Relentless Intimacy: The Peculiar Labor of an Anglican Biblical Scholar

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“Mystery meeting mystery”—for the last several years I have seized upon this phrase as a touchstone with which I approach the hearing, reading, and interpretation of the Scriptures within a life of faith. By it I wish to evoke a theological framework that begins with the recognition of the nature of texts and traditions as infinitely mysterious, with what is visible and knowable always leading into territory that is yet to be explored and incapable of being fully known. This framework likewise recognizes the nature of readers, hearers, and interpretive communities as also infinitely mysterious, as full of hidden depths, unspoken histories and memories, and as constituted by lives that ultimately are completely known only by God. In other words, I wish to claim for critically engaged biblical interpretation an environment that is characterized by thorough exploration, insightful analysis, and unwavering historical rigor, as well as by a certain apophatic acknowledgment of the fragmentary and fragile nature of our knowledge. Any good historian appropriately wishes the same, and especially those who work with ancient texts and cultures, for which our knowledge is so limited by the tiny amount of material remaining.¹

By the phrase “mystery meeting mystery,” however, I also wish to claim something more: namely, that as an interpreter takes up the text, she encounters something that is an artifact of communities’ and individuals’ experience of engagement with what they recognized as God. It is an artifact of relationship, encounter, invitation, or struggle—all marked by the depth and complexities of human life as well as by the

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enigmatic revelation and elusiveness of a God beyond human knowing. The text that the interpreter takes up is a moment of utterance out of a relationship that existed centuries before and a relationship that was always more complex than could ever be contained by human words or images. This interpreter meets the text with all the mystery of her own life, with questions and conflicts, with what lurks in the shadows of her knowledge of herself, with what is acknowledged and what is unacknowledged about her way of being in the world. Above all, from the standpoint of faith, she takes up the text as one in whom God is already at work in ways seen and unseen, in a manner that she recognizes or in ways that are unfamiliar and quite unnamed. The same, moreover, may be said about any community of interpreters: they encounter the mystery of the text out of the manifold complexity and historical depth of their corporate life as well as of who they are as individuals. Two images torn from their contexts evoke this relationship between text and interpreter. One is Michelangelo's depiction of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: the fingertip of God reaches out and just touches the fingertip of the first human—the moment of mystery meeting mystery. The other is the bidding of Christian hospitality and reconciliation, “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16), whether between strangers or friends—the complex mystery of one human life touching another in the moment of the kiss, and thus constituting the bond of community.

In this essay I undertake an extended reflection on what it is to be a biblical scholar whose life and work is firmly rooted within the Anglican tradition, particularly as shaped within the North American context. The essay grows out of a keynote address that I gave in November 2010 to the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars in connection with that group’s consideration of the Anglican Communion project on “The Bible in the Life of the Church.” My reflections have been focused by my participation in the North American Regional

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2 The address was delivered on November 19, 2010 at the Annual Meeting of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars. I am grateful to Rhetta Wiley and Cynthia Kittredge for the invitation, as well as to my colleagues in the gathering for their comments and questions.

3 For a description of “The Bible in the Life of the Church” project, see www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/index.cfm. Robert MacSwain convenes the North American Regional Group for this project; some of these ideas were discussed in the context of our initial meeting in Sewanee, Tennessee on June 14–15, 2010. See also Stephen Lyon, “Mind the Gap! Reflections on the Bible in the
Group for this project, but have also been shaped over my years of teaching, preaching, and conversation in the pastoral and parochial contexts, as well as in theological education and in the university. This essay is, of necessity, an intensely personal reflection, informed by my perspectives and implicitly by my experiences. It grows in part out of my discomfort and uneasiness with what is often the marginal placement of biblical scholarship in the life of the church, or at least of biblical scholarship as it is practiced by those who are trained in its disciplines. But this essay also grows out of my experience of the church as a place where Scripture is loved and honored and of a tradition in which the life of the mind is nurtured as much as the life of the spirit. Out of the paradoxical confrontation between these two experiences I hope to offer a way forward, a way in which rigorous biblical scholarship thrives as a source of delight and as the church’s treasure. I hope also to suggest various ways in which the Bible itself may enjoy a more robust and vigorous life within our churches and among its everyday interpreters.

