CHARLES WESLEY AS A BIBLICAL INTERPRETER

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Charles Wesley’s output of hymns and poems on specific passages of scripture numbers in the thousands. For example, in 1762 he published two volumes entitled Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scripture. Volume I contained 1,160 numbered hymns on the Old Testament and Volume II contained 318 on the Old Testament and 870 on the New Testament for a total of 2,348 hymns. There is a manuscript Scripture Hymns dated 1783 which includes 126 entries on the Old Testament and 128 entries on the New Testament for a total of 254. This extensive poetical productivity directed to scriptural interpretation postdates what might be called the most significant period of Wesley’s hymn and poetry writing, namely, from about 1738–1755. Numerous volumes published during this period include a voluminous amount of material related to specific passages of scripture: Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739), Hymns and Sacred Poems (1740), Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love (1741), Hymns and Sacred Poems (1742), Hymns for Times of Trouble and Persecution (1744), Hymns on the Lord’s Supper (1745), Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord (1745), Hymns for our Lord’s Resurrection (1746), Hymns for Ascension Day (1746), Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father (1746), Hymns to the Holy Trinity (1746), Hymns and Sacred Poems (1749). These are some of the volumes of primary interest to this study. The 1762 volumes mentioned above will be cited here as Scripture Hymns (1762). There are also many unpublished Wesley hymns and poems based on the four gospels, the Book of Acts, and numerous other passages of scripture. The Arminian Magazine (1797–1801) also contains many psalm paraphrases of Charles Wesley.

The scripture hymns written from 1762 onward are more closely reasoned and the language sometimes lacks the lyrical eloquence of his earlier verse, such as the poem “Wrestling Jacob” (“Come, O thou Traveller Unknown”) which is based on Genesis 32 and was first published in 1742. Yet, his brother John felt that some of Charles’ finest verse was found in Scripture Hymns (1762).

It should be clarified at the outset that Wesley often specified the passage of scripture on which his poetry was based. Sometimes it was only a point of reference, however, and his verse might have little to do with the designated passage. At other times he might capture the spirit and/or mood of a passage while not treating it in detail. He also wrote poetical paraphrases of many sections of scripture, such as the
Psalms. On other occasions he responded to verses of scripture sequentially in a hymn or poem. Finally, his poetry, whether based on a specific passage of scripture or not, is filled with biblical language which was a part of the matrix of his existence. He used biblical language, figures of speech, metaphors, similes, etc. to explicate the faith. Hence, even verses not specified as based on a particular scripture passage may be valid for biblical interpretation.

**Biblical Studies and Poetical Interpretation**

The analytical orientation of biblical studies based on historical-critical method often leaves little room for the poet as a biblical interpreter. The canons of biblical interpretation often do not allow for the intrusion of art. The process of verification has become paramount in source and form critical analysis in tracing tradition and redaction history. Even structural criticism has not escaped the pitfall of structure verification as the key to biblical reality and truth.

Wesley had none of the advantages or disadvantages of contemporary biblical criticism and its tools since he predated them. He did know the primary biblical languages and was not a biblical literalist. He once wrote of one who,

So resting on the *literal* word
Renounced the truth.

Furthermore, he writes:

The reasoning selfishness of man
Can it the word of God explain?
Or shall I trust the learn'd employ'd
By pride to make the present void?
With faith's unfeign'd simplicity,
Jesus I turn from man to thee,
Thy own interpreter thou art.
Write thy own meaning in my heart.  

Does this offer only the option of a spiritualized interpretation of scripture and the fate of theological thumbsucking? No, but it does mean taking an honest look at biblical exegesis as a science together with artistic interpretation and the viable options they may offer to biblical interpretation. Both realms are vital to biblical interpretation. Biblical studies do tend to exclude art, since one cannot subject them as readily to the kind of analysis biblical exegetes have come to think is essential to biblical interpretation. There is, however, often a yawning chasm between historical-critical method and the ultimate and/or contemporary relevance of scripture. The poet often sees the ultimate

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1*Manuscript Matthew* based on 5:42, 41.
value in minutia, detail, the obvious and the deduced, which are frequently the life of analytical theory. The poet may see a form and structure which reside deep within things and may elude the exegetical specialist.

Is it possible to rest so heavily on historical method that one also renounces the truth? Is that not also a literalistic approach? Can one miss the common motive or universal human experience behind and within the scripture which the artist sees? Can the artist provide valuable insight in biblical interpretation less apt to result from historical-critical method?

