

UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**THE PREAMBLE
FIFTEEN YEARS ON**

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Book Forum: Robyn Whitaker's *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*¹

An Invaluable Resource

Liz Boase

From the moment I heard/read the title of Robyn Whitaker's book on interpreting the Bible, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*, I looked forward to reading it. My initial response was playful intrigue – I loved the title and was curious about where Whitaker would position her argument. I know Robyn as a colleague and fellow biblical scholar, and we share interpretive sensibilities. So, my curiosity was piqued – what was she thinking in choosing this title, and where would the book take its readers?

I was right to be intrigued, and I have enjoyed the read. This short volume (189 pages) is a careful and astute exploration of the need for informed biblical interpretation.

Even the Devil Quotes Scripture is addressed to a range of audiences. One of the gifts of this book is the combination of deep scholarly learning, clear and approachable writing and personal experience. Whitaker introduces the volume with a memory of receiving an NIV bible as a teenager, with the words of Jesus highlighted in red, the inside cover inscribed with “May you have the wisdom to discern the kernel from the chaff” (11). Interwoven through the book are traces of Whitaker's journey from an earnest conservative, evangelical teenager determined to read the Bible literally (her self-description) to a mature scholar who takes the Bible seriously but not literally. Whitaker's journey of discovery grounds the argument built across the chapters. The Bible was and remains the starting point for Whitaker in her scholarship, teaching and preaching. Because of this commitment, Whitaker raises and responds to three core questions through which she challenges her readers to examine their assumptions about the Bible: “What is the Bible? What do we expect from it? And how do we best read and interpret it?” (p. 11).

The first chapter, “What is the Bible?” sets the foundations and the tone for what follows. Whitaker suggests at least two ways of responding to the question. The first is the scholarly, literary, and historical response, while the second is the enduring significance of the Bible for people of faith with a focus on the Christian community. Throughout the book, Whitaker explores an interpretive position true to contemporary scholarly insights and the significance of these insights for the church. What emerges is an interpretive framework in which both scholarship and the voice of faith are mutual contributors.

¹ Robyn Whitaker, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023)

The following six chapters can be broadly divided into two groups; chapters 2 to 5 explore the Biblical case about the necessity of interpretation, with chapters 6 and 7 focussing on what Whitaker refers to as the hermeneutic of love.

Chapter 2, “Bible Interpreting Bible”, sets out the conditions requiring biblical interpretation, including the linguistic, contextual, and historical distance between the biblical world and our own. The chapter emphasises that there is no such thing as a neutral reader. Our worldview and life experience will inevitably influence how we read the Bible. For those who have done introductory biblical studies, there is little to surprise in the opening of the chapter (17-29); however, Whitaker’s insistence on beginning with the Bible starts to bear fruit in the remainder. Whitaker identifies places where the Bible itself refers to biblical interpretation, which illustrates that even before the Christian Bible became a (more or less) fixed entity, there was an awareness of the need for interpretation and that the community played an essential role in discerning faithful interpretation.

Chapters 3-5 dig deeper into Biblical evidence supporting interpretative practices. Chapter 3 delves into examples that show the multifaceted nature of the Bible. The different renditions of creation accounts in Genesis (two accounts), Job, Psalms and Isaiah, and places where different perspectives about the same issue coexist (redemption for enemies, marriage to foreign wives). Chapter 4 explores “Scripture Rewriting Scripture”, examples where stories are retold or updated to keep the traditions alive and relevant for each new generation or changing context. Whitaker suggests that “rewriting the Bible affirms the Bible, keeping it alive and relevant” and that Scripture models an ongoing conversation between God and God’s people as they grapple with (interpret) their stories of faith across time.

Chapter 5 is entitled “Jesus as Interpreter.” Whitaker demonstrates that Jesus was an active interpreter of the Scriptures, which, for him, were a version of what is now called the Old Testament. As Jesus taught his followers and entered into disputes with his contemporaries, he was a constant interpreter of Scripture. Whitaker refuses to force Jesus into predetermined categories, showing that the portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels reveal a complex response to Scripture, sometimes radically reinterpreting it and at other times calling for a “deeper and more demanding allegiance” to Torah/law (116). She notes that:

Amid this complexity, a picture emerges of a Jesus who was considered an authoritative teacher of the Bible, someone who frequently appealed to the Scriptures in his teaching and who assumed the Scripture speak to the present with authority and relevance. Jesus as interpreter, we shall see, is a Jesus who prioritizes people, mercy, and compassion (116).

The conclusion of chapter 5 moves the reader to the heart of this book, what Whitaker refers to as the hermeneutic (interpretive lens) of love. Based on Jesus’ use of Scripture in the Gospels, she suggests Jesus modelled an “ethic of love” and an “attitude of mercy” (135), which leads to a list of nine attitudes through which we might imitate Jesus’ approach to Scripture; deep knowledge of the Old Testament, approach reading and interpreting with prayer, expect Scripture to speak, an attitude of openness, expect to have to interpret, prioritize people over rules or ritual, look to Bible to help to loving those who are different, interpret with integrity and act with compassion (135).

