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INTRODUCTION

As Nick Spencer has shown, there should be no doubt that the Bible has deeply embedded itself in English parliamentary politics over the centuries.¹ The Bible even has a physical presence of sorts in the Houses of Parliament, including the Latin text of Psalm 127.1 on the floor of the Central Lobby and the texts of 1 Peter 2.17 and Proverbs 11.14 on the floor of the Commons Lobby.² Spencer noted, however, that a certain appreciation of the Bible had changed by the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Bible was no longer an authoritative document which could (theoretically) decide political debates. Instead, the Bible was becoming a document which informed arguments, inspired individuals and provided rhetorical force. But in addition to no longer commanding universal deference, awareness of the contents of the Bible was changing:

Evangelicals...also recognised that the level of biblical knowledge among their peers, particularly in parliament, could not now be assumed. When the Quaker MP John Bright spoke in favour of Gladstone's Reform Bill in 1866, accusing an opponent 'into what may be called his political cave of Adullam', many members of the House did not know where or what the cave of Adullam was. That would not have happened in Cromwell's time.³

This loss of biblical knowledge also echoes a wider debate, and one that will be touched upon in this book, about the apparent 'decline' in biblical literacy, that is biblical literacy as defined in a quasi-Protestant sense as knowledge of the specific details of a range of biblical passages and an

1. N. Spencer, *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible* (Kindle edition; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011). On the history of Christianity across contemporary party politics see e.g. M.H.M. Steven, *Christianity and Party Politics: Keeping the Faith* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 45-64.

2. Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Introduction.

3. Spencer, *Freedom and Order*, Chapter 8.

awareness of a range of biblical characters.⁴ That there is a loss of knowledge about the details of the biblical texts is clear enough yet if the emergence of reception history has taught us anything it is that the Bible undeniably remains widely present in contemporary culture. In this book, I want to change the emphasis from a quasi-Protestant notion of biblical literacy and look at what interpreters, primarily English politicians, think the Bible ‘really means’ or how it might be used rhetorically, and *particularly in its public presentation rather than any hidden motives*, irrespective of whether there is an awareness of obscure biblical passages and characters, irrespective of whether a given political position can actually be found in the Bible, and irrespective of whether any given political interpretation would hold up to scholarly exegetical scrutiny. In other words, I want to look at the broad public hermeneutical assumptions among roughly contemporary politicians and how they interact with wider cultural and historical change.

Chapter 1 will give an overview of ways in which we might approach the interaction between historical change and understandings of the Bible. It will provide an explanation of the choice of post-1960s English political culture with particular emphasis on the importance of the emergence of Thatcherism and neoliberalism. It will then discuss major politicised understandings of what the Bible ‘really means’ and rhetorical uses (the Cultural Bible, the Liberal Bible, the Neoliberal Bible, and the Radical Bible) which will form the basis for the rest of the book and how different political figures and trends interact with these understandings. Some attention will initially be given to Tony Benn and his politically radical biblical interpretation because he represented a dwindling understanding of a once popular tradition in parliamentary politics.

Taking the examples of the Communist historian Christopher Hill and the Conservative politician Enoch Powell, the section on ‘Experiencing Defeat’ will look at how different political traditions engaged with the upheavals of the 1960s and the end of Empire. While both result in narratives of defeat and decline, both illustrate nascent ways in which politically radical, economically liberal, and nationalistic interpretations would survive inside and outside Parliament.

4. On debates over the pros and cons of biblical literacy see e.g. P.R. Davies, ‘Whose Bible? Anyone’s?’, *Bible and Interpretation* (July 2009), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/whose.shtml>; H. Avalos, ‘In Praise of Biblical Illiteracy’, *Bible and Interpretation* (April 2010), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/literate357930.shtml>.

The following chapter will look at Margaret Thatcher's influential understanding of the Bible. Thatcher saw the Bible as important support for her agenda of individualism and economic liberalism, or what would be labelled 'neoliberalism', and as something to be seen as part of English or British nationalism and democratic heritage. She also saw the Bible as being fundamentally anti-Marxist which was, of course, part of her Cold War thinking. But this was also in subtle contrast to her views on 'religion' which, no matter how negatively she viewed a manifestation of a given religion in the present, recognised that there was always potential for 'good'. This would be taken up in more detail by Tony Blair, in addition to his tacit general acceptance of Thatcher's reading of the Bible, even if his rhetoric occasionally suggested otherwise.

The steadily developing ideas of Thatcherism and her individualistic interpretation of the Bible in wider cultural trends are shown by looking at people who would largely be expected to be hostile to Thatcher and the Conservatives: Manchester musicians and Monty Python. These seemingly eclectic examples show how Thatcherism was, consciously or unconsciously, harnessing wider cultural trends developing since the 1960s but also how key elements of Thatcherism were, consciously or unconsciously, being transmitted by arguably more credible carriers of cultural change.

The next section will look at Thatcher's ongoing influence in party-politics and political biblical interpretation with reference to two important aspects of her legacy: the sharp fall of the Conservative Party and its 'toxic' brand and the emergence of the heavily Thatcherite New Labour. The chapter on Jeffrey Archer and his somewhat obviously semi-autobiographical novel on 'rescuing' Judas will look at how problematic hyper-Thatcherism had become but simultaneously how, outside Parliament, Archer's Bible represents an arguably unintentional by-product of Thatcherism – the amorality of the extravagant wealth of the successful entrepreneur.

The chapter on Blair will look at how, despite all the concerns of some of those around him, he regularly used the Bible in a way familiar to Thatcher while trying to incorporate the more politically radical biblical language that was deeply embedded in the Labour movement. Blair attempted to use biblical language of radical social transformation to garner support for his foreign policy and interventions, particularly in Iraq where he was struggling to gain widespread support from the Labour Party. Controversial though Blair's agenda was, there is clear evidence that his exegesis is a norm within the Parliamentary Labour Party, particularly his emphasis on social liberalism. Some attention will

be paid to the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and how he has developed his understanding of the Bible internationally as part of his understanding of 'religion' and other scriptural traditions, notably the Qur'an, in terms of liberal democracy.

The next chapter will assess present day understandings of the Bible in parliamentary politics in light of these political and hermeneutical changes. The hermeneutical assumptions of Thatcherism remain among the circle around David Cameron and key Liberal Democrats but are qualified by the Blairite concern for social liberalism. The nationalism of the 'heritage' angle of the Bible has been strongly emphasised as representing English democracy, tolerance, freedom, and so on, most notably in the various utterances during the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible and Michael Gove sending a copy of the King James Bible to English schools. Some consideration is then given to the views outside of this seemingly settled political tradition: the fate of politically radical interpretations of the Bible. This will involve more politically radical interpretations of, for instance, sexuality and same-sex marriage (e.g. Peter Tatchell), foreign policy (e.g. the East Timor Ploughshares), the 2008 financial crisis (e.g. Occupy London Stock Exchange), and racial politics (e.g. Linton Kwesi Johnson). It is clear that such radical interpretations certainly remain but that they largely take place on the fringes of Parliament, or outside Parliament entirely.

Finally, some speculative consideration is given to why politicians bother using the Bible at all. In virtually all cases, the interpretation of the Bible matches the political agenda of a given politician and there is no obvious reason why the Bible is even needed. Issues of political heritage, voting, and implicit notions of authority will be briefly discussed.

In short, this book is about the parliamentary and even cultural victory of (a modified) Thatcher's Bible out of the socio-economic chaos of the 1960s and why politically radical interpretations have been pushed outside Parliament.