>); Robert L. Tsai, “The Anti-Immigration Bible,” *The Boston Review*, 18 June 2018 (<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/robert-tsai-anti-immigration-bible/>).

<sup>44</sup> Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford:

an abandoned garden in the countryside.<sup>45</sup> Without constant pruning, selective breeding, and weeding, the garden loses its distinctive character, as it is overtaken by the greater variety of plant species in the surrounding wilderness. Despite Hugh Pyper's conception of the Bible as the most successful text, the "fittest" text, in a cultural-evolutionary sense,<sup>46</sup> it is worth asking whether the Bible has expired in the wilderness of the Nordic context? Perhaps nowhere within the Global North is perceived to be as secularized as the Nordic countries.<sup>47</sup> In a recent study of Norwegian parliamentary debates, Ole Jakob Løland argued that the Bible was a "marginal entity," and that since the 1930s, "the Bible hardly ever influenced decision making within parliamentary debates."<sup>48</sup> Previously, he had shown how the Bible has been notably absent during pivotal national events in Norway, such as in the ceremonies following the terror attacks in 2011.<sup>49</sup>

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Oxford University Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce, *Secularization*, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Hugh S. Pyper, *The Unchained Bible: Cultural Appropriations of Biblical Texts* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 167–179.

<sup>47</sup> Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu, "Bible Reception in a Nordic Context," in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, eds. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 3–21 (3–4), discuss the way global indexes of religiosity tend to be counted as low in the Nordic countries, while people in these countries at the same time exhibit high degrees of loyalty to the traditional Lutheran national churches. See also Hanna Liljefors, *Hebreiska bibeln debatterad: En receptionskritisk studie av diskurser om "Gamla testamentet" i svenska dagstidningar 1987–2017* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma Bokförlag, 2022), for an in-depth engagement with theories of secularization in relation to biblical reception in Sweden.

<sup>48</sup> Ole Jakob Løland, "The Bible in Norwegian Politics: Scripture in the Parliamentarians' Discourse," in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, eds. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 119–140 (119). Løland nonetheless shows that the Bible is not completely absent from parliamentary debates, demonstrating in what concrete ways the Bible is considered useful (119–140).

<sup>49</sup> Ole Jakob Løland, "The Norwegian 9/11: In the Church Without a Bible,"

Katie Edwards writes of the way reports about growing ignorance about the Bible and a steep decline in biblical literacy are rife.<sup>50</sup> And yet biblical texts, as Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood argue, are “recycled, appealed to, exploited, banalized, as they circulate as part of ongoing vocabularies.”<sup>51</sup> The perception of declining levels of biblical literacy depends on what we mean by biblical literacy, where we are looking and what we are looking for.<sup>52</sup> Hanna Liljefors’ recent study on references to the Hebrew Bible in Swedish newspapers demonstrates how perceptions of the Bible continue to play a role in public debate.<sup>53</sup> These perceptions are both remarkably persistent and plastic. Further, as Pyper has demonstrated, the absence of a Bible does not necessarily signify its irrelevance in a particular context.<sup>54</sup> James Crossley has recently argued that the tendency to highlight the relevance of the Bible by connecting it to high culture has obscured the way issues of class and

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*Political Theology* 1 (2017): 1–15.

<sup>50</sup> Katie Edwards, ed., *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), ix. See also Phillip Davies, “Whose Bible? Anyone’s”, *Bible and Interpretation* (2009, <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/opeds/whose>), who cites several reports about biblical illiteracy.

<sup>51</sup> Yvonne Sherwood and Jonneke Bekkenkamp, “Introduction: The Thin Blade of Difference Between Real Swords and Words about ‘Sharp-edged Iron Things’ – Reflections on How People Use the Word,” in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, eds. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 1–9 (3).

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of biblical literacy, see Máire Byrne, “Biblical Literacy: The Irish Situation,” in Katie Edwards, ed., *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3–21, particularly, 5–7. For a critique of assumptions around what counts as biblical literacy, see James G. Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos: The Bible in English Political Discourse since 1968* (rev. ed.; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014/2016), xvi. For a discussion of religious literacy more generally, see Justine Ellis, *The Politics of Religious Literacy: Education and Emotion in a Secular Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

<sup>53</sup> Liljefors, *Hebreiska bibeln debatterad*.

