

Opening Thomas Merton's Bible

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for Marshall Soules

I become aware that I have only begun to seek the questions. And what are the questions? Can man make sense out of existence? Can man honestly give his life meaning...?

letter to Dom Francis Decroix, August 21, 1967.¹

A strange book

The Bible is a strange book and Thomas Merton's extended essay, *Opening the Bible*, is no less strange. Leave it to a poet-monk, at once 'ascetic, conservative, traditional, monastic' and 'somewhat akin to beats and hippies and to poets in general', to make use of a film (Pasolini's 'The Gospel According to St. Matthew'), a novel (Faulkner's *The Sound and Fury*) and a work of non-fiction (Fromm's *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*) to galvanize a fresh reading of the Bible.² While it's not necessary for the reader of *Opening the Bible* to have seen the film, read the novel or be familiar with Erich Fromm, such familiarity certainly enhances one's reading. Strangely, and perhaps characteristically, given his lifelong love of the arts, Merton turns to an atheist who makes a classic of religious cinema, a novelist who uses themes, imagery and diction from the Bible, and a Jew who regards the Bible as a work of radical humanism. The Bible, for Merton, 'is everybody's book, and the unbeliever can prove himself as capable as anyone else of finding new aspects of it.'³

Merton's engagement with the film 'The Gospel According to St. Matthew' by the Italian Marxist poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini is particularly riveting:

The Christ of Pasolini, young, dark, splendidly aloof, dreadfully serious, was obviously not the sweet, indulgent Jesus of late nineteenth-century Church art. And the apostles were obviously not unreal, shadowy ghosts incapable of understanding a single fact

about human existence. These were very real, gnarled, tough men, weather-beaten people who had lived through cruel wars, who had hidden in the mountains from the political police, who knew what the inside of prisons and concentration camps looked like—in a word, they resembled the actual men Christ chose for his disciples!⁴

Written and directed by Pasolini in neorealist style in 1964, 'The Gospel According to St. Matthew' features Pasolini himself as St. Peter, and his mother as the Virgin Mary. The cast 'were not professional actors, but just 'people'—most of them poor and some of them Communists.'⁵ Merton believed that the director and the actors had all personally *discovered* the Gospel of Matthew in the course of making the film.

What struck Merton on his 1966 viewing of the film were the beauty and naturalness of the human faces: 'The actors—all ordinary Italian people, but with extraordinary faces. Some of it was unforgettable. A passion play on the screen, done very movingly and with a lot of verve and dignity—visual quality of Tuscan painting at times (without the colour). But above all the faces!'⁶

Merton enters the Bible not as a priest or a monk, not as a scholar or an authority, but as an individual reader who struggles, like so many others, with the Bible's meaning. Readers familiar with Merton would be wise to keep at the forefront of their minds his magnificent sentence from *Contemplation in a World of Action*:

This is simply the voice of a self-questioning human person who, like all his brothers, struggles to cope with turbulent, mysterious, demanding, exciting, frustrating, confused existence in which almost nothing is really predictable, in which most definitions, explanations, and justifications become incredible even before they are uttered, in which people suffer together and are sometimes utterly beautiful, at other times impossibly pathetic.⁷

The questioning voice is the voice of *Opening the Bible*. Merton has more questions than answers, more probes than pronouncements. He seems to recognise that the Bible is not so much a book of dogmas and doctrines; rather it is a book of stories, which are often ambiguous and always open to interpretation. These ancient stories continue to reflect, influence, and guide our lives.

Merton laments much of centuries-old traditional biblical scholarship, which, rather than illuminate the ancient texts, obfuscates them. He protests the 'arid, exhausting desert of futile detail which wearies the

mind by distracting it from the meaning of the Bible and goes wandering aimlessly through a wilderness of technicalities where all interest withers and expires.⁸ Against such aridity, Merton pitches a lively reading of scripture.