Let me speak first of the paradoxical discomfort that many biblical scholars experience in the life of the church. If we are active in our church communities, we hear great swathes of Scripture read in the liturgy, we sing psalms, we sing hymns where allusions to the Bible are pervasive, we recite prayers that are likewise informed by the phrases and cadences of Scripture—in short, we find ourselves in an environment that is saturated by the material that we study and teach day in and day out. I hear a passage from one of Paul’s letters read in the lectionary, and it is one on which I have lectured the previous day. As I hear Scripture in the context of the liturgy, I hear it “hypertexted” (to use a metaphor from the familiar environment of the internet), linked to webs of scholarly discussion and literature, “marked up” in my hearing with a host of larger issues and implications, and resonant with all the strenuous give and take of intellectual discourses. To put it another way, I once walked along a coastal shoreline with a geologist who saw the rocks, cliffs, and beaches with very different eyes than I did: he saw them with the well-trained scientific knowledge of how these geological formations came into being, what forces of volcanoes and glaciers shaped the landscape, and how his observations intersected with new

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horizons of knowledge and new questions. The biblical scholar in the life of the church experiences something similar: she is awake to this saturated environment and alert to the myriad details, historical dimensions, and contentious issues at every reading of Scripture and in all the whispers of biblical allusions.

This intimate knowledge, however, is not the common apprehension of Scripture in the practices of the church in our time. It is rare to find this kind of intimacy with the depths and manifold nuances of biblical scholarship reflected in the day-to-day work of the church. Often the experience and learning of the biblical scholar, although respected, are treated in much the same way as the scholarly knowledge of the learned botanist or geologist or architectural historian: fascinating, complex, a little confusing, but not of central value to our ways of proceeding in the faith. I say this not as a complaint, but rather to identify a dynamic of our practice. To the biblical scholar, this experience is often paradoxical and unsettling, because unlike the botanist or geologist or architectural historian whose fields of study do not reside at the foundation of the Christian faith, that corpus with which we are most intimately familiar, namely, the Bible, does comprise one of the foundational sources of authority, inspiration, and orientation within the Anglican tradition. The biblical scholar within the church lives in a juncture between two realms in which the Bible resides centrally, where each realm has its own set of ways of treating Scripture, an array of practices formed by distinct (but overlapping) histories.

To give a superficial example, at the church where I worship most Sundays, a reading from Ephesians will be announced as “A Reading from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians.” As I hear this, my mind silently supplies an internal conversation that goes something like this: “The letter (if it is in fact a letter) makes a claim to be written by Paul, even though scholarly consensus tends toward regarding it as the product of the legacy of Paul in a subsequent generation. But the church’s use of the epistles embeds a history of apostolic authority and tradition, and our ancestors in the faith have from their own perspective regarded this letter as the writing of the apostle Paul, so in a certain way it makes some sense to announce the reading in this fashion. And indeed early tradition places the name of Paul upon the ancient multigenerational trajectory of Paul’s legacy. But really it is confusing, and what if one of my students is here in the congregation and repeats this ‘fact’ back to me on an exam?” Most biblical scholars in the church are
adept at moving between these worlds, living in the juncture, and hav-
ing such conversations internally and with others, but many of us long
for a more thorough integration of our worlds. We long for a way not
to compartmentalize our intimate knowledge of Scripture—with its
mysterious and manifold depths—apart from our lives of faith and our
participation in the common life of the church.

