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The Bible in America and Britain at War

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This year marks the centenary of America's entrance into what was known as the Great War on the side of France and Great Britain. On April 6, 1917, having passed both the Senate and the House of Representatives, the United States of America declared war against Germany:

Whereas the Imperial German Government has committed repeated acts of war against the people of the United States of America:

Therefore, be it *Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled*, That the state of war between the United States and the Imperial German Government, which has thus been thrust upon the United States, is hereby formally declared.¹

It was Good Friday. For Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States, a day associated with sacrifice and redemption may not have seemed inapt. Wilson was a Presbyterian elder, the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers. As is well known, his view of the world and the United States was deeply colored by his Calvinism. He had a strong belief in divine providence and in America as a chosen nation. If his preferred policy of studied neutrality had had to be abandoned, America still held to his principles by entering the war for the sake of others and in the cause of justice.

Wilson's speech to Congress a few days earlier not only outlined the case for war, but in its final paragraph alluded to scriptural and religious language to bring home its appeal:

It is a distressing and oppressive duty, gentlemen of the Congress, which I have performed in thus addressing you. There are, it may be, many months of fiery trial and sacrifice ahead of us. It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts – for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal

¹ United States. Congress. *Declaration of War with Germany*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1917. Emphasis original.

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dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.

Those familiar with the King James Version of the Bible will recognize 1 Peter's "fiery trial" and Hebrews' "fearful thing". More pointed in an appeal to declare war on Germany is Wilson's concluding appropriation of Martin Luther's riposte to the Diet of Worms: *hier stehe ich und kann nicht anders. Gott helfe mir. Amen*. On the four-hundredth anniversary of Luther's 95 theses, no less!

Britain and America's joint enterprise deepened the relationship between two nations already bound by shared history and shared language. They both also had a predominantly Protestant, and hence biblical, religious culture. An instructive example of this shared culture was the mission of the Old Testament scholar George Adam Smith to America in 1918.² Smith had been invited by the American National Committee on Churches and the Moral Aims of the War, but his visit was sanctioned by the British Foreign Office who supplied him with literature and statistics with which to pepper his talks. He went not only as a representative of Great Britain, but as an emissary of the United Free Church of Scotland and the Universities of Britain. Smith was a good choice because he had already traveled to the United States on a number of occasions and taught at a number of universities. On Smith's account, he traveled over 22,000 miles from New York to San Francisco and addressed 127 meetings over a period of 5 months. The addresses were published later that year as *Our Common Conscience*.³

Smith was at this point one of the most high-profile intellectuals in the country. He was Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Aberdeen, and had recently been elected to the British Academy as well as being made a knight of the realm. His *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* was reputedly consulted daily (along with the Bible!) by Allenby during his Palestine campaign,⁴ and an

² For Smith's trip to America see the academic biography of Smith by Iain D. Campbell: *Fixing the Indemnity: The Life and Work of George Adam Smith (1856–1942)*. Paternoster Theological Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004).

³ George Adam Smith, *Our Common Conscience: Addresses Delivered in America During the Great War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918).

⁴ Archibald Percival Wavell, *Allenby: A Study in Greatness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 223. For some well-placed skepticism about just how important Smith's book was to Allenby, see Eric R. Cline, *The Battles of Armageddon: Megiddo and the Jezreel Valley from the Bronze Age to the Nuclear Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

abbreviation was published in 1918 at the request of the War Office.⁵ That a biblical scholar should hold such positions and be invited to undertake such tasks is itself a sign of the stock that a theologian might hold in Britain and America in the early twentieth century. During his visit, Smith even met his fellow Presbyterian Wilson who spoke warmly of the meeting:

I very much enjoyed my interview with Sir George Smith and am very happy that he did not go away without my seeing him, and I was deeply and truly interested in what you and he told me of what you [Frederick Lynch of the American National Committee on Churches and the Moral Aims of the War] and he had been doing and of the general work of extending an intelligent understanding of the moral aims of the war.⁶

The moral aims of the war were, indeed, the principal themes of Smith's talks, lectures and sermons. Though they embraced different forms – factual and statistical accounts of the war efforts in his talks, accounts of the role of the universities and discussions of international dimensions in his lectures, exposition of scriptural passages in his sermons – there is a significant overlap in content. For Smith, America and its new war associates are committed to the cause of justice and peace in that order, in contrast to the German Empire's anti-Christian embrace of power. The war is a "sacred cause" which the British took as an act of duty and fidelity to Belgium. It has proven the moral fiber of the British people from those on the front to those left at home. At various points Smith's message is carefully modulated to resonate with American sensibilities – the nation's reluctance to enter the war, the idea that it transcended the greed of the European nations, Wilson's commitment to a league of nations, and Roosevelt's suspicion of dual citizenship (so-called hyphenated Americans). Yet, the success of Smith's mission was also no doubt because of his ability to articulate what he described as America and Britain's "common conscience" and to couch it in the language and ideals of a shared Protestant culture: the idea of vicarious suffering, the centrality of justice, and the belief in divine providence.

The ability of Smith to appeal to a "common conscience" was the result of a significant traffic of religious ideas between the United States and Great Britain that went back to colonial days and continues even to the present. This traffic was deeply colored by the Bible's place within the dominant Protestantism of both countries. The essays in this themed fascicle provide a window into the character of biblical religiosity in both countries and the relationship between them.

⁵ George Adam Smith, *Syria and the Holy Land* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918).

⁶ Cited in Campbell, *Fixing*, 169.