<sup>54</sup> Hugh S. Pyper, “The Absent Bible: Oaths of Office in Scotland and the United States,” in *Challenging Contextuality: Bibles and Biblical Scholarship in Context*, eds. Louise Lawrence, Peter-Ben Smit, Hannah M. Strømmen, Charlene van der Walt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

capital impact Bible use.<sup>55</sup> He calls for more ethnographic work that can map varied working-class groups.<sup>56</sup>

Processes of secularization in the Nordic countries, then, may have steadily lessened the influence of the Bible, particularly in the twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> But the Bible remains a perpetual steady seller in Nordic book markets.<sup>58</sup> In “this paradoxical landscape, the Bible continues to play a role as a significant container of cultural values in the Nordic countries.”<sup>59</sup> As Hallgeir Elstad puts it, the Bible could be said to be “liberated from the religious authorities,” to become as much a cultural object as it is Christian scripture.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the Bible is in many ways a perfect product in the global marketplace. It can be produced and reproduced, packaged and repackaged endlessly. To function as a commodity beyond faith communities, though, it relies on something other than the belief in Bible as sacred scripture. Bibles move around the marketplace as newly branded commodities. As Timothy Beal articulates, “there are multiple, often competing, symbolic, and material productions of the Bible—that is, biblical media—that are generated and generative in different cultural contexts.”<sup>61</sup> Beal calls for attention not only to the materiality of Bibles, but to “the economic aspects of scriptural production, marketing, and consumption, and to the way those processes trade in various unstable forms of social, cultural, financial, and sacred capital.”<sup>62</sup> Cru-

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<sup>55</sup> James Crossley, “Capitalism, Class, and the Bible: A Very English Proposal,” in *Challenging Contextuality: Bibles and Biblical Scholarship in Context*, eds. Louise Lawrence, Peter-Ben Smit, Hannah M. Strømmen, Charlene van der Walt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

<sup>56</sup> Crossley, “Capitalism.”

<sup>57</sup> Hallgeir Elstad, “The Bible in the Nordic Welfare States,” in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, eds. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023), 23–26 (23).

<sup>58</sup> Bjelland Kartzow, Bro Larsen, and Lehtipuu, “Bible Reception,” 4.

<sup>59</sup> Bjelland Kartzow, Bro Larsen, and Lehtipuu, “Bible Reception,” 4.

<sup>60</sup> Elstad, “The Bible,” 35

<sup>61</sup> Timothy Beal, *The Book of Revelation: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5.

cially, as I have already argued, such Bibles are in movement—biblioscapes, as I called them. To provide examples of the way Bibles circulate and change as content and commodity, I turn to one part of the Global North, namely Norway.

### BIBLES IN NORWAY

Rather than cast out of the Norwegian mainstream, the Bible as commodity and as content might be worth exploring further for thinking about biblioscapes in the Global North. I will mention here examples of the Bible as literary product, as political resource, and as a national object. I neither set out to prove theories of secularization wrong nor to claim the Bible as a supremely fit text, in Pyper's sense. I do, however, want to take seriously the way the Bible as commodity and content functions in a particular contemporary context that is marked by national and transnational trends. The examples I mention, then, demonstrate the multiple belongings of "the Bible", but are simultaneously characterized by the specificity of the Norwegian context.

The 2011 translation of the Bible into Norwegian was widely reported to be a bestseller.<sup>63</sup> One version of it famously won an award for the most beautiful book in the adult fiction category in Norway.<sup>64</sup> Another

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<sup>62</sup> Timothy Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," *BibInt* 19 (2011): 357–372 (366).

<sup>63</sup> UK and US newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *Forbes* reported on the bestseller status of Norway's new Bible. See for instance, Alison Flood, "Bible Becomes 2011 Bestseller in Norway," *The Guardian*, 3 January 2012 (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/03/bible-2011-bestseller-norway>); Alex Knapp, "The Bible Was Norway's Bestselling Book in 2011," *Forbes*, 4 January 2012 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2012/01/04/the-bible-was-norways-bestselling-book-in-2011/?sh=18fab876e7d>). It could be argued that these headlines are evidence of surprise that the Bible should be a bestseller, and therefore do not evidence a "comeback" for the Bible or widespread popularity, but a fluke. Even if this is a fluke, however, it shows the way Bibles come and go as part of trends and shifts in the market value of Bibles.

