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Introduction: John Donne and the Bible

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As poet, preacher and translator, Donne participated in the central Reformation project of biblical scholarship. This special issue, *John Donne and the Bible*, focuses on how he engaged the Bible throughout the varied genres of his work—the prose works (*Biathanatos*, *Essays in Divinity*, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, etc.), the *Sermons*, and the *Divine Poems* (*Holy Sonnets*, *Lamentations of Jeremy*, etc.). Such a multigeneric approach is one significant contribution of this issue in understanding Donne's reading of the biblical text. A second contribution is the expansion of the scholarly focus on the question of source (which Bible translation or which biblical commentator did Donne use at a given time?) to a scholarly focus on exegetical methods (literal and metaphoric/symbolic interpretation), as well as on theological concerns (conscience, divine revelation, sin and salvation).

The search for Donne's biblical and exegetical sources is, of course, an important foundation for a comprehensive study of his reading and interpreting the Bible. D. C. Allen's pioneering 1943 essay, "Dean Donne Sets his Text,"[1] looks at Donne's sermons in the context of "the efforts of the Jacobean preachers to establish a just and pure text of the Scriptures."[2] In his study of *LXXX Sermons* of 1640, he estimates Donne's sources for biblical references numbered "something more

[1]Don Cameron Allen, "Dean Donne Sets his Text," *ELH* 10.3 (1943): 208–29.
[2]Allen, p. 208.

than a thousand different texts."[3] Allen's primary concern in studying these references is to establish that Donne used a variety of Bibles—reflecting the cornucopia of biblical editions extant in the 16th and early 17th centuries.[4] He thus notes Donne's use of the *Vulgate*, the *Complutensian* and *(Royal) Antwerp* Polyglots, and the *Geneva* and *King James* Bibles. On her part, Evelyn Simpson provides a more extensive discussion of Donne's biblical and exegetical sources, in Volume X of the edition of the sermons that she edited with George Potter (1962).[5] She includes several overviews, relating to all of Donne's sermons, regarding his use of languages (Hebrew and other Semitic languages), various versions of the Bible (Greek, Latin, English), and the early Church Fathers. What is more, her appendices provide valuable information: Hebrew words; passages cited from Augustine's works; and medieval and renaissance commentators cited by Donne. This resource is subsequently complemented by Troy Reeve's three-volume *Index to the Sermons of John Donne* (1980),[6] as well as by the accessibility for source research provided by the digital collection of Donne's *Sermons* at the Brigham Young University Library.[7] More recently, there is the painstaking task presently being undertaken by the editors of the *Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, who provide exceptional notes in each volume about Donne's use of sources. These notes correct and expand Simpson's scholarship, as the combined efforts of editors and advisors—aided by modern research

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[3]Allen, p. 209.

[4]For further discussion of these Bibles, see Lori Anne Ferrell, "The Preacher's Bibles," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, ed. Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington and Emma Rhatigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 21–33; S. L. Greenslade, "English Versions of the Bible, 1525–1611," in *The Cambridge History of The Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 141–74.

[5]*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), Vol. 10, pp. 295–401.

[6]Troy D. Reeves, *Index to the Sermons of John Donne*, 3 volumes (Salzburg, Austria: Institut Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzberg, 1980).

[7]See: www.lib.byu.edu/collections/john-donne-sermons.

tools—reveal for a reader of Donne's sermons the routes and byways of his search for biblical and exegetical sources to enrich his preaching.

Simpson opens her discussion of Donne's sources in Volume X with an acknowledgement of Donne's ultimate purpose in citing the Bible. She writes, quite perceptively:

> Of all the sources used by Donne in his *Sermons* the Bible is by far the most important. This may seem self-evident, but many preachers, while taking their text from Scripture, have filled their discourses with theological discussion, or abusive controversy, or with moral counsel, or stories from the lives of the saints. Donne is first and foremost an evangelical preacher, and he enforces his argument at every turn by direct quotation or oblique reference to the Bible.[8]

Simpson's short but succinct attention to Donne's exegetical method and theological concern distinctly echoes in several seminal essays about his use of the Bible. Contemporaneous to this final volume of the Potter and Simpson edition, Dennis Quinn argues in two essays[9] for a understanding of Donne's "Christian eloquence" from a conceptual viewpoint, writing that the "psychology of preaching in general is, for Donne, the same as the psychology of the Bible, which works directly upon the soul and only indirectly upon man's reason."[10] Moreover, Quinn sets out to free Donne from being perceived as following "polemical, theological, speculative, literalistic, and allegorical approaches," choosing instead to represent him as maintaining an Anglican "balance of reason and faith."[11]

Two more recent essays have recognized the significance of Donne's interaction with the biblical text. Both are included in present-day volumes discussing the Bible in English literature; these two collections demonstrate the continued fascination with this topic.

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[8]*Sermons of John Donne*, Vol. 10, p. 295.

[9]Quinn's discussion in the two essays cited were developed in his Ph.D. dissertation, entitled *John Donne's Sermons on the Psalms and the Tradition of Biblical Exegesis* (University of Wisconsin, 1958).

[10]Dennis Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," *ELH* 27.4 (1960): 283.