A pervasive and more troubling experience is that which I char-
acterize as a “utilitarian” or “instrumental” approach to the Bible in
the life of the church, and by extension to biblical scholarship. By an
instrumental approach to the Bible I mean one that seeks to make the
Bible “useful” or applicable to whatever problem or situation is at
hand. To put it bluntly, the biblical texts are not loved for their own
sakes, but only for how they can help us solve ethical problems,
whether large or small. The texts become a set of tools, a collection of
 teachings ready to be applied and to tell us what to do. In a highly
utilitarian age and culture, it is scarcely surprising to find such a ten-
dency. Biblical scholars are thus consulted in the course of solving
problems or of drawing up discussion papers for the church’s delib-
eration on a wide range of ethical issues, in order to identify what the
Bible has to contribute to these conversations. This is important work
and not to be discounted, but again I want to identify the underlying
dynamic: the reduction of the Bible to an instrumental role. What
happens in this process is frequently a tendency to “extract” meaning
from a text: to find a message, axiom, or instruction that can be ap-
plied to the question at hand. There are more and less sophisticated
methods of making the Bible play such an instrumental role. The less
sophisticated include the ancient and modern practices of sortes,4 or
the opening of the Bible at random and letting one’s finger fall upon
the “relevant” verse, but also extend to the pietistic tendency to select
the word or verse that “moves” one as that which provides meaning
for the present moment, whether individually or corporately. At the
more sophisticated end of the instrumentalist spectrum lie the various
 techniques that many of us have learned as methods of Bible study or

4 This practice, known as sortes biblicae (“biblical lots”), sortes sanctorum (“lots
of the saints”), or sortes sacrae (“holy lots”), derives from similar practices using the
texts of Homer or Virgil as a basis for divination in the ancient Mediterranean world.
See William E. Klingshirm, “Defining the Sortes Sanctorum: Gibbon, Du Cange,
77–130.
preparation for preaching. Thus we undertake the careful exegesis of a passage so that we can identify its central message or teaching in such a way that it is available and applicable to a pressing question of how we are to live: “The meaning of this parable (or story or psalm) for today is such and such.”

I choose an analogy from my New England and Quebec contexts to illustrate this dynamic. The process of making maple syrup involves taking an enormous quantity of maple sap and then boiling it down for hours in order to produce a tiny amount of intense, pure, sweet syrup that is appropriate for use. Our methods of Bible study are often like this boiling down—the application of intense heat in order to produce a teaspoon of meaning. What is lost, unlike the evaporated liquid of the maple sap, is the rich complexity and mystery that is the biblical text in its manifold dimensions. Lost, in other words, is all that in which the biblical scholar is saturated, even as our methods of biblical interpretation are appropriated for such an instrumental use.

This tension is built into “The Bible in the Life of the Church” project, as it attempts to document and describe the various ways in which the Bible is being read and utilized across the Anglican Communion. The case study for the first year of the project asked the participants, working with local groups, to reflect on a set of eight biblical (including apocryphal) texts in relation to the Anglican Communion’s fifth Mark of Mission, namely, that pertaining to stewardship of the environment.5 The texts had evidently been selected for their appropriateness to the themes of creation, the earth, and the renewal or destruction of creation, for the purpose of exploring “how our engagement with the Bible sheds light on our understanding of the Fifth Mark of Mission.”6 The questions presented for guiding the case study presuppose first that the biblical texts can speak to the issues of environmental concern, and second that it is possible to turn to such texts and hear, whether in a mediated or unmediated fashion, what they are saying and to what action they are calling us.

My point here is not to criticize the project as a whole, but rather to indicate its structural presuppositions about the utility of the Bible,

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5 “To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” The Five Marks of Missions were developed by the Anglican Consultative Council and agreed at their meeting in 1984, with a sixth mark added in 2009. See http://www.anglicancommunion/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm.

6 See the study notes for Case Study 1 at http://www.aco.org/ministry/theological/bible/docs/pdf/case_study1.pdf.
structural presuppositions that this project shares with many of the ways in which biblical texts and biblical scholarship are appropriated in the church. The project simply illumines a dominant paradigm of instrumentality.\textsuperscript{7}

The mandate for “The Bible in the Life of the Church” project arises from the recognition that the underlying factors in the current difficult conversations and disagreements across the Anglican Communion include the divergent approaches both to the authority of the Bible and to appropriate methods of biblical interpretation. The project attempts to describe, indeed to map, these divergences, as well as the commonalities and the shared ground. I appreciate the fact that stewardship of the environment was selected as the focus for the first case study, not least to de-center the concern for sexuality and other topics of profound controversy so that we can return to these latter topics with renewed sensitivity, mutual understanding, and respect. If one is working within a paradigm of instrumentality, then the turn to the stewardship of the environment is a good choice, in my view. My question, however, is whether the paradigm of instrumentality itself overly controls what comes to light through this project. In other words, what would we learn about the Bible in the life of the church if we did not adopt an instrumental approach?