book, published a couple of years later, but including authors who were a part of the translation committee for the 2011 Norwegian Bible, was called *Bibeldikt* (Bible poems).<sup>65</sup> The publisher announced that this book showed that God was making a serious comeback in fiction.<sup>66</sup> Norway's most famous contemporary literary export, Karl Ove Knausgård, has called the Bible the most important text ever written.<sup>67</sup> Like Knausgård, the Norwegian Nobel Prize winner in literature for 2024, Jon Fosse, was part of the committee to work on the 2011 translation. Both consider the Bible a key source, citing biblical references in their works.<sup>68</sup> The idea of a Bible reimagined by poets and novelists, or as literature itself, is not new or native to Norway of course. We could go back to influential publications such as Northrope Frye's *The Great Code*, from the early 1980s,<sup>69</sup> or to the infamous atheist Richard Dawkins who vocally complained about the immorality of biblical texts but simultaneously hailed these texts as great literature that every schoolchild should read.<sup>70</sup> Dawkins went so far as to accuse people who did not appreciate the literary merits of the Bible of barbarity.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The version of the Bible was by Aud Gløppen from Blæst Design, and won the gold award (<https://www.grafill.no/avb/nyheter/vinnere-2012>).

<sup>65</sup> In this book, 87 Norwegian authors write poems in dialogue with biblical texts (Alf Kjetil Walgermos and Jan Ove Ulstein, eds., *Bibeldikt* [Oslo: Verbum, 2014]).

<sup>66</sup> The description of the book reads: "En gruppe skjønnlitterære forfattere stod sentralt i arbeidet med den nye bibeloversettelsen som kom i 2011. Det litterære prosjektet *Bibeldikt* tar samarbeidet et skritt videre og viser at Gud for alvor er tilbake i skjønnlitteraturen" (see <https://www.adlibris.com/se/bok/bibeldikt-9788254312926>).

<sup>67</sup> Karl Ove Knausgård, "Hjelpemann på bibelen," *Samtiden: Tidsskrift for politikk, litteratur og samfunnsproblemer* 4 (2010): 64–80.

<sup>68</sup> See Karl Ove Knausgård's *Morgenstjerne* novel (2020) and its following books in the series; see Jon Fosse, *Morgon og Kveld* (Oslo: Samlaget, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Northrope Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006 [1981]).

<sup>70</sup> Richard Dawkins, "Why I Want All Our Children to Read the King James Bible," *The Guardian*, 19 March 2012 (<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/may/19/richard-dawkins-king-james-bible>).

Productions of new Bible versions and claims about the Bible as great literature reflect widespread perceptions of biblical texts as culturally relevant, accelerating interest in Bibles as literary products on the secular market. The point about the Bible as common culture, suited to a secular context, is echoed by the Norwegian Bible Society, in their annual report for 2022. The General Secretary of the Society, Øyvind Haraldseid, writes that we “often think about the Bible as a book for believers—a book around which churches stand together and own—God’s word,” but it has “become clear that the Bible also is more than a holy book for churches and believers.”<sup>72</sup> The Bible “is a social issue [et samfunnsanliggende], a culturally and historically important marker.”<sup>73</sup> Despite what might seem like ever-growing trends of secularization, Bible-production may not be in abeyance. Richard Pleijel has shown how in Sweden during the 1960s, despite the strong narrative of this being a time of increased secularization and even anti-religious feeling, a number of institutional actors were intensely occupied with translations of the Bible and believed strongly in the idea of the Bible as common culture.<sup>74</sup>

The idea of the Bible as a culturally and historically important marker is a classic reformulation of the trends that, as Jonathan Sheehan has so persuasively shown, developed during the European Enlightenment. This period produced a dominant conception of the Bible as an icon of cultural heritage in the West.<sup>75</sup> The post-theological Enlightenment Bible had no one centre for its authority, but rather coalesced around four domains: philology, pedagogy, poetry, and history. Each of these

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<sup>71</sup> Dawkins, “Why I Want.”

<sup>72</sup> Øyvind Haraldseid, *Bibelselskapet 2022 Årsrapport*, 3 (my translation). Available online here: <https://bibel.no/det-norske-bibelselskap-og-verbium-forlag/arsrapporter>.

<sup>73</sup> Haraldseid, *Årsrapport*, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Pleijel, “The 1960s Bible: Investigating Discourse on a Swedish Translation of the New Testament,” *Perspectives* (2023), 1–15.