He leans into the Bible in his distinctive manner, with a beginner's attitude. In *Opening the Bible*, a work originally commissioned for a projected *Time-Life Bible* and left in draft form towards the end of his life, Merton reads scripture as if for the first time and invites the reader to do the same. He rejects readings that seek to provide rescue from the world; instead, he affirms readings that lead to greater immersion in the world while neither domesticating the Bible's wildness nor familiarizing its strangeness.

Merton explores this 'dangerous' book, or collection of books, resisting the temptation to harden its fluid metaphoric complexities into rigid literal dogmas. He makes reading scripture strange again, allowing himself to be read and to be questioned by the very book he is reading and questioning. Merton insists that 'it is of the very nature of the Bible to affront, perplex and astonish the human mind. Hence the reader who opens the Bible must be prepared for disorientation, confusion, incomprehension, perhaps outrage.'⁹

He writes his essay on the Bible in his customary style of language and thought. Here, as in his best work elsewhere such as *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and his personal journals, Merton offers the reader a jambalaya, a great mix: storytelling, film criticism, biblical exegesis, brief biography, and theology with the help of Protestant theologians (Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Very few Catholic references are to be found in the 83 pages of Merton's text in *Opening the Bible*. In his narrative, Merton characterizes the Bible as unsatisfying, difficult, confusing, 'disconcerting, ambiguous, even frightening'. Merton's invitation to open the Bible is an odd one: come into a danger zone and be baffled. If you're uncomfortable, you're meant to be. Prepare yourself for 'supernatural jolts, shocks, short circuits, mystical feedback, and heaven knows what else besides'.¹⁰

A message preached to the poor

Yet for all Merton's cautionary warnings, he takes the reader quickly to the heart of scripture: 'We must never overlook the fact that the message of the Bible is above all a message preached to the poor, the burdened, the oppressed, the underprivileged.'¹¹ The Bible is a sequence of books

written by the poor, to the poor and for the poor. It is also a book, or more accurately, a collection of books, written by Jews, to Jews and for Jews.

According to Merton,

The Bible is not primarily a written or printed text to be scrutinized in private, in a scholar's study or a contemplative cell. It is a body of oral messages, announcements, prophecies, promulgations, recitals, histories, songs of praise, lamentations, etc., which are meant either to be uttered or at least read aloud, or chanted, or sung, or recited in a community convoked for the purpose of a living celebration.¹²

In Merton's monastery outside of Bardstown, Kentucky, the Psalms, for example, were sung communally with fellow-monks on a daily basis. Merton wrote at length on the Psalms—their poetry, their symbolism, their mysteries—in *Bread in the Wilderness* in 1953.

Merton's words about 'a living celebration' within a worshipping community are written in the context of his engagement with Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* and the character Dilsey, a black cook and housekeeper in the Compson (white) household. Merton argues, by means of Faulkner's novel, that the Jewish and Christian understanding of the Bible has never been the work merely of scholars and specialists; rather, 'it has been the fruit of collective and communal celebration, and the transmission of a common *experience* of receiving the word of God from generation to generation.'¹³

Merton highlights this sense of celebration: 'In the last section of *The Sound and Fury*, describing the Easter service at the little Negro church, Faulkner presents us with one of the most authentic and most moving accounts of a deep Biblical experience. This experience is precisely the authentic hearing of the message of God.' Dilsey, with the idiot Benjy Compson, leads a 'solemn procession out of the violent world into a world of simplicity, poverty, honesty and biblical truth'.¹⁴

The Bible is a Book of Questions rather than a Book of Answers. It doggedly pursues questions—from Job's relentless interrogations to the litany of questions by Jesus—including the vexed question of identity. The Bible, according to Barth as relayed by Merton, asks questions of its readers, not only 'What is this book?', but also, 'Who is this that reads it?'¹⁵

As the Israeli novelist Amoz Oz and his daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger note in *Jews and Words*, 'The Book of Books is full of questions.' The

authors provide this brief, but telling, dialogue:

God to Adam: 'Where are you?' and: 'Who told you you are naked?'

God to Eve, and later to Cain: 'What have you done?'