The final two chapters continue to build the case that an ethic of love should shape contemporary interpretation. Chapter 6 begins with an illustration that brings to the fore perhaps the most contentious interpretive issue of our age, the use of the Bible and the church's response to LGBTIQ+ people. It is essential to assert, though, that *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture* is not written to make a case about inclusivity but to argue for an interpretive posture that takes the Bible seriously. It is in exploring what the Bible reveals about the need to interpret Scripture in conversation with the issues of the day, a posture that Jesus himself took, that Whitaker asserts the centrality of love. She writes that interpreting faithfully begins with "a core theological assumption that God embodies loving-kindness and wants us to do the same" and declares that "If I'm erring in that interpretation" (ie loving and affirming LGBTIQ+ people) "I am erring on the side of love" (144).

In the final chapter, Whitaker leaves the reader with two key questions that can be asked of any biblical passage: "1. How does this interpretation lead me to love God more? 2. How does this interpretation lead me to love my neighbor more?" (167). As she has done in previous chapters, Whitaker illustrates her point with Scriptural reading, in this case the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Interpretations of this passage are contested (172), and Whitaker takes her readers through a process of reading with compassion, of doing no harm, of reading in our contexts, of prioritizing people over institutions, rituals or laws, and exploring the question of how the passage might help us to love God more (172-176). She summarises the ethic of love of God and love of neighbor in her final words: "This, the greatest of commandments, is also the hermeneutical key. If our interpretation does not lead to love, we have, frankly, missed the point" (178).

It is hard to find fault in this interpretive lens. And yet, of course, some will. No one book will address all questions about the nature of Scripture and the place of interpretation in the life of the church. For those who have questions about the Bible, or who are struggling to reconcile the uncomfortable, complex, or contradictory parts of the Bible, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture* offers a wealth of insights. The combination of Whitaker's personal voice, scholarly insights and clarity of expression makes this a valuable contribution. Congregational leaders looking for material to facilitate Christian education and for small groups to explore, this is an ideal resource.

However, not everyone will be convinced of Whitaker's argument. As Whitaker herself notes, how one person understands the best way to love may be different to another's (139). Debates over gender and sexuality, and about other hot topics that have dominated discourse in the Uniting Church and in the wider Christian community will continue, and readings of Scripture will remain at the centre of many of these debates. It would be a sad indictment, however, if Whitaker's insights were dismissed because of a declared theological position that the church is currently at odds about.

Whitaker's aim is not to resolve debate. She sets out an approach to biblical interpretation that takes the Bible seriously by looking to the Bible itself as the beginning point. Her approach to Scripture and its interpretation is shaped by her teen years immersed in evangelical Christianity, which places the Bible at its centre, and the realization of a vocation as Biblical scholar and teacher. While her understanding of the Bible and its interpretation has changed over time, expanded and honed by academic rigor and scholarship, what remains constant for Whitaker is the centrality of the Bible as her starting point. Whitaker demonstrates that for the Biblical writers and for the Christian community today, interpretation is a living

tradition, flexible and adaptable, and, at its best, grounded in an ethic of love and compassion rather than doctrine and dogma. That Whitaker is one of Australia's leading scholars and public theologians is a rich testimony to the importance of her work.

Even the Devil Quotes Scripture is not a book which aims to tear down treasured beliefs about the nature of the Bible and its place in the life of faith. Rather, in taking the Bible seriously and looking to the Bible for clues about interpretation, Whitaker enables the reader to look to their own assumptions about the nature and function of Scripture and to think through what it means to interpret faithfully when guided by an ethic of love. I hope that this highly accessible book is itself taken seriously as it opens rich opportunities for rigorous, respectful, and, I pray, love-shaped teaching, preaching and learning in the life of the church and in our communities.

Considering what the Bible Is and Is Not

Ali Robinson

In discussions on ethics and Christian conduct, it is not uncommon to hear the phrase “the Bible says” (e.g., “The Bible says women should be silent”). Such statements are often made without acknowledging the inherent biases that accompany one's understanding of scripture or the complexity of biblical interpretation itself. These matters can feel particularly daunting for those without a formal theological education. This makes the arrival of Whitaker's book most welcome.

Robyn J. Whitaker's *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* helps readers consider what the Bible is – and is not – and the lens through which we understand its texts. Whitaker's initial objective was to see how the Bible “talked about” and “modelled interpretation” within its pages (65). In other words, she set out to understand how the biblical writers themselves exhibit and embody the act of interpretation by demonstrating the many instances where one writer reads, exegetes or adapts another. Through this investigation, Whitaker also underscores that no reading of scripture is truly neutral. Even an attempt to read the Bible in a “plain sense” is, in itself, a form of interpretation (39).

After a brief introduction, the book is divided into seven main chapters. In Chapter 1, Whitaker considers what is meant when referring to “the Bible.” We are alerted to the issues related to the compilation of ancient manuscripts, the translation of biblical languages (13), and the diversity of religious traditions (i.e., Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox), each with their own conception of what is meant by “the Bible.” Following this, Whitaker discusses translation problems that have left their mark on our English Bibles (15–18). In her examples, she carefully shows the intricacies surrounding some of the most debated passages (e.g., 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10). Her goal is not to undermine trust in the Bible but to broaden our understanding of why the simplistic phrase “the Bible says...” (8) is inadequate as a claim for invoking biblical authority.