[11]Dennis B. Quinn, "John Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 61.2 (1962): 313.

Moreover, the inclusion of particular chapters on Donne demonstrates his centrality for such scholarship. Jeanne Shami's contribution to *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*[12] signals an important change in studying Donne's reading of the Bible, highlighting as she does the pervasiveness of biblical allusions throughout Donne's corpus. She also supports the insights set out by Quinn and Simpson, while establishing an incisive view of Donne's exegetical methods and theological demands. Shami's opening statement is revealing, as she writes that the "Bible permeates Donne's universe, providing the fabric and texture of his epistemology, spirituality, and sense of self, and the raw materials for his witty, imaginative explorations of experience."[13] Such an integrative conception of Donne's relationship to the biblical text encompasses not only his entire oeuvre, but also his stance as both metaphysical poet and captivating preacher, thereby offering one way to resolve the question about literary and theological development. She also engages, though necessarily in brief, with several other issues that are important in studying the topic of Donne and the Bible: his recognition of the Bible's "eloquent literary qualities";[14] his use of biblical translations and commentaries; his "spiritual appetite" for the Psalms;[15] and the definition of Donne's interpretive strategies within "the proliferation of controversy" during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation."[16]

Emma Rhatigan's contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England* complements her work on a volume of the *Oxford Edition of John Donne's Sermons*, which is dedicated to the sermons preached at the Inns of Court. This essay demonstrates the way in which the issues designated by Shami are skillfully employed to illuminate "the relationship between Donne's biblical scholarship and

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[12]Jeanne Shami, "Chapter 17: John Donne," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, ed. Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowland (Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 239–53.
[13]Shami, p. 239.
[14]Shami, p. 240.
[15]Shami, p. 241.
[16]Shami, p. 243.

his commitment to a particular rhetorical and didactic occasion."[17] Rhatigan concentrates on Donne's sermon on Psalm 38:2, preached at the elite pulpit of Lincoln's Inn, as an example of how he perfected his unique, "rhetorically ornate and often ostentatiously learned" preaching style.[18] She carefully and meticulously shows how Donne traces "out a single image across multiple books of the Bible."[19] As she argues, for Donne biblical exegesis is therefore "indistinguishable from its rhetorical construction"[20]—which effectively integrates his skill as poet and preacher. This assertion is central to the way in which Rhatigan reconceptualizes Donne's use of scholarly sources and original texts, forging a highly informative and integrative discussion of a sermonic text. Taken together, the essays by Rhatigan and Shami signify a new way of looking at Donne's relationship to the Bible, which adumbrates the concerns and methods of the present issue.

The nine essays included in this volume are divided into three groups, each of which elaborates on three different genres: "Sermons"; "Sermons Extended" (to include prose and poetic texts); and "Other Works" (*Essayes in Divinity* and *Lamentations of Jeremy*). Daniel Doerksen's essay, which opens the first group, argues for Donne's participation in the dominant Calvnistic conformity in the Jacobean (and Caroline) Church of England. In doing so, Donne reflects its "word-centered" view, in which there is an emphasis on the Scriptures as the Word of God. This argument has two main consequences for Doerksen's study of sermons preached throughout Donne's ministry. In terms of auditory, Doerksen shows how Donne supports a practical purpose of biblical study—which is to evangelize and transform lives. In terms of exegetical method, Doerksen sets out how Donne supports the "sober studie" of the Bible, continuously affirming the authority of the biblical text by regularly consulting exegetical sources to establish its accuracy. This recognition of exegetical sources is developed in my essay, in which I focus on Donne's use of one

[17]Emma Rhatigan, "Donne's Biblical Encounters," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England*, *c. 1530–1700*, ed. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Willie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 565.
[18]Rhatigan, p. 566.
[19]Rhatigan, p. 566.
[20]Rhatigan, p. 569.

particular Jewish exegetical source—the Aramaic *Targum* (known also as the "Chalde Paraphrase"). I propose that Donne's citings of the *Targum* throughout his ministry are to be divided into three groups, corresponding to the type of meaning provided for philological and semantic ambiguities in the biblical text: confirming a literal meaning of a Hebrew term; extending the term's meaning to provide an alternative, literal one; and creating a complex metaphoric/symbolic meaning for the biblical text. I thereby demonstrate that Donne's use of the *Targum* highlights his active participation in the intellectual heritage of Christian Hebraism, revealing as well the great care he takes to make the Hebrew biblical text accessible for his audience in order to involve them in reading as a process of interpretation. The final essay in this group, by Ramie Targoff, discusses two sermons preached at St. Paul's: Whitsunday 1629, containing Donne's Trinitarian gloss of Genesis 1:2; and Christmas day 1625, containing Donne's report of the blood libel against Jews for murdering Christian children. Targoff throws light on a highly interesting, and disturbing, aspect of Donne's preaching on Jews. The main concern of her essay is therefore Donne's attitude toward Jewish biblical hermeneutics and ritual as seen through the eyes of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose extensive marginal comments in two copies of Donne's collected *Sermons* draw attention to the limits of his religious tolerance. Targoff argues that reading Donne through Coleridge's eyes teaches one to admire Donne as one possessing a "truly great" mind—but one not to trusted when it came to Jewish doctrine or practice.