God to Cain: 'Where is Abel your brother?'¹⁶

Cain's answer to the question is another question, one of the most powerful in the Bible, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Dilsey, with Merton, Faulkner and many others, would emphatically answer Yes.

Merton and Heschel

Merton's entry into the Bible evolves from a phone call by Rabbi Abraham Heschel: 'Father Abbot spoke to me of your phone call, something about an article on the Bible for *Life*? ... I sincerely doubt my capacity to write anything worthwhile on the Bible. I am not a pro. But if it is something within my powers I can at least think about attempting it.'¹⁷

Merton seems to give a contradictory response to Heschel's request—no, maybe, then yes. He does make the attempt and by September of 1967 he has completed an outline and by Advent, a draft. The article (essay) wasn't published in *Life*, but it did appear posthumously in book form, first in 1970, and then in 1986 with an introduction by Robert E. Stone II, a slim volume of 84 pages.

As early as 1960, Merton had had a reading relationship with Heschel—each reading the other's works—and some mutual correspondence. In his journal on October 29, 1960, Merton records: 'Abraham Heschel wrote an amiable and humble letter and sent three books. I am happy and consoled. He is the most significant spiritual (religious) writer in this country at the moment. I like his depth and his realism. He knows God!'¹⁸ In his correspondence with Heschel, Merton acknowledges reading *God in Search of Man*, *The Prophets*, *The Earth is the Lord's* and *The Sabbath*.

On July 13, 1963, Rabbi Heschel visits Thomas Merton at Gethsemani. Even before the visit, based on his readings, Merton praises Heschel's depth and realism in a letter to Erich Fromm: 'I have been deeply impressed and moved by the wonderful work of Abraham Heschel.... It is singularly authentic religious material.'¹⁹

In retrospect, it seems odd to me that a Jewish scholar with an immense reputation for biblical scholarship would ask a Christian to write on the Bible while knowing that there are important differences

between the Hebrew Bible, which ends in Chronicles and the Christian Bible, which ends in the Book of Revelation. The Hebrew text is often subsumed into a new context, in which the Old is made to be the forerunner of the New. Such thinking—that the Old is superseded by the New—is embedded in Merton's thinking: 'To read the Bible ... as understood by Christians, means to ... see how the New Testament claims to fulfill and to perfect the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant in a completely new kind of freedom.'²⁰

Clearly Heschel and Merton would have disagreed on the idea that the New Testament fulfills and perfects the Old Testament. Where the rabbi and the monk may have agreed lies in this single powerful sentence by Merton: 'There is, in a word, nothing comfortable about the Bible—until we manage to get so used to it that we make it comfortable for ourselves.' The trouble with such comfort is: 'Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it? Have we ceased to fight it? Then perhaps our reading is no longer serious.'²¹

The word 'bible' derives from the Greek *ta biblia*, meaning books. Biblical scholar Robert Alter makes the case for the 'extreme heterogeneity' of the Bible in his Introduction to the Old Testament in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. The books were written over centuries, sometimes having as many differences as they have similarities.²² The Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh or, in Christian tradition, The Old Testament) consists of the poetry of praise (Psalms), the poetry of eroticism (the Song of Songs), prophecy, chronicles, wisdom, laws, stories, short biographies, dreams, and at least one work of great literature—Job. To this mix, not always integrated and unified in my reading, the Christian Bible primarily adds the letters of St. Paul and the parables of Jesus along with Jesus' birth-to-death narrative.

Merton downplays the differences between scriptures and pays little attention to the Jewishness of both bibles or the Jewishness of Jesus (Yeshua). He knew of course, although many of his readers may have needed reminding, that Jesus went to a synagogue to worship, not to a church; he observed Jewish feasts and holy days; he was steeped in Jewish scripture. To quote myself from 'Harold Bloom's Jesus' in my *Lightness and Soul*, 'The Jewish Jesus, as opposed to the American Jesus, is far more radical, and troublesome, than what many churches would be comfortable with.'²³

To be fair to Merton, scholarship has moved on since the time of Merton.²⁴ Scholars and poets are reclaiming the Jewishness of Jesus and the Jewishness of the Bible, both New and Old Testaments. Poet Leonard

Cohen playfully croons in *The Future*: 'I'm the little Jew/Who wrote the Bible'.²⁵ Few now would contest his lyric.