In Chapter 2, *Bible Interpreting Bible*, several examples are given to illustrate the principles of interpretation. For instance, Whitaker discusses how the word “hypocrites” has been misleadingly conflated with “Pharisees” (47–48). She helpfully alerts readers to the significance of context, offering the example of Leviticus adapting

the Babylonian code, “an eye for an eye” (Lev 24:19–20), and demonstrating that interpretation is both natural and necessary for each generation and context (57).

Chapter 3, *Stories That Invite Conversation*, tackles the challenge of handling parts of the Bible appearing to differ or contradict each other. Whitaker invites us to resist the urge to harmonise the Bible in the hope of finding “the real account.” The fact that the Bible has conflicting accounts, which often sit side-by-side (i.e., Gen 1:1–2:4a and Gen 2–3), should inspire confidence to hold our disparate readings of Scripture in tandem. As Whitaker writes, “For Christians who have been told their difference excludes them from the community or who feel constricted by a particular interpretation of what it means to be a “real Christian,” knowing that God’s community has always included a variety of people, perspectives, and experiences can be helpful” (81).

In Chapter 4, *Scripture Rewriting Scripture*, Whitaker explores how biblical writers reinterpret earlier texts. She examines how ancient authors engaged with and reimagined their stories. For instance, the account of David in Samuel and Kings is reworked in 1 Chronicles as the writer speaks of Israel’s monarchy (100). This theme of reinterpretation continues in Chapter 5, *Jesus as Interpreter*, where Whitaker examines Jesus’ use of the law in the Sermon on the Mount. She demonstrates how Jesus contextualised the law while still upholding the authority of Torah (113–15).

Chapter 6, *A Hermeneutic of Love*, traces the history of the iconic notion of loving God and loving neighbour (129). Whitaker looks at this command from Leviticus 19:18b, tracing the concept through Second Temple Judaism to the Gospels, highlighting its sparseness in the Hebrew Bible, and its deliberate emphasis in the New Testament. She points out that this love ethic, seemingly self-evident today, has a specific historical development that many may not have considered (130). Then, in the final chapter, *Reading the Bible for Love*, Whitaker concludes with an appeal to approach the Bible through the lens of love (155). This means reading with “a spirit of generosity toward the views of others both in the text and in the tradition to see what it might provoke in us. The more we do this, the more we learn about what it means to love God and neighbour from the Bible itself” (155).

Whitaker’s inclusion of her personal experiences and perspectives adds a unique dimension to her work. Her anecdotes and humour are engaging and make complex theological discussions more accessible. In the opening chapter (2–6), she offers a candid reflection on her own religious background, a relatable starting point for many readers. Her statement on page 3, “I have learned that it is impossible to read the Bible in a literalistic way, and I now believe we are not meant to. We are meant to take the Bible seriously, not literally,” encapsulates her thoughtful approach to biblical interpretation – respect for the text but a willingness to ask hard questions of it. In a field that can often be polarising, Whitaker’s balanced and thoughtful approach should be the tenor of discussions to come. She steers clear of conspiracy-driven and ideological narratives, instead encouraging readers to think deeply and critically about the Bible’s more ambiguous areas. The tone is inviting rather than confrontational, creating a space to explore and question one’s own beliefs.

Whitaker’s analysis of inerrancy and infallibility (24–29) may present a challenge for those who transfer a strong belief in divine sovereignty directly to the irrefutable authority of the biblical text. I cannot say

whether or not spending more time on these concepts would have ultimately convinced this readership, but the scope of the book does not allow for a deeper assessment of these various debates. Additionally, Whitaker introduces intriguing concepts, such as the distinction between viewing the Bible as a “sacred object” versus seeing it as a “testimony” (21–22, 26, 33), but these ideas are not fully developed. A more thorough exploration of these distinctions could have provided readers from diverse backgrounds with a more comprehensive understanding of her arguments.

Even the Devil Quotes Scripture significantly contributes to biblical studies, offering a nuanced and challenging approach to understanding and interpreting the Bible. Whitaker’s blend of scholarship, personal reflection, and critical analysis makes this book an essential read for anyone interested in deepening their understanding of the Bible and its role in contemporary faith communities. I especially recommend this book to laypeople and believe it should become a core text in theological colleges.

Biblical Interpretation Cannot Change the World

Jameson Ross

I think the aim of Robyn J. Whitaker’s book, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*, is to convince readers that serious, loving biblical interpretation can save the world, or at least make the world a better, less hateful place. Before reading the book, I might have believed this to be the case, but it was an implicit, unknown assumption, and probably even more powerful for being so. Reading the book was a gift because I can now say, in contrast to what I take to be Whitaker’s view, I do not believe that better, more informed, more serious, more loving biblical interpretation can save the world. Whitaker’s book helps us get to this place, and it is a good place.

Where in the book, though, is it claimed that biblical interpretation could save the world? It is nowhere stated, as such. It is, though, stated everywhere, established less by assertion and more by demonstration. Whitaker uses various resources – stories, worked examples, academic discussions, etc. – to bring about that conviction. In short, if one wants to be on the right side of contemporary social and political and religious issues, then one would do well to adopt Whitaker’s approach to the biblical text (what it is) and to interpretation (how to read it). Even shorter: If one wants to save the world, one will read the Bible seriously, but not literally.