<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2013).



domains offered an answer to the question of biblical authority, and each enabled the Bible to survive in a modern climate suspicious of theological truth claims based on a sacred unquestionable and authoritative text.<sup>76</sup> Michael Legaspi has called this historical development the “death of Scripture” and the birth of a different kind of Bible.<sup>77</sup> For many, scripture could no longer function meaningfully “as an authoritative anthology of unified, authoritative writings belonging to the Church.”<sup>78</sup> The Reformation and the concurrent splitting of Christianity and the Bible into different camps and canons turned scripture into contested territory. As a contested text, the Bible could no longer successfully function as a self-authorising, unifying authority in European culture.<sup>79</sup> Rather, the Bible was claimed as a “common cultural inheritance.”<sup>80</sup>

Bibles do not only move around the market as literary classics or aesthetic commodities to prove bourgeois *Bildung*, though. Bibles in Norway move in political directions that go both left and right. Based on the 2011 Norwegian translation of the Bible, a Bible appeared on the Norwegian market called *Fattigdoms- og rettferdighetsbibelen*. In this Bible, passages in the Christian canon of scripture that refer to poverty and justice are highlighted.<sup>81</sup> Additional material includes 25 reflections from different church communities, organisations, and civil society, who interpret biblical texts for the present time.<sup>82</sup> The Norwegian Poverty and Justice Bible could be understood both as a result of local activist traditions and working-class movements in Norway, and as tapping into

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<sup>76</sup> Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 91.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture*, 5.

<sup>81</sup> *Fattigdoms- og rettferdighetsbibeln* (Oslo: Verbum, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> The description on the publisher’s webpage also notes that this Bible will inspire everyone who wants to contribute to a better and more just world: <https://bibel.no/nettbutikk/bibel-2011-fattigdoms-og-rettferdighetsbibelen>.

liberation theological movements in South America and South Africa going back to the 1960s and 70s.<sup>83</sup> Also that same year—2011—Norway’s own homegrown far-right terrorist cited the Bible in his manifesto, which he posted online and emailed out to would-be sympathizers.<sup>84</sup> His own Bible citations were themselves the result of the extraction and import of particular biblical content. The 22 July terrorist’s listing of multiple biblical verses justifying violence in his manifesto was almost entirely lifted from a US evangelical webpage, dedicated to “Battle verses of the Bible.”<sup>85</sup> Much of the manifesto’s Bible was, also, however, the result of long-term transnational far-right and populist-right trends to pit the Bible against the Qur’an—where the Bible stands for everything progressive and benign about Western civilization and the Qur’an represents everything threatening and malign.<sup>86</sup> The biblical content cited in the manifesto is also its own kind of export through online and offline channels.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Roland Boer, *Rescuing the Bible* (Maldon: Blackwell, 2007), has argued that an active highlighting of passages in the Bible is necessary from a leftist political standpoint in order to avoid the Bible to be claimed solely as a right-wing product.

<sup>84</sup> Hannah M. Strømmen, “Christian Terror in Europe? The Bible in Anders Behring Breivik’s Manifesto,” *The Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 4/1 (2017): 147–169.

<sup>85</sup> Hannah M. Strømmen, *The Bibles of the Far Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>86</sup> Hannah M. Strømmen, “Biblical Blood-Lines. From Foundational Corpus to Far Right Bible,” *BibInt* 25/4–5 (2017): 555–573; see also idem, “Scripts and Scriptures of Populism: On Populist Reading Practices,” in *The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times*, eds. Ulrich Schmiedel and Joshua Ralston (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 85–100; idem and Ulrich Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity: Responding to the Far Right* (London: SCM, 2021).

<sup>87</sup> Breivik’s manifesto has been cited as an inspiration in different circles and cases, such as by the mass murderer who killed 59 people in a terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019, targeting two mosques during Friday prayer. Graham Macklin and Tore Bjørge discuss Breivik’s impact on extreme-right lone actor terrorists in the ten years since his terror attacks by exploring thirty cases where Breivik is mentioned by name as an inspiration. While in the Christchurch shootings, as they suggest, there is ample evidence that Breivik’s influence was substantial, the influence is

There is nothing new about the so-called politicization of Bibles, particularly for propping up notions of national identity. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Karin Neutel have discussed the way Bibles function as specifically national products, marketed alongside other claims to national identity, such as Norwegianness.<sup>88</sup> In the history of creating national Bibles in the vernacular, these Bibles can be seen as majoritarian artefacts made accessible for the people of a nation. National Bibles can be treasured books by a majority without being necessarily exclusive or exclusionary. But national Bibles can function, as Bjelland Kartzow and Neutel have argued, to defend a majoritarian “we” in the face of a changing religious landscape. This “we” might implicitly or explicitly exclude minorities from the “we” in the public sphere.<sup>89</sup>