Let me propose three alternative case studies for such a descriptive and diagnostic project.\textsuperscript{8} First, in the project’s actual case study the instrumentality was underscored by the selection of eight texts that could reasonably be supposed to have something to do with themes of creation. What would we learn about the ways in which the Bible is heard, read, and lived in the church if the texts in the case study had on their surface \textit{nothing to do with the topic} at hand? Would the invitation then be to enter into an experience of these texts as people who carry a concern for the environment in heart and mind, and thereby to undertake a very different path of discovery? How would the full mystery of these texts encounter the full mystery of the individuals

\textsuperscript{7} In this connection, it is striking to note that some of the news releases describing the Bible in the “Life of the Church” project heralded its aim as “discovering the church’s role in battling climate change.” See, for example, http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2010/6/4/ACNS4706.

\textsuperscript{8} I proposed these three approaches in the course of the North American Regional Group’s brainstorming of possibilities for the second case study to be forwarded to the project’s Steering Group in June 2010, and am grateful for the reactions voiced by the other members of the group.
and communities who hold the question of the environment close to heart? What would we discover about the Bible in the life of the church by describing this engagement?

A second approach would be to set as the focus of the case study a question fundamental to human existence, the kind of questions to which answers are seldom easy and are perenniably shaped by Christian identity. Let us suppose a case study that is built around the question, “How are we to die well?” and which asks the participants to engage a set of biblical texts as arenas in which to reflect on this question. I suggest this question not as a cipher for an array of contemporary ethical end-of-life problems (such as assisted suicide and euthanasia), but rather as a point of practical contemplation for a basic orientation of Christian ethics, that of holy living and holy dying. I pose the question as one that disinvites the instrumental paradigm in favor of a paradigm that brings the mystery of our lives, corporately and individually, into conversation with the multiple biblical witnesses of lives lived out in response to God. We may well emerge from such reflection with the nucleus of a rule of life, a set of practices for holy living and holy dying, formed by our experience with these texts. Undertaken corporately, this reflection may issue in a fresh and recommitted understanding of Christian community, of our place among our ancestors in the faith, or of the consequences of eucharistic living. In tracing and describing our ways of engaging with the biblical texts, moreover, we will have observed a great deal about the Bible in the life of the church. We may not have discovered how biblical texts may (or may not) help Christians live socially responsible lives, and we may not have developed our personal list of tasks for social action, for which the paradigm of instrumentality is far better suited. Yet we will have gained a far richer and more sustaining set of resources for living as God’s people within the diverse and shifting contexts of our world.

The third approach that I would propose here, albeit with a bit of whimsy, in order to gain perspective on the ways in which biblical texts are heard, read, and interpreted in the life of the church without the presuppositions of the paradigm of instrumentality is to design a study wherein the texts are selected at random. In other words, the study would observe and describe a group grappling with eight or so texts that have not been chosen with any thematic topic or any ethical problem in mind. The scope of each of the texts would respect its narrative, rhetorical, or poetic integrity. The texts would not, however, be chosen according to any principle of liturgical practice, as happens
when we encounter texts through the medium of the lectionary. Instead the participants in such a study would be “dropped,” as it were, into the environment of each text in rather the way participants in a wilderness experience might be dropped off as a group in the midst of unfamiliar and unexpected territory—to explore, to find the resources for their sustenance, to read the winds and the tides and the lay of the land, to become intimately familiar with that area of wilderness for the time while they are there. What then would we perceive about our practices of reading, noticing, interpreting, and drawing sustenance from a text? What too would we discern about our practices of engaging a text in the company of others, as we attend to what they are noticing, much as in the wilderness our very survival depends upon attending to our companions’ observations and insights? We might of course observe that sometimes our practices of reading are indeed quite utilitarian, led by our needs and problems, but we would also see what else we do, in what ways in the Bible flourishes in the life of the church outside of the paradigm of instrumentality. We would also be moving toward developing an intimate knowledge of texts, the kind of intimacy that comes from living in the midst of a text in its complexities, rather than simply exploiting it for our purposes.