This conclusion was not, it is important to note, clear to me as I was reading the book. In fact, little was clear to me as I was reading the book. For some of this lack of clarity, I am, no doubt, responsible; I was reading the book alongside far too many other seemingly urgent and important tasks. But some of this lack of clarity is objectively lacking in the book itself. In the spirit of giving the benefit of the doubt, however, I can take responsibility for sixty-five percent of the unclarity; I can be dense. The other thirty-five percent, though, I will put on the book. I found the book to lack clarity with respect to audience, concern, and conceptuality. (This is not meant to be only a cheeky, rhetorical gambit, but is meant to underline the fact that every book and book review is an interpretive affair, one marked by greater and lesser amounts of human subjectivity. We write our books and respond to books as people.)

Who is this book for?

At no point was I clear about the audience for whom Whitaker was writing, a situation which makes both commendation and criticism difficult. Sometimes this book felt like it was a textbook for an introductory class on biblical interpretation. Corroboration for this suggestion is supplied by an occasional sidebar (functioning like a textbox in a textbook, 10, 87, 113, 133), an excursus (19-20), a table (11-13), footnotes throughout, and the comments Whitaker made about her students, maybe some of whom will read this book for a class she teaches on biblical interpretation.

Sometimes, though, it felt like it might be for those frustrated with their Christian experience or community, looking for a more progressive approach to thinking about and reading the Bible. In this memoir-mode, it felt like a volume comparable to one of several books by Peter Enns or Rachel Held Evans (both of whom are mentioned here and there, sometimes in epigraphs, sometimes in footnotes). As readers we were privy to Whitaker's take on her on development as a Christian, watching her work out various points of tension in that process. In this mode, I got the impression that she was employing this primarily to try to help theological students through the often-tricky terrain that is theological education.

Of course, an author writes whatever kind of book they like and for whatever kind of audience they like, and they are also free to creatively blend in whatever way they please. The difficulty lies in the struggle to discern the kind of book one is reading and thus the kind of response one should be making to it. The textbook would be evaluated and commended in one way, while the memoir would be dealt with in other, very different ways. Because I am not sure what kind of book this is and who it is for, I have struggled with how to respond to it, hence the italicised, impressionistic language of feeling above and the attempt to state and criticise its effects rather than its mechanics.

What is this book about?

At no point was I clear about the primary subject matter the book was addressing; I wanted to isolate the main, explicit claims but struggled to do so. I can pin my confusion to a couple features of the book. The first is the sheer range of contemporary issues touched upon throughout the book. I am sure I missed some, but I made a list: patriarchy, sexual abuse, vaccine hesitancy, colonialism, imperialism, crusades, conquests, slavery, racism, feminism, sexuality, gender, abortion, assisted-dying, war, climate-change, science, ordination of women, politics, male headship, and, broadly, inclusion. I want to be on the just and loving team with respect to all these things, but I found that Whitaker's tone and my desire combined to stunt critical reception.

The second feature is a blessing and a curse of the book: the case study. On the one hand, this is necessary, and as such, it is a blessing. It is important to see how the approach described can be worked out, especially in contrast to that against which it is opposed. The case study can be an illustration of a point made discursively elsewhere. I would put the extended case study at the end of the book on 2 Samuel 11 in this category (158-164). On the other hand, the case study or worked example can be a curse because it can smuggle in concerns that are not illustrative of something said elsewhere but can itself serve to advance claims made much more subtly. The examples in the list above fit into this category, and to be specific,

I would put the treatment of “sodomite” in this category (41-42). In a section devoted to word meanings, it is easy to conclude that another word could have illustrated the point being made. Why, then, use this example, an example fraught with so much contemporary angst?

Having been taken in by the similarities between Whitaker’s story and my own, I had a false sense of intimacy with the book. The style was working on me, causing me to want to align myself with views being expressed, feeling myself patted on the back, and, at some points, patting myself on the back in a self-congratulatory fashion. But what was I resonating with? Thinking about the Bible this way? Interpreting the Bible this way? Specific ways of articulating this or that position on such and such an issue? I am not sure.

What is a hermeneutic of love?

At no point was I clear about the meaning of a “hermeneutics of love.” My major point of contention with this is that it seems like a rhetorical flourish rather than a notion that can be clearly explicated and practiced. This does not mean, it must be said, that Whitaker does not provide explication of the concept; she does, in chapters six and seven. There is, though, a fatal flaw in this: most readers of the biblical text would want to claim they are interpreting lovingly, so how does one discern what counts as loving or unloving biblical interpretation? Whitaker is aware of this tension, but she ventures forth to talk about, describe, and display such loving interpretation. I applaud her effort, but I do not see how an intractable difference of this kind, which is fundamentally a matter of discernment, can be resolved. I do not understand how a method for reading the Bible can be deemed compatible with a hermeneutical aspiration. This is, it seems to me, a straightforward category mistake.

With so little clarity, how can I so confidently assert that this was a book about biblical interpretation saving the world, and that insofar as it was about that, that it succeeded only in helping me resist that conviction?