In fact, it is perhaps noteworthy that when the Norwegian right-wing populist Fremskrittspartiet-politician Sylvi Listhaug published a book in 2018, *Der andre tier* (Eng. “Where others are silent”), she writes about a Bible linked to her childhood, to tradition, and to Norwegian values.<sup>90</sup> Recounting her childhood Christianity, she wrote about the Bible teaching she remembers from Sunday school.<sup>91</sup> According to Listhaug, “Norwegian and Christian values are under pressure.”<sup>92</sup> Like many proponents in the contemporary European populist right, she complains about elites and about a supposedly uncontrolled “stream” of asylum seekers coming to Norway.<sup>93</sup> Islamism, she writes, is today’s

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often more indirect. Graham Macklin and Tore Bjørgo, “Breivik’s Long Shadow? The Impact of the July 22, 2011 Attacks on the Modus Operandi of Extreme-right Lone Actor Terrorists,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15/3 (2021): 14–36.

<sup>88</sup> Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Karin Neutel, “‘God Speaks Our Language’: Recent Scandinavian Bible Translations and the Heritagization of Christianity,” in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, eds. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 163–178.

<sup>89</sup> Kartzow and Neutel, “God Speaks,” 165.

<sup>90</sup> Sylvi Listhaug, *Der andre tier* (Oslo: Kagge Forlag, 2018).

<sup>91</sup> Listhaug, *Der andre tier*, 143–144.

<sup>92</sup> Listhaug, *Der andre tier*, 149.

“horror-ideology,” and has to be battled.<sup>94</sup> The Bible of Listhaug’s childhood is the kind of Norwegian-Christian tradition that needs to be preserved, as she presents it. This is also a way of repackaging a Bible and putting it on the market—in this case as an object of nostalgia and carrier of tradition, even a guarantor against the “foreign” Qur’an.

Bibles move in different directions in Norway, also when it comes to perceived Norwegianness. A major celebrated Bible in recent years in Norway is the North-Sami Bible, *Biibbal* 2019. On Sunday 25 August, 2019, this Bible was processed through a church in Kautokeino, with church leaders from Sweden, Finland, and Norway in attendance.<sup>95</sup> According to the Norwegian Bible Society, the first edition of *Biibbal* 2019 was sold out in the first six months.<sup>96</sup> Further Sami translations are underway.<sup>97</sup> But the efforts to produce a Sami Bible were historically affected by theological and cultural trends and resources—or the lack of them. The question as to whether mission to the Sami should best be conducted by insisting on Norwegian as the language of mission, or by translating the Bible into the Sami vernaculars, impacted Bible production in the early 18th century. When Sami translators such as Anders Porsanger and Lars Hætta in the 18th and 19th centuries translated the biblical texts, resources were withheld, by refusing to pay them properly for their translation work.<sup>98</sup> Of course, the context for these discussions about what Bibles to pay for and to produce was the forced Norwegianization of the Sámi.<sup>99</sup> In this context, though, “the Bible” does not sim-

<sup>93</sup> Listhaug, *Der andre tier*, 37; 86–87.

<sup>94</sup> Listhaug, *Der andre tier*, 140.

<sup>95</sup> See the Norwegian Bible Society’s account of this event online at <https://bibel.no/nyheter/bibelfest-i-sápmi>.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Erik Wirgenes, “Året vi fikk ny bibel på norsamisk,” *Bibelselskapet 2019, Årsrapport*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Wirgenes, “Året,” 3.

<sup>98</sup> Marit B. Henriksen, “Bibelen på samisk: Historisk blick på samiske bibeloversettelser,” *Kirke og Kultur* 124/1 (2020), 68–84.

<sup>99</sup> Henriksen, “Bibelen på samisk,” 69.

ply belong to the majority population in Norway as a colonial tool to Norwegianize the Sami, or to people who could withhold or distribute resources for the production of a Sami Bible. This history of Norwegianization crucially marks the Bible in Norway. But the production of Sami Bibles also demonstrates the way notions of nation, national identity, and borders are crossed and disrupted through Sami translators, Sami religiosity, and Sami Bible users.