Shortcomings

The pugnacious Harold Bloom, an astute religious critic as well as a famous literary critic, in a book dedicated to historian Donald Akenson, claims that the New Testament is 'the strongest and most successful creative misreading in all of textual history'. According to Bloom, 'The central procedure of the New Testament is the conversion of the Hebrew Bible into the Old Testament...' The conversion is enacted in part by the rearranging of the Tanakh's ordering, 'so that it ends with Malachi and not with II Chronicles,' and changing the order of Ruth and Daniel. Furthermore: 'The New Testament is designed as a prism through which its precursor text is to be read, revised, and interpreted.'²⁶

To my mind, if Merton goes too far in pushing similarities between scriptures, Old and New, Bloom goes too far in minimizing the connections and continuities. In both scriptures, for example, the stranger is welcomed as a guest, and the suffering and the needy are fully recognized and attended to. In both scriptures (Hebrew and Christian), the 'terrible problem of suffering' is regarded 'not so much as a problem to be explained or as a mystery to be contemplated, but as an inscrutable existential fact.'²⁷

Another shortcoming for me in Merton's engagement with the Bible has to do with the non-existence of the first person pronoun. Uncharacteristically, there is no 'I' in the book. Merton doesn't personalize his thinking as he so often does. Oddly, he has very little to say on the parables of Jesus whom Harold Bloom and Jewish scholar Gila Safran Naveh regard as 'the world's foremost parabolist'.²⁸ He seems oddly distant from his subject at times except when he emphatically makes the point that a filmmaker (Pasolini), a psychoanalyst (Fromm) and a novelist (Faulkner) have as good a chance of elucidating scripture as any so-called expert.

The 'I' is at the centre of Merton's best work, implicitly or explicitly, whether, for example, in his journals, *The Sign of Jonas*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, or in the best of his political essays. His words are underwritten by his life. His voice is personal, intimate, and almost always based on his own life experiences. The first person pronoun is not present in *Opening the Bible*. Nowhere does Merton single out a verse for a personal comment or speak of a particular story or parable that has informed his life.

Merton's reach is also too sweeping at times. He bites off more than he can comfortably chew and digest. Whatever connections one can make—Merton as a student of world religions was the one person who may very well have been equipped to make them—between the Bible and Confucian thought, the Bible and Indian thought, or the Bible and Zen, one cannot treat the connections in any kind of depth in a few paragraphs. Drive-by, fly-by, inter-textual references don't suffice. At times Merton would have been better off holding his breath and resisting the urge to comment at all.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the book's shortcomings and perhaps the haste in which it was written, *Opening the Bible* has Merton's customary energy and exuberance. He recognizes a salient feature of the Bible: that it 'deals with events rather than with theories or ideas'. These events or happenings 'all take on the character of the unexpected and free *interventions or breakthroughs*. They are often explosive, astonishing, dramatic.'²⁹

A book of liberation

To read the Bible as a Christian—the readership Merton is primarily addressing—is to acknowledge that

the full manifestation of God is in fact a self-emptying (*kenosis*) in which God becomes man and even submits to death in the hands of men.... The word of God is now not only event but person, and the entire meaning and content of the Bible is to be found, say the Apostles, not in the message about Christ but in an encounter with Christ, who is at once person and word of God, and who lives as the Risen Lord. The fullness of the Bible is, then (for Christians), the personal encounter with Christ Jesus in which one recognizes him as "the one who is sent".... To become utterly committed to this person and to share in the event which is his coming, his death, and his resurrection is to find the meaning of existence, not by figuring it out but by living it as he did.... The great question of the New Testament, the question which includes all others, is *who* is Christ and what does it mean to encounter him?³⁰

Merton sees the Bible as a book of liberation, the liberation of a people (Jews) and the liberation of the individual through Christ. In both Testaments, the Bible positions itself on the side of the poor and the oppressed.