Things clarified when I reread the story of the encounter with “the head of a conservative Christian lobby group” (126). His group was advocating for gay-conversion therapy because, “What is more loving than stopping someone going to hell?” Whitaker writes, “He thought he was being loving in trying to save people from eternal damnation he believes awaits anyone who acts on same-gender attraction.” She continues:

The disagreement between myself and my Christian brother in that hotel lobby was partly about love but mostly about biblical interpretation. We both agreed that following Jesus means living out our faith in tangible ways; we agreed that love involves action, but we disagreed about what kind of action because we disagreed about how to interpret the Bible (127).

If both accounts are construed as loving, then what makes Whitaker’s account distinctive or better suited to adopt? I did not find anything internal to the explicit proposals to commend Whitaker’s approach over the approach of this conservative Christian with whom she disagrees. Whitaker thinks her account is better than his because she is reading the Bible on its own terms. The problem is, of course, that he would claim to have been doing that as well. He sees what he can see, and Whitaker sees what she can see. Descriptively, this is unobjectionably the case. Normatively, Whitaker wants to claim that what he sees is not there to be seen, but she can only claim this because of what she sees, supported by the resources she employs to see in this way.

Complex issues cannot be solved (read: the world cannot be saved) by better biblical interpretation, as if all the bad Bible readers could enrol in a biblical interpretation class that used Whitaker's book at some stage. If that guy learned this method for reading, then he would come to see what she sees, right? I believe that is the basic logic at work in the book, but it is simply not the case that this would happen.

Where does that leave us, then? Are we left in interpretive indeterminacy, locked into a zero-sum game in which my interpretation is better than yours because my interpretive paradigm is better than yours? Yes, I think so. No method can save us. But it is here that Whitaker's most explored and fruitful insight can make a return to help us.

According to Whitaker, one aspect of taking the Bible on its own terms is the recognition that the biblical text is itself constituted by a variety of voices, multiple forms of reading and rereading. These voices and perspectives are never fully reconciled; they sit uncomfortably in conflict alongside one another in the Bible. As with the biblical text, so with us. Every interpretive venture about how to read the Bible, about what the Bible is, about how to read specific texts, about how to engage the Bible for specific contemporary concerns is another piece of the ever-proliferating puzzle about how to understand who we are and what we are doing as Christians. If a hermeneutics of love is called for, I think it would need to be less directed to the biblical text in terms of a methodology (something I remain convinced is not possible) and be more directed to other readers of the Bible with whom we are contemporary, a point Whitaker would surely affirm, but that may have been muted.

Conclusion

Whitaker's book reminds us that biblical interpretation is contested territory, complex off the charts. It is a territory for all of us, not just those who can practice biblical interpretation in specific ways. It leaves room for the multiplicity that is Christianity, a problematic and frustrating multiplicity with which all Christians must live. The book allows us to see that it is itself just one contribution along the lines that I have mentioned above, and as such, it can inform the ways we interpret biblical texts and people, hopefully more rather than less lovingly.

An Asian Australian Reflection on *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*

Paul Dongwon Goh

A Lifegiving Gift for the Church

The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word. (Basis of Union, Paragraph 11).

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) values biblical scholarship. Along with those of evangelist, prophet, and martyr, the Basis of Union – the foundational document of the UCA – sees the work of scholars and

“scholarly interpreters of Scripture” as a continuing witness to the Church to guide it towards truth and renewal in faith and mission.² A biblical scholar can be a gift to the church, as their scholarship and works can help us discern and participate in the work of God, who is alive and active in the world today. Being both a UCA Minister and a biblical scholar teaching at a Uniting Church theological college, Robyn Whitaker provides a scholarly, well-researched, and accessible book titled *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* for the church to understand why biblical interpretation matters, and what we can learn about interpreting the Bible from the Bible itself and how we best engage it (4). Whitaker hopes this book will be a valuable resource for the church and for those with less familiarity with biblical interpretation. I believe many of us, including theological students and church leaders, would like to thank God for her engaging scholarship, which bridges the gap between academic learning and everyday life experiences of faith.

As someone who has dealt with the challenges of navigating historical-critical scholarship and faith, I deeply resonate with the author’s journey of deconstructing and reconstructing faith through the study of the Bible: “a faith that can embrace the rigor of academic insights but retains an evangelical heart that recognises the way the Holy Spirit continues to speak to God’s people through the Bible” (ix). Throughout the book, she compels us that (re)interpreting the Bible for new times and places is indispensable in discerning how God continues to speak to us through these “diverse, vibrant, living, breathing, wondrous” (166) scriptures. This book is a much-needed gift for the church urging us to reclaim “the Scriptures as a lifegiving, transformative and faith-building gift of God to the Church.”³

“Believing the Bible and living under its Authority”

The UCA regards the Bible as authoritative.⁴ In paragraph 5 of the Basis of Union, UCA members are tasked with “the serious duty of reading the scriptures.” The Bible – “the books of the Old and New Testaments” – is a “unique prophetic and apostolic testimony,” and it is in the Bible that we (the Church) hear the Word of God. We read the Bible to hear God’s Word. The Bible nourishes and regulates the Church’s faith and obedience. In his commentary on it, Davis McCaughey emphasizes the importance of the Bible within the life of the Church: “The Word of God can only be heard if scripture is opened and read, preached from, and meditated upon in the worshiping, witnessing life of the Church.”⁵ Reading this paragraph in the light of its Christological and ecclesiological context in the Basis of Union, Geoff Thompson refers to it as “the hermeneutical primacy of the Church,” highlighting the theological significance of the Bible and the identity of the Bible as the church’s book.⁶ Therefore, the Bible is meant to be read within the church’s active life, rather than merely through private devotional reading or academic abstraction.⁷

² Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal: The Shaping of a New Church*. Revised edition. (Unley, S. Aust.: MediaCom Education Inc, 2016), 148-149.