The continued production of “new” Bibles on the market is also evidenced by the first Norwegian Catholic Bible in 2023. This is the first Norwegian Bible edition that follows the Catholic canon and order of biblical books. The Catholic Bishop in Oslo, Bernt Eidsvåg, has commented on how pleased Norwegian Catholics are finally to have a full “Bible of their own.”<sup>100</sup> Rather than a gap in the market that has now been filled, further Catholic Bibles are under discussion, with one planned also in Nynorsk. Bibles are not only affected by the needs of minority religious communities, such as Norwegian Catholics, however, but are affected by larger geopolitical events. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the expulsion of people from Ukraine is accelerating the production of Ukrainian Bibles on the Norwegian market, as well as the shipping of Bibles out of Norway to the East.<sup>101</sup>

All of these Norwegian cases—the 2011 beautiful fiction Bible, *Bibeldikt*, the poverty and justice Bible, the 22 July far-right Bible, Listhaug’s childhood Bible, *Biibbal* 2019, the Catholic Bible, the

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<sup>100</sup> “Første ‘katolske’ bibel på norsk”, October 2023 (<https://www.katolsk.no/nyheter/2023/10/forste-katolske-bibel-pa-norsk>) and “Den katolske kirke får sin første bibel på norsk,” 5 October 2023 (<https://bibel.no/nyheter/den-katolske-kirke-far-sin-forste-bibel-pa-norsk>).

<sup>101</sup> The Bibles shipped from Norway to Ukraine can also be understood in relation to the enduring role Bibles have played in warfare, for soldiers’ comfort for instance, or in military chaplains’ hands to preach, in the words of John 15:13, that “there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends.” Incidentally, this very verse was echoed by Vladimir Putin in a speech on March 18, 2022, to justify the Russian war on Ukraine.

Ukrainian Bibles in Norway and exported to Ukraine—could be understood as distinctly Norwegian or Nordic phenomena. But they also need to be understood as part of global flows of capital, cultural circulations of texts, themes, and tropes, and local expulsions of people and products. The production of Bibles as commodities and the mining of biblical content crucially depends on contextual factors that are both specific to the Norwegian context, but simultaneously reliant on transnational trends.

### BIBLES IN MOVEMENT

Bibles are in movement. This point in many ways plays out Brennan Breed's argument that biblical texts must be studied as things "for which movement and variation is a necessary quality."<sup>102</sup> How can biblical scholars account for this movement and variation? Breed suggests that scholars can organise and make sense of "the history of a text's unfolding capacities."<sup>103</sup> Reception inquiries provide a survey of "the text's ever-expanding potentials."<sup>104</sup> However, doing so, I suggest, requires a focus not only on the multiple different biblical texts and their multi-directional exegesis, but on the production and movement of Bibles and the circulation of biblical content. Bibles are local artefacts, read, used, and researched in particular contexts. But they are also dependent on transnational trends of seeing the Bible as common cultural inheritance, a national treasure, a literary classic, a majoritarian artefact or a minority object, an archive for violent texts or an aid export for victims of war. Geographical contexts are necessary for focus, nuance, and understanding. Contextual understandings of the Bible also, however, need to ac-

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<sup>102</sup> Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), 116–117.

<sup>103</sup> Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 142.

<sup>104</sup> Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 142.

count for the way Bibles circulate, are exported, imported, gain traction, or lose traction, depending on trends and resources.

In light of the movement of Bibles I have been discussing, then, we might be better off when researching the Bible in the North, to not assume it is lost with declining church numbers or affiliates with Christianity. It might be more beneficial to analyse the way Bibles circulate as part of the global flows of capital, relying on shifting cultural trends, and ever-changing resources. Bibles are produced as aesthetic commodities, are goods to be exported in times of war, are content to be mined, exported, marketed, branded, and rebranded. From Bibles as objects of nostalgia to treasure troves for battle, extractions from the biblical archive mark the cultural scenes of the North. Considering the fact that we can now chat to biblical characters using Chat GPT,<sup>105</sup> it would seem that there is no end to the way Bibles continue to be produced and reproduced. These productions and reproductions are specific to the bordered identities we are born into and legally obliged to live by, and oblivious to human-constructed border regimes.

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<sup>105</sup> Fione André, “New AI app lets users ‘text with’ Jesus and other biblical figures,” 7 August 2023, (<https://religionnews.com/2023/08/07/new-ai-app-lets-users-text-with-jesus-and-other-biblical-figures/>).