I have suggested that the paradigm of instrumentality exists for the biblical scholar in tension with the experience of saturation in the biblical texts and their manifold mystery. I have sketched these three approaches in order to point the way toward alternative paradigms: paradigms of exploration and intimacy, of struggle and contemplation, which aim at doing greater justice to the experience of saturation. Such an experience of saturation is not unique to biblical scholars, however: for Anglicans, in continuity with most other Christians—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—the primary location of Scripture in the life of the church is in worship: in the liturgy and in common prayer. We may differ considerably in the liturgical articulation and interpretation of Scripture, but it is in that “saturated” experience of common prayer that we apprehend Scripture in the first place. Biblical texts thus become ritual practices, shaping the environment of prayer and praise; the “texts” are in turn shaped by this environment so that we hear them through the present and remembered experience of liturgy.

I would cite one example: at the Easter Vigil, the story of creation from Genesis 1 is followed by the collect, “O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human
nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. 9

Each event—the story and the collect—exists intact, but in the ritual environment, each comes to shape the other and together they are shaped by the resurrection liturgy itself. And these events are usually not new to us, for we remember too our histories of these texts, liturgies, and prayers, how we have heard them before and what moments of recognition and awareness have occurred on previous occasions. We, the participants, come to find meaning or, perhaps better, to derive our identity and our hope out of the midst of such a semantically rich ritual juncture. My point here is that the experience of the biblical scholar and the experience of participants in the liturgy share something essential, namely, an environment of saturation in the texts, with multiple resonances, historical dimensions, and webs of contexts and intertexts.

This saturation, however, is not only about our experience. It is also about how, in almost all cases, biblical texts themselves came into being. The biblical texts emerged out of and in relation to communal practices of remembrance, in prayer and proclamation, in lamentation and argumentation, in telling the foundational narratives of the community in the contexts of ritual. I have argued elsewhere in detail how the remembrance of Jesus’ death among the earliest Christians happened in ritual contexts—meals and initiations—already saturated with psalms and prophecies, as well as with the stories of the vindication of God’s suffering and beloved servants. 10 This is the trajectory that plausibly produced the passion narratives of the gospels as well as some of the core arguments of Paul’s letters, along with later baptismal and eucharistic practices. Even if we suppose a text that is, in its final form, very much the literary product of a single author—for example, the Acts of the Apostles—it is almost inconceivable in the ancient world that this author did not write out of a larger context of scriptural saturation, through both scribal and ritual practices.

Such scriptural intimacy could be traced in many other times and places, and indeed for our purposes perhaps most importantly throughout the history of Anglican prayer and preaching. (I long at

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times for a “hypertexted” *Book of Common Prayer*, with each allu-
sion to Scripture noted and immediately accessible.) Here, however, I
would briefly mention only two examples. The first is that of monastic
practice, where the patterns of the Offices and Eucharist, together with
personal prayer, produce a life in which Scripture is inescapable and
foundational. Whether one considers the practices of those religious
communities such as the early Celtic monks or modern-day Copts who
recite the entire Psalter each day, or the more common practice of a
four- or seven-week cycle of psalms, together with the full round of lec-
tionary readings, it is readily apparent that biblical texts here become
intensely familiar and shape an essential language of Christian experi-
ence. The Bible is not an exterior authority to be consulted when needs
arise or used to buttress good ideas, but is instead interior, intimate,
and resonant within the community and the individual.

My second example comes from a conversation with Bishop
Mark MacDonald about the practices of traditional indigenous An-
glican communities such as the Cree and Inuit who, not without
struggle, claim the Bible as their text but to whom the notion of Bible
study as an isolated activity appears foreign and unnatural. A biblical
text will rather occupy a central role in defining a communal con-
versation, a time of prayer, a period of discernment, as a context of
reference and as an arena for exploration, reflection, and prophetic
leadership. The “text” is a presence in the conversation, apprehended
intimately and out of an understanding of its availability, witness, and
resourcefulness.¹¹

These “traditional” patterns of engaging biblical texts in the
church share more in common with the experience of biblical scholars
than we might first presume, because of their grounding in scriptural
intimacy and saturated environments. Nothing in these patterns is in-
herently antithetical to critical scholarship or an appreciation of the
historically conditioned shaping of biblical texts; yet even if Scripture
is “useful” and a rich resource (and it clearly is), it is not apprehended
primarily through a utilitarian paradigm of instrumentality. Instead
Scripture becomes an environment for living, and if for living, then
for love.