³ “Reading and Understanding the Bible,” *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Sydney, NSW: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 461.

⁴ Davis J. McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne, Victoria: Uniting Church Press, Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand, 1980), 29.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Geoff Thompson, *Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 67-68.

⁷ Geoff Thompson, *“In His Own Strange Way”: A Post-Christendom Sort-of Commentary on the Basis of Union* (Unley, SA: MediaCom Education Inc, 2018), 47-48.

In accordance with the Basis of Union, Whitaker is correct in asserting that the authority of the Christian Bible stems from the church community's decision to recognize these specific books as special, unique, trustworthy, and as bearing witness to the Word of God, that is, Jesus (see 32). Nevertheless, "believing the Bible and living under its authority" should not be viewed solely as an individual "choice" (33). Rather, for members of the UCA, it represents a communal commitment and a fundamental aspect of discipleship within the life of worship and witness of the Church.

(Mis)Use of the Bible in the Church

It's important to recognize that simply quoting the Bible doesn't always lead to a true understanding or correct interpretation. The Bible has unfortunately been misused to support actions that go against its intended message. As Whitaker rightly points out, it takes more than just quoting the Bible to truly grasp and live by its principles: "Anyone can quote the Bible, but that does not mean they know it, understand it, or have interpreted it well. After all, even the devil quotes Scripture" (4). Without careful and faithful interpretation of the Bible, it can be misused as a prooftext or to justify unjust systems and ideologies.

The Task Group, formed after the Eighth UCA Assembly in 1997, highlighted the danger of the misuse of the Bible within the Church: "Texts from the Bible are regularly quoted in the Church, but in a time of conflict and confusion they are as likely to be used as weapons in a battle as read as gracious invitation to dwell within the purposes and grace of God."⁸ The Task Group acknowledged that debates about biblical interpretation often lead to division and lack of resolution. They urge the Church to move on beyond the present impasse towards fresh ways of valuing, using, and interpreting the Bible and presented seven compelling recommendations: 1) Reclaiming the Bible by reading the Bible; 2) Reclaiming the Bible in Christian community; 3) Reclaiming the Bible as a conversation partner; 4) Reclaiming the Bible with the help of Biblical scholarship; 5) Reclaiming the Bible from within our particular cultural setting; 6) Reclaiming the Bible in ethical decision-making; 7) Reclaiming the Bible in spirituality.⁹ Whitaker's book epitomizes the spirit and aspirations found in many of those recommendations.

Neither Liberal nor Conservative: "Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms"

Whitaker argues that both liberal (historical-critical) and conservative (literal-fundamentalist) approaches to biblical interpretation have distorted our understanding of the Bible by treating it as a collection of facts, based on Enlightenment ideals. Instead, she advocates for new voices and approaches that challenge existing interpretations in light of gender, power, culture, race, and politics. She sees cultural changes as an opportunity to interpret the Bible for new audiences and contexts, rather than a threat to ecclesial and biblical authority (154).

To interpret the Bible in a way that stays true to the gospel, Whitaker recommends reading the Bible with the understanding that biblical writers themselves used and interpreted their own sacred texts (4). She reveals that nearly 50% of the Bible is made up of rewrites, demonstrating that ancient priests, prophets, scribes,

⁸ "Reading and Understanding the Bible," 448.

⁹ "Reading and Understanding the Bible," 461–474.

Jesus, Paul, and others reinterpreted earlier biblical texts – later declared sacred by the church. They have “adapted, edited, rewritten, and variously interpreted earlier biblical texts in order to help the Bible speak in new contexts and situation” (127). This approach models how we can view the Bible as a conversation partner between God’s people then and now, a living God, and contemporary contexts and new questions. This “inter-biblical interpretation is flexible, adaptable, and highly contextual” (5), keeping the Bible alive and relevant for each new generation and context (102). The crux of the matter is faithfully interpreting the Bible and determining the ethical and theological principles that should guide our interpretations (129).

Only One Universal Hermeneutical Norm?

Based on her understanding of Jesus and the authors of the New Testament as interpreters of the Old Testament, Whitaker proposes “a hermeneutic of love” as a guiding ethic that “transcends any particular context or time” and “exemplifies the very nature of the God Christians worship”: love of God and love of neighbour (129). This hermeneutical principle is not new. It has been commonly claimed by Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley. For the Reformers, she insists, the goal of Scripture is to produce more love for God and God’s creation (143). In conclusion, she calls for the reading the Bible for love in today’s world with two key questions (155):

- i* How does this interpretation lead me to love God more?
- ii* How does this interpretation lead me to love my neighbour more?