Merton proposes that 'any serious reading of the Bible means personal involvement in it, not simply mental agreement with abstract

propositions. And involvement is dangerous.' Here Merton turns to the example of David in 2 Samuel 12: 1-10 where David listens to the story of Nathan and 'becomes involved in it to the point of intense and righteous indignation, and then discovers that the malefactor who so angers him is *himself*!'³¹. David, like the rich man in the parable who steals the poor man's sheep, has done the equivalent of cheating the poor and stealing from them. The message of the parable seems to underscore words from Barth: 'When you begin to question the Bible you find that the Bible is also questioning you.'³²

Even though Merton's dialogue with the Bible is not as personal as one might wish it to be, it still speaks powerfully in plain language to a wide audience. Running through his narrative is the conviction that one must grapple with scripture without preconceived ideas and assumptions. 'One must get along without the security of neat and simple ready-made solutions. There are things one has to think out, all over again for oneself.'³³ The Bible itself calls us, its readers, to rethink, re-imagine, and reposition our whole lives in relation to those who suffer, to those who are in need, to all our neighbours; and 'to come to terms personally with the stark scandal and contradiction' that any reading of the Bible demands.³⁴

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1985), p. 156.
2. Letter to Sister J. M., June 17, 1968, in: Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, ed. Br Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1990), p. 385.
3. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (London: Unwin Books, 1972), p. 28.
4. *Opening the Bible*, p. 30.
5. *Opening the Bible*, p. 29.
6. Entry for October 28, 1966 in: Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 6, 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 151.
7. Thomas Merton, 'Is the World a Problem?' in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, intro. Jean Leclercq O.S.B. (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1973), p. 160.
8. *Opening the Bible*, p. 25.
9. *Opening the Bible*, p. 1.
10. *Opening the Bible*, pp. 26, 17.
11. *Opening the Bible*, p. 41.
12. *Opening the Bible*, p. 44.
13. *Opening the Bible*, p. 44.
14. *Opening the Bible*, pp. 43, 45.

15. *Opening the Bible*, p. 17
16. Amos Oz & Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 31.
17. Letter to Abraham Heschel, December 12, 1966, in: Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (London: Collins Flame, 1985), p. 435.
18. Entry for October 29, 1960 in: Thomas Merton, *Turning to the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 4, 1960-1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 61-62.
19. Letter dated September 30, 1960 in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 315
20. *Opening the Bible*, p. 68.
21. *Opening the Bible*, p. 27.
22. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter & Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1987.
23. J.S. Porter, *Lightness and Soul: Musings on Eight Jewish Writers* (Woodstock, ON: Seraphim Editions, 2011), p. 106.
24. See for example: Géza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (1973); J.P. Meir, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (1991); E.P. Saunders, *Jesus and Judaism* (1985); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991); Donald Harman Akenson, *Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus* (2000).
25. Leonard Cohen, *Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), p. 371.
26. Harold Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), pp. 36, 44-45.
27. *Opening the Bible*, p. 56.
28. Gila Safran Naveh, *Biblical Parables And Their Modern Re-Creations: From 'Apples of Gold in Silver Settings' to 'Imperial Messages'* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 63.
29. *Opening the Bible*, pp. 64, 65.
30. *Opening the Bible*, p. 69.
31. *Opening the Bible*, p. 33.
32. *Opening the Bible*, p. 17
33. Entry for November 2, 1957 in: Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 3, 1952-1960, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.132.
34. *Opening the Bible*, p. 27.

J.S. Porter, with Susan McCaslin, co-authored *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine* in 2018. He has also contributed to past issues of *The Merton Journal*: 'Robert Lax on Thomas Merton' in 2011; 'Notes on Robert Lax' in 2009; and 'Thomas Merton on Adolf Eichmann' in 2007.