¹¹ Bishop Mark MacDonald is also a member of the North American Regional
Group for “The Bible in the Life of the Church” project; I am especially grateful to
him for his descriptions of some of the ways in which First Nations and other indig-
enumous peoples in North America engage the Bible within the context of Anglicanism.
“Mystery meeting mystery”: this orientation to the reading and interpretation of Scripture requires us also to acknowledge that the mystery of who we are may well include histories of suffering and histories of struggle, sometimes with the very texts that we are hearing. This may come from our own prior experience of those texts and the memories that they arouse, or it may come from our awareness of the harm wrought by and through these texts by earlier generations. It is not for nought that some biblical texts have been called “texts of terror”\(^\text{12}\) or that we have learned to read with a hermeneutic of suspicion alongside a hermeneutic of generosity.\(^\text{13}\) That is, the communal histories and dynamics that have given rise to the biblical texts before us include “difficult histories,” struggles, bitter disputes, sharp and ungenerous constructions of boundaries and divisions, and oppressive attitudes and actions toward others. In this respect, our biblical texts may not be innocent, either in their origins or in their subsequent uses.

Biblical scholars today are keenly aware of these dimensions, and indeed some of us devote our work to their analysis. To borrow a phrase from the apostle Paul, we have “treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7): biblical texts are earthen vessels just as we humans are—both we and they are capable of containing and revealing divine glory, but are marked by fallibility, mortality, and limitation. Similarly any community of interpretation is an “earthen vessel,” fundamentally human, marked by all manner of limitation and possibility of failure, but also graced with dignity and possibility for sharing divine life. This is part of the mystery of the interpretive community that encounters the similar mystery of the text. What this implies is that any community of interpretation becomes also a community of struggle, questioning, doubt, and at times resistance. If the Bible is to enjoy a vital life in the church, it is crucial that we have confidence in struggle, question, doubt, and resistance as dimensions of robust communities of interpretation, as characteristics of mature readers, and as natural in environments that are both saturated with Scripture and peopled by real human beings.


By virtue of our discipline and analytical habits, biblical scholars are perhaps more accustomed to approaching biblical texts with probing questions, to tussle with meaning, history, and implications, to ask of the text, “Why are you telling me this?” And what biblical scholars know above all from our work is that Scripture is tough, hardy, durable; the biblical texts can take our rough handling and demanding questions. We see just such practices of interpretation very clearly throughout the history of Jewish biblical interpretation—in the give and take of rabbinic questions, as well as in liturgy and story-telling—and these examples can help us spot similar approaches in our own traditions of interpretation. Sometimes I fear that in our times, perhaps because of the paradigm of instrumentality, the church regards the Bible as being like very fine china, kept in a cabinet for special uses and to be admired, requiring a delicate touch and adept handling. My grandmother had just such a set of china, but she also had a set of lovely everyday earthenware, which we handled with familiarity, aware of its sturdiness and serviceability. Biblical scholars know the texts to be just such sturdy “earthenware” placed before us every day, held in our hands and passed from one person to another. The saturated experience of liturgy also shows us the “everyday” character of Scripture, present with us as we pray and capable of being handled roughly by our questioning lives.