When we turn our attention to marginalized groups such as First Nations People and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse People (CALD) in Australia, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in America, as well as LGBTQ+ individuals globally, what does a hermeneutic of love signify for them? What if they have different interpretations and visions of ‘love? Who has the right to define ‘love’? We also need to consider how this would apply to those whose neighbours follow different religions or hold no religion.¹⁰ Do we have the right to expect the same hermeneutical norm and interpreting strategies to apply universally, without accounting for differences in gender, race, class, culture, language, and politics?¹¹

Reading the Bible in a Multicultural and Multifaith Context: An Asian View

In a multicultural and multifaith Australia, it’s crucial to consider how to interpret the Bible with CALD neighbours from the Majority World, including Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. The questions shaping Western discussions about the Bible and its interpretative strategies are not the same as those relevant to their communities. The approaches to the Bible and theology from the Majority World and minority communities are diverse, not uniform.

¹⁰ Almost 40 per cent (38.9 per cent) of Australia’s population reported having no religion in the 2021 Census, an increase from 30 per cent (30.1 per cent) in 2016 and 22 per cent (22.3 per cent) in 2011. Australian Bureau of Statistics (27 June 2022), 2021 Census shows changes in Australia’s religious diversity, ABS Website, accessed 9 September 2024.

¹¹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Growing up in a multi-religious Asian society has convinced me that biblical interpretation needs to be flexible and adaptable to cultural and religious diversity. Asia, as a multicultural and multireligious continent, boasts a rich tapestry of religious texts from major traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Taoism. These texts are revered as sacred scripture (*Gyung* in Korean; *Ching* in Chinese), and their understanding is deemed essential. Consequently, Asia has a profound tradition of scriptural interpretation. Within each religious tradition, followers diligently study their texts with specific aims. For instance, in the Taoist tradition, individuals aspire to master their scriptures, while in the Confucian tradition, scholars seek to emulate the Sage through the study of their scriptures and self-cultivation. Similarly, within the Buddhist tradition, monks and adherents endeavour to achieve Buddhahood by meditating and chanting their scriptures. For them, scripture is not merely a source of knowledge, but a pathway to enlightenment and salvation. In the realm of Asian Christianity, the goal of reading the Bible may be to emulate the life and teaching of Jesus as a living embodiment of the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). Yet, as asserted by Kwok Pui-Lan and other Asian biblical scholars and theologians, it is imperative to acknowledge the diverse nature of interpretation and recognize that a singular norm cannot be universally applied across different cultures and communities.¹² In a multicultural and multifait context, it is important to adopt diverse and intercultural hermeneutical principles. This approach to interpreting the Bible can lead us to love our multicultural and multifait neighbours more deeply, as suggested by Whitaker's hermeneutical key: love of God and love of neighbour.

Contestation and Love: biblical interpretation remains complex

Robyn J. Whitaker

How we interpret the Bible really matters. In fact, it may be the single most significant and divisive issue for contemporary Christianity.

I recently attended the largest global meeting of biblical scholars in the world – the *Society of Biblical Literature* annual meeting. Thousands of people gather at this conference, which itself embodies the sharp divisions of global Christianity and biblical scholarship. Sessions range from the theological to progressive to atheist, from patriarchal to feminist, colonial and postcolonial, and across a cultural spectrum (although Western views still dominate). Evangelicals who claim the inerrancy of Scripture meet separately beforehand and some say they do not feel safe in the main conference due to the disparaging language used by scholars towards those of such faith. I myself witnessed such language on many occasions – a dismissiveness and even mockery of “those” people with their “naïve” theological views. And while I think there is no place for such derision, I can also see that it sometimes comes from people who have themselves felt marginalised and oppressed by the biblical interpretation of people from more conservative Christian churches. This is the nature of global biblical studies, one that Australian churches reflect in their own embattled way.

My book, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*, was not an attempt to solve all these problems, but it was an attempt to write something accessible for people who might never go to

¹² Pui-lan, Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 19.

seminary but wanted to think a bit more deeply about what the Bible is and how we interpret it faithfully and ethically in the modern world. What the Bible *is* and how it works is, I think, central to interpretive debates. Contra Jameson Ross' claim, my proposals for biblical interpretation are not oriented to "saving the world". That is up to God. I do, however, think we Christians can embody more loving communities and contribute to the common good if our biblical interpretation has love as one of its goals. Where Ross and I find agreement is in his observation that such a hermeneutic (if one accepts it) would do well if "directed to other readers of the Bible with whom we are contemporary". The increasing polarisation within Christianity, particularly in relation to biblical interpretation, is something to be lamented.

I wonder if Jameson Ross and I model the aforementioned ecclesial divide in our different ways of engaging the issues. He wonders about my audience, my purpose, and why I chose examples "fraught with so much contemporary angst" (e.g. "sodomite" language). The answer to the latter is easy – precisely because they are fraught. Boase has captured my intention well when she writes the book "is not written to make a case for inclusivity but to argue for an interpretive posture that takes the Bible seriously". Yet, to write a book about biblical interpretation and not deal with at least some of the most contested texts seemed to lack both integrity and courage. I was aware in doing so, I would lose some readers early on who were unprepared to have their beliefs about such matters challenged, even by the Bible.