In her essay, Cindy Wesley examines the way that American Methodism responded to Woodrow Wilson's decision to lead the nation into war against Germany. She argues that Methodists leveraged biblical themes of righteousness, self-sacrifice, and brotherhood of humanity to support Wilson's aims of defending the freedom of nations and the defense of democracy. Wesley shows how the American Methodists are an archetypal American denomination and illustrates how the non-democratic world of the Bible becomes a vehicle for American ideas of democracy.

Charlotte Methuen's essay examines George Adam Smith's fellow Scot, James Cooper, and his sermon preached on the national day of prayer and intercession in January 1915. Cooper and Smith were to be Moderators of their respective churches in 1917, in the middle of the war: Smith of the United Free Church of Scotland and Cooper of the Church of Scotland. In other ways, their lives mirrored the other's. Both had spent some of their theological education in Germany; they had been parish ministers in Aberdeen in the 1880s and 1890s before being called to chairs in Glasgow; after his appointment in the University of Aberdeen, Smith was instrumental in the founding of the Officer Training Corps (OTC), whilst Cooper was chaplain of the University of Glasgow OTC. But whilst Smith was unwavering in his belief that the war was a sacred cause, Methuen traces a discernible shift in Cooper's sensibilities about the war. Cooper's sermon emphasizes the themes of duty and sacrifice, and not the crusading zeal of the opening months of the war. Whilst maintaining the righteousness of the Triple Entente's cause, he also insisted that they too had sins of which they needed to repent. As Methuen demonstrates, Cooper's application of Scripture to the events of the war was ahead of his contemporaries.

Judging the public mood, whilst also representing tradition, was a challenge that all churchmen faced during the war. Andrew Mein's essay discusses a particularly potent example that arose during the Church of England's revision of the Prayer Book. Liturgical reform has always had the potential to inspire impassioned responses, but the proposal that imprecatory passages be removed from the Psalter seems particularly ill-timed given that British civilians were feeling the brunt of the war in ways previously unimaginable, through aerial bombardment. The deliberations of the Convocation of Canterbury became front-page news and unleashed a torrent of correspondence about the rights and wrongs of seeking retribution. Mein's article helpfully juxtaposes some very different responses from prelates and university theologians to newspaper columnists and ardent letter writers. They give an impression of what a cross-section of the British public thought the Bible was, or should be, about, and the role of the church and its leaders in war-time society.

At the furthest remove from those seeking unlimited retribution upon Germany might appear to be those who formed the *Fellowship of Reconciliation*.

Ian Randall's essay examines the work of the Fellowship and its use of the Bible. He plots the establishment of the fellowship and some of its earliest publications on Scripture and war. Its resistance to any form of conflict became more challenging with the introduction of conscription in 1916, albeit with some happy results for historians. The records of military service tribunals sometimes record detailed discussions about Scripture and the basis for pacifism. The work of the fellowship did not end with the cessation of hostilities. They were not simply opposed to war, but had decided views about what shape peace should take. Through the examination of the Fellowship during the First World War and beyond, Randall shows a common biblical hermeneutic that saw in the New Testament, and especially the teaching of Jesus, a normative Christian ethic.

By extending the historical horizon well into the 1930s, Randall reminds us that the First World War should not be considered in isolation from its larger historical context. Indeed, the settlement imposed through the Treaty of Versailles created the conditions for the Second World War, and thus the First World War can be seen as the first part of a two-part drama. Mike Snape's essay argues against easy periodization of the twentieth century, and demonstrates the benefits that accrue when one examines the ways in which the Bible was used by the American and British military in both the First and Second World Wars. He addresses the various uses of the Bible within the services: its use by commanders and ordinary soldiers, the extent of Bible distribution, and the degree to which this resulted in actual Bible reading, and ways in which the Bible was used as a talisman. Snape demonstrates that, in both conflicts, the Bible had a strong social and cultural currency. Perhaps most remarkable, given the claims that are often made for secularization after the First World War, the Bible appears to have had greater prominence in the Second World War.

In his article, Eric Reisenauer encourages us to look back in time for the origins of millennial interpretations of Daniel and Revelation that flourished during the First World War. He shows that the equation of Ezekiel's Tarshish and its lions and Daniel's King of the South with Britain and its empire had its roots in nineteenth-century British-Israelism readings of Scripture. Far from being a marginal set of beliefs, Reisenauer demonstrates that such ideas were held by a not insignificant proportion of the British population, including high-ranking military officials. The long duration of the war, its unprecedented nature, the entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war, and the Palestine campaign ensured that such millennialism reached a crescendo in the final years of the war.

Alana Vincent's essay on the design of graves in Imperial War Graves cemeteries extends our horizons not just chronologically, but also geographically. She reminds us that those fighting for Great Britain came not only from its Atlantic archipelago, but also from across its sprawling empire. For British politicians,

this raised the problem of how to commemorate soldiers with various religious affiliations – not only the variety of Christian denominations found in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but also Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Sikhs, amongst others. Vincent discusses the role of choice quotes from the Apocrypha as vehicles of religious sentiment, but which were not overly associated with the dominant Protestant Christianity of the home nation.

The different articles in this themed fascicle illustrate the great diversity of ways in which the Bible was put to use during the Great War, in Britain and America. The Bible is at the same time a prospectus for pacifism, a guidebook for the apocalyptic future, a beacon of democracy, and a protective talisman. In many ways, it is still all of those things to contemporary readers. The benefit of viewing the strange country that is the past is the degree to which it reveals our present as an equally strange country. It is, in the words of a certain Woodrow Wilson, “a book which reveals men to themselves.”⁷

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⁷ Woodrow Wilson, *The Bible and Progress* (New York: Globe Litho, 1911), 2.