In this last section, I sketch some ways in which, building upon this renewed and reinvigorated perspective, rigorous biblical scholarship can contribute to a more robust and vigorous life for the Bible within our churches and among its everyday interpreters. To do so I use the framework of memory—the shared, collective, or social memory of a community, expressed through the words and actions of those who constitute it. Elsewhere I have written about leadership from the perspective of the New Testament as consisting of the cultivation and stewardship of such memory, not least through actively drawing upon all that is available through Scripture itself in forming the memory of the church so as to inform and energize the work of the here

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14 The literature on social, cultural, or collective memory is now extensive. For a good introduction, see Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), as well as the foundational work of Jan Assmann, Religion and Cultural Memory, trans. Rodney Livingston (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).
and now. One central aspect of such stewardship of memory is, to borrow a phrase from the philosopher Charles Taylor, the continual building of the social imaginaries of the church, that is, the complex of ways in which we imagine God’s desire for creation and our part in it. However we name this desire—the reign of God, the new creation, resurrection life—we recognize that in Christ God has inaugurated a new way of being in which we have been given a share and for which we have been graced to work. The ways in which we conceive of such a life, its foundations and history, the relations within it, its values, and the behaviors appropriate to it all inform what I am calling here a social imaginary. Such a social imaginary is not static, but rather dynamic, responding both to the situations of the present and drawing in a renewed fashion upon the resources of memory. We might think of a social imaginary as providing the means for envisioning a new creation and our entry into it—as that to which we belong in part here and now. It also may teach us the new ways of acting and the new social relations appropriate to this new “culture,” forming us as citizens of God’s commonwealth, members of Christ’s body.

This framework provides us with a means for understanding the resourcefulness of Scripture apart from a paradigm of instrumental-ity. The Bible is, in itself, a collection of such social imaginaries, not so much documenting God’s action as inviting people into a world understood as radically reshaped and redefined by God’s involvement and forming them in the social relations appropriate to such a world. As such, the multiple texts provide perspectives—in word and image, through struggles and hopes—for the shaping and articulation of

17 In a similar vein, Richard Valantasis proposes a broad definition of “asceticism” as “performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity”; see Richard Valantasis, “A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism,” in Asceticism, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 548, 550. This definition seeks to avoid conceiving of the ascetic as exotic, but draws instead upon the classical and Hellenistic Greek notion of askēsis as exercise, practice, or training in a profession, a set of skills (for example, in poetry, the gymnasium, or the military), or a mode of living. In this respect and under this definition, critically engaged biblical scholarship is both a form of asceticism and contributes to the ascetic project of the church.
social imaginaries for our own time. The role of Scripture in the formation of a social imaginary is not a directly instrumental use of biblical texts; rather, those texts become environments, territories, in which we grow familiar with other ways of looking at the world, other ways of moving toward God’s desire. Within this framework we often begin with the texts and let new questions for our times evolve out of the text. What is more, the “memory” of the church is not singular, but rather differentiated, multivocal, and polyphonic, as the various social imaginaries of our scriptural ancestors intertwine among each other, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in profound disagreement. It helps also to remember that the biblical texts and these social imaginaries are themselves frequently grounded in experimentation, that is, the experimentation of peoples and individuals in living as the people of God. So too we, in our time, are experimenting, trying out new or renewed ways of living as the people of God, drawing upon the treasuries of memory and articulating a social imaginary that sustains and energizes our love and work.

Here biblical scholars have much to contribute to the life of the church. As those who are particularly saturated in the expressions of memory and in the formation and expression of the social imaginaries that are the biblical texts, we are distinctively equipped to guide others in this wild and often exotic territory. We can help others to “remember” and to become sufficiently saturated in Scripture as to allow it to inform their own social imaginaries in ways that are creative and sound to the body, mind, and spirit. The scripturally saturated environment of the liturgy, as I have described above, is a fitting complement to such work. No one aspect is sufficient in itself to the formation of memory and the social imaginary, but scholarship and liturgy work together with a host of other dynamics that include a conscientious awareness of the needs of the world and the suffering of others, as well as an unrelenting commitment to what is real and not illusory.