The second, and largest, group of essays very appropriately extends the study of Donne's sermons by juxtaposing them with a broad array of his other works. Caroline Carpenter's opening essay examines intertextual relationships between three of Donne's sermons (preached in 1621/2 at a wedding, at Lincoln's Inn and at Whitehall) and his 1608 treatise on suicide, *Biathanatos*. She argues that Donne's virtually identical exegesis of the biblical verses shared by these sermons and *Biathanatos*, writings that serve two very different rhetorical purposes, reflects the centrality of conscience in his moral philosophy. She notes that each sermon connects, via a shared biblical verse, to one of the three major divisions in *Biathanatos*: natural law, reason, and the law of God. The resulting ecumenicism of Donne's moral philosophy, as Carpenter has demonstrated through his biblical

intertextuality, allows him to transcend confessional differences in both his personal and professional lives. In the following essay, Tessie Prakas juxtaposes Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* to his sermon on Psalm 38:2, preached in 1618 at Lincoln's Inn. She proposes that both the nineteenth *Devotion* and the sermon dwell on the considerable labor required to engage with the metaphorical nature of scriptural language. Prakas further argues that Donne positions the multiplicity of interpretative possibilities arising from the "ambiguous" nature of the psalmic text as a boon, rather than a hindrance, to the understanding of the Christian worshipper. In practice, then, as she demonstrates, Donne glosses short passages of text rigorously and repeatedly, and the multiplicity of meanings thus generated gives these glosses the aspect of a lesson in exegetical practice—a lesson that might enable listeners not only passively to comprehend, but independently and actively to engage with the scriptural text.

The next two essays in this group, by Salenius and Taylor, both extend the *Sermon*s even further, encompassing Donne's *Divine Poems* as well as his prose works. Salenius's essay examines how Donne, throughout his preaching career, cites and retells biblical narratives of death in his *Sermons* when developing his argument about encountering death. Supported by a study of Donne's letters, *Devotions*, and *Holy Sonnets*, she demonstrates how Donne utilizes a specific linguistic choice and distinct grammatical voice, in order to illustrate both the importance of the presence of God for salvation and the absolute destruction of man when this divine presence is denied. Furthermore, Salenius argues that this division into contact versus annihilation echoes the rhetoric of the narratives of near-death experience recorded by later NDE (near-death experience) research, and that this linguistic similarity adds a further lever of interest in the cognitive process of how one's depiction of death is developed. In his essay, Taylor juxtaposes sermons preached throughout Donne's ministry with *HSBlack* ("Oh my blacke soul!") and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. He proposes that Donne considers scriptural images of sin as the invisible truth of his inner self, experiencing sin most vitally as an internal illness. Taylor further contends that Donne follows patristic typology in applying to himself scriptural images of sin as bodily contamination. Offering first an extended treatment of

sin as stain, Taylor subsequently examines in the *Sermons* Donne's idea of how the public liturgy of the Church blots out the stain of sin. For as in the sacramental application of Christ's blood through baptism and the eucharist, Donne finds the fulfillment of a scriptural trope: in the Scripture and in sacrament, blood not only symbolizes sin but also effaces sin, not only signifies guilt but also clears guilt.

The essays in the third and final group turn their attention to other genres in Donne's oeuvre. Paul Stanwood discusses *Essayes in Divinity*, the first of Donne's works to deal explicitly and entirely with scriptural concerns. Stanwood argues that while the form of these essays may recall the "new" genre made popular through Montaigne (and Bacon), there is little reason to think so; for Donne is responding to the possibility of a divine vocation, first of all as a putative biblical exegete. Stanwood thus perceives *Essayes in Divinity* as beginning as an exegesis, but developing into a moral and aesthetic understanding of the Scriptures. Specifically, Donne is at first inspired by the long hexaemeral tradition on the creation narrative set out in book of Genesis, which then becomes an occasion for personal reflection and textual revelation rather than one that is scholastic or theoretical. Alison Knight's essay concludes this issue with a study of Donne's divine poem *Lamentations of Jeremy*, which she argues represents one of Donne's most sustained explorations of the poetic qualities of the Hebrew Bible. Knight further proposes that Donne's poetic choices in this verse paraphrase attempt to accommodate what early modern commentators viewed as the intrinsic hybridity of the Hebrew Bible's language. In his *Lamentations*, Donne's translation thus prioritizes multivalent word choice—words that encourage multiple readings and conflicting images. Alongside commentary in his sermons and letters, the emphasis in *Lamentations* on accommodating what Donne considered to be the hybridity of the Hebrew language suggests his considerable interest in the esthetics of biblical language and argues for his belief that such esthetics are a key aspect of translation.

This special issue of the *John Donne Journal* presents a collection of essays, which together conceive of Donne's study and citation of the Bible as comprising a nexus of textual, interpretive and theological relationships. This issue has benefited greatly from the generous support and scholarly advice provided by Sean McDowell, the journal's

editor, and it is to be hoped that it will generate a rich and stimulating interchange about these topics.

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