The book gives a brief overview of theologically-loaded words like "inerrancy" and "infallibility". Ali Robinson wonders whether more time on these concepts would have helped. It is something I wondered about too and ultimately resisted, as there are volumes already in existence on such things should people be interested. But I take the point that spending a little more time on other "intriguing concepts" (her words) like thinking of the Bible as "testimony" as opposed to "sacred object" might have been useful for readers.

I appreciated Paul Goh's framing of his response within a Uniting Church theology of the Bible. While I wrote the book for a wider audience, I am formed by the Uniting Church's theological traditions and find the way the Basis of Union speaks about the Bible to be both profound and nuanced. It offers a vision of a certain kind of biblically literate and engaged church that remains a lofty goal worth striving for. I agree with Goh's emphasis on the communal commitment, as church, to living under the authority of the Bible and recognise that in writing personally, the personal or individual may have been over-emphasised. I would, however, maintain that while any Christian acts as part of a community there is still a need for personal commitment at an individual level.

Offering "an Asian view," Goh challenges the idea that a hermeneutic of love can be universal and asks whether we can expect the same hermeneutical norm for those of various genders, cultures, and even those of different religions. A reminder that Western approaches continue to dominate biblical studies is crucial. As a white woman it is too easy for me to stay within Western ways of thinking: learning to be self-critical, as well as intentional and committed to disrupt Western thinking, remains a personal challenge. I think, however, that Goh and I are not as far apart as he might think. He argues for diversity and flexibility, not uniformity – precisely what I aim to support in showing how the Bible itself reflects a range of cultural and contextual interpretive approaches. If we in the West can better acknowledge the cultural and theological diversity within the Bible, then perhaps we might be better able to recognise the ongoing importance

of such diversity in the modern church: diversity that is not just 'important' but, according to Christian confession, reflects the very nature of God.

I did not address other religious traditions in my book, but Goh raises this multi-religious question. The 'hermeneutic of love' I propose is inherently biblical and therefore takes on the particularity of the God revealed in Jewish and Christian traditions. It is love as defined by the self-giving Christ of the incarnation and a God who calls, liberates and enters into a covenant with God's people. In this sense I think it *is* a universal principle but *only* for those who would call themselves Christian. I do not, however, assume that such a hermeneutic applies to the sacred texts of other traditions who should rightly be guided by their own texts, values, and understandings of divine revelation. Where Goh and I agree is in recognising that love, biblically defined, is still culturally expressed and therefore diverse in its forms and application.

Deconstruction is far easier to do than reconstruction, yet I wanted to attempt to offer something for Christians who desired a hook, guide, or principle to work with. As I argue in the book, love of God and neighbour is presented as the hook on which "hang all the law and prophets" within the Bible itself (Matt 22: 40).

What love looks like in hermeneutical application or any other practice is, of course tricky, as Liz Boase, Ali Robinson, and Jameson Ross point out in various ways in their reviews. As Boase writes, "how one person understands the best way to love may be different to another's." I was aware when researching and writing the chapters that attempt to offer an interpretive ethic for the modern world, that love was complicated. If we think of parental love as an example, we can note how radically different love can look in different cultures and even within the one culture a decade or two apart. To give due weight to the philosophical and theological writings on love or the cultural nuances of human love would have needed many more chapters or perhaps a whole other book. So, I recognise, that what I have offered is a starting place and one that requires both further investigation and will be embodied differently by different communities. My hope is that the idea is picked up and developed in practise.

I think that in writing about love I could have made two things clearer. Firstly, that, at minimum, love does not harm. In the example I use of a colleague and I disagreeing about sexuality and whether people go to hell, I did want to make a distinction between causing immediate harm to people (in forcing, for example, LGBTQI+ "conversion" practices) and potential divine harms. For humans to harm people because we are worried about possible future divine judgment seems both arrogant and counterintuitive to me: we harm to prevent God's assumed harm?

Secondly, love for Christians should primarily be defined by the love of God as revealed in the Bible. It is the nature of love embodied by Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. It is love based on a divine love that is itself expansive and embracing of difference, as I argue. I do not think I explicitly said this in the book and as I have thought about it further this is the theological emphasis I would want to make and the starting place for thinking further about love. This does not make it simpler by any means. But does point us back to the One who is the Source of love.

Lastly, I want to clarify that a 'hermeneutic of love' is not a method *per se*. I refer to a range of methods in the book, including scholarly methods that I think can and should be employed in seeking to interpret

these ancient, sacred texts faithfully and ethically. Rather, love is an interpretive “lens” or ethic (I also call it a ‘principle’ at points) – one perhaps best thought of as a posture towards the text *and* towards our contemporary neighbours.

All this means I am willing to say, perhaps controversially and even offensively to some, that there are interpretations of Scripture that are theologically invalid. Invalid because using the Bible to harm other humans, or nature itself, stands in contradiction to the loving God revealed therein. (There are of course interpretations that are invalid on linguistic or historical grounds too – we cannot make the text mean whatever we like).

I would like to end by thanking the reviewers for their thoughtful and critical engagement with *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* and the journal for inviting these reviews and response. Biblical interpretation remains one of the most contested and emotive areas within global Christianity. It is an honour to have esteemed colleagues engage in one’s work in such a way and I hope the conversation may continue in other forums.