Biblical scholars who are involved in the life of the Anglican churches—and there are a great many of us—have a deep desire to give and to collaborate with others in what we might loosely call God’s mission in the world. We hear the call to articulate the relevance and applicability of biblical scholarship for this work keenly, and we allow ourselves to work within a paradigm of instrumentality in the context of the church and elsewhere because of our love, our sense of justice, and our acute awareness of the world’s problems. We want to be
useful. We want to draw upon what we have been given—our education and expertise, our abilities to teach and write. It is, in one way or another, love that motivates us: love for God’s people and creation, love for God. The intense work of study and practice, the life of learning and creativity to which biblical scholars necessarily devote themselves, all participate in that same divine self-giving love that sustains and transfigures us.\(^\text{18}\)

We do that love a disservice, however, if we do not speak and teach out of the depths of the knowledge we have cultivated and tended, out of the treasury of abundant resources that we have been given. The church, moreover, does that love a disservice when the multifold contributions of biblical scholarship are marginalized or only drawn upon superficially. Rather, if our contributions are to be those which properly inform the church’s memory and its social imaginary, there needs to be attention to the long duration of time and history that reveals God’s providence, care for the details, patience for the uncomfortable perspectives and convictions of the past, and hospitality to the voices of our (sometimes awkward, sometimes gracious) ancestors. Through our work, biblical scholars bring many disparate and odd voices to the table, as it were, as we make out the distinct and particular points of view that constitute the biblical texts.\(^\text{19}\) There is grace and freedom in this, for in my view it also gives a great deal of room to distinct and particular views in the communities of our own times. But it requires from all of us the virtues of patience, attentive love, and hospitality, as well as that virtue of delighting in the variety and peculiarity of God’s creative activity.

Another way of encapsulating what I am advocating here is to say that biblical scholars have a crucial role to play in the cultivation of a


\(^\text{19}\) Paul F. Bradshaw, in *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), distinguishes between scholars who are “splitters” and those who are “lumpers” (p. ix). Biblical scholars are, on the whole, “splitters” who seek distinction and difference, rather than “lumpers,” who create grand narratives or synthesizing conceptualizations. For example, biblical scholars distinguish without hesitation among the differing portrayals of Jesus in the four canonical gospels and attend to the *aporia* (or awkward gaps) in one of Paul’s letters, which may provide clues to a complex compositional history.
learnéd memory for the church, among all its members.\textsuperscript{20} By learnéd memory I mean a memory that is deeply informed by the disciplined inquiry into how those before us and around us have spoken of the action and presence of God. It is about the cultivation of a memory soaked in the Scriptures and saturated with the understanding of how the texts of the Scriptures were crafted in order to give multifaceted voice to the encounter with God—a memory learnéd in the experiences of others. Such a memory is restless with curiosity about how others have spoken of God: how they have argued for God and how they have extended God’s welcome, and how they have prayed and how they have sung God’s praises. Rigorous biblical scholarship can nourish an ever-expansive memory with an increasing capacity to appreciate what is strange and unfamiliar, seemingly very foreign, yet part of the whole multifaceted treasure of how humans encounter the divine. I am not speaking here about nostalgia—that longing for a return to an earlier, idealized time—but rather about the recognition that we live in an ongoing, dynamic, multivocal stream of making and expressing meaning wherein the richness of the past, discerned and understood in some depth, is available as a resource for the very present work of living in the here and now and for moving with courage and wisdom into the future. A learnéd memory is indeed not something that we possess, but it is rather a way of living, a set of practices that ground us and give us confidence. A learnéd memory is how the work of the church, our love of souls and our love of God, comes to be filled with depth and insight, beyond any techniques or charming words or tricks, beyond instrumentality, and indeed beyond ourselves.

The intimacy with the texts in their manifold mystery, in which biblical scholarship—rigorous, critical, generous, and bold—takes delight, combines in the church with commitments to the love of souls and to fierce advocacy for justice, truth, and reconciliation. Biblical scholars practice what I would call a certain relentless intimacy in our work, an intimacy that begins with the texts themselves and extends into all that the texts refract, all that the texts care about, engage with, and catalyze. This is one aspect of the peculiar labor of the biblical scholar. But we bring that intimacy with the texts to all the other

aspects of our work, to everything else with which we are concerned. We have, indeed, a particular, sometimes peculiar, role to play in the life of the church as we guide others into the territories of the biblical texts, where they may gather new perspectives, new insight, new strength from what they experience there. As the church’s guides into these territories, biblical scholars provide the insights of experienced lovers of the text who are not afraid to acknowledge the difficulties and to recognize what we cannot know. In this way, biblical scholars serve as persistent advocates for Scripture in the life of the church and bold entrepreneurs who invite others into scriptural environments abundant with life.