Art functions best in living forms and, hence, it approaches scripture within the context of life as it is lived, not merely as it has been lived. Johannes Brahms’ musical setting of I Corinthians 13, for example, in the *Four Serious Songs* translates these words into a living covenant of present existence. Benjamin Britten has actualized the flood story of Genesis 6–9 in his church opera, *Nove’s Fludde*, in a way never before accomplished by any biblical exegete. It is an incredible lesson and model of biblical hermeneutics affirmed and made possible through artistic sensitivity. But—someone may ask, “How can Britten put the words ‘kyrie eleison’ into the mouths of the animals in the ark? That is dragging Christian liturgy into an Old Testament story. That is ridiculous!” Such a comment reflects the sentiment of defenders of historical method who aver, and rightly so, that it rejects dragging Christianity into the Old Testament. Britten, the artist, however, has heard the constant cry of all creation which is indeed “kyrie eleison,” or “Lord, have mercy upon us.”

Poets and other artists do not necessarily have analogical thinking as the basis of their art. Therefore, they become suspect to biblical exegetes whose foundation is precisely that. Too many temples built upon this foundation have already crumbled. Some of them are toppling still. The fullness of history has become more important than the particularity of history.

How can a poetical commentary on scripture such as that of Charles Wesley, which does not reflect most of the concerns of contemporary exegesis or biblical science, possibly have integrity for biblical interpretation in the twentieth century? It must be said clearly and firmly that the value of Charles Wesley’s work does not lie in the realm of intellectuality often connected with the canons of exegetical method. Furthermore, if there is no value in his art, there can be little value in his interpretation. As important as J. E. Rattenbury’s view is in refer-

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2When Albrecktson in *History and the Gods* (1967) proved through careful ancient Near Eastern textual study that *Heilsgeschichte* was not a unique Israelite phenomenon, biblical scholarship had to revamp decades of historical and theological structures whose form, stability, and analysis issued from that presupposition.
enence to Charles Wesley—"Religious doctrine is perhaps better approached and understood as an art than as science; as petinent devotion than as desiccated dogma"—it is not a commonly shared view. With certainty biblical exegesis, since the development of historical-critical method, have not generally shared another view of Rattenbury: "Artistic endowments are often gifts of God, more valuable than the technique of the logician for achieving the very ends which the thinker pursues."

Is this also true of Wesley’s poetical appropriation of scripture?

Charles Wesley’s Biblical Interpretation

There are essential facets of Wesley’s biblical interpretation which may be established from his extensive scripture poetry. The following survey discusses seven of them which are fundamental for studying his work.

(1) Wesley’s biblical text is the Authorized Version or King James Version of the Bible. It functions for him as a “given” text in language, diction and authority as God’s Word. Nonetheless, this does not transpire without a concern for the texts in their original languages. There are times in his hymns and poems when he uses transliterated forms of Hebrew and Greek words for emphasis, rhyme, alliteration, assonance or meaning, instead of the language of the Authorized Version. For example:

1. JEHOVAH-EL, I thee adore
2. The glorious Schechinah Divine
3. JESUS, thy name my Bezer stands

One might speak of the Wesley lyrical corpus as a modern midrash of the Authorized Version, for, like the Jewish sages and rabbis, he often brings biblical wisdom into sharp focus by means other than exegetical method. They developed an interpretative blending of life experience with oral and written traditions, e.g., sayings, stories, metaphors, etc., of both theological and practical spheres, which would find little respect in biblical commentaries today; nonetheless, they often communicate the wisdom of the text. Wesley’s midrash is a poetical one. It is his mid-rashic vehicle of getting at the heart of the biblical text and elucidating wisdom.

In addition to the Authorized Version Wesley used the Book of Common Prayer, its Psalter and allusions to the scripture from the writings of the early church fathers.

4Ibid., 101.
6Ibid., 45.
7Ibid., 223.
(2) Wesley actualizes the biblical text. His scripture poetry is not random homiletical and devotional ruminations on the biblical text. Wesley actualizes the text for the church's task. It is true that many of his poems are sermons in themselves through his use of typology and allegory. Many are genuine paraphrases, such as those of the Psalms, which highlight and emphasize meanings which are often hidden within the lines of the text. Wesley puts himself, readers, and singers into the scripture and vice versa so that the Bible lives at the moment of encounter. All become everyone in scripture and even the inanimate is given life.

(3) Wesley respects and accepts the church's confession that Holy Scripture consists of the Old and New Testaments. He is very concerned with an understanding of the Old Testament in the light of Jesus Christ, as he has received this affirmation both within and from the church, through personal experience and through the scripture as an object of study. Charles Wesley's encounter with Jesus Christ is an encounter with God. The encounter with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not with a different God from the God of the Psalms.

His view of the wholeness of the Old and New Testaments in terms of God's witness and Word is summarized in his verse on Matthew 17:3, "And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him."

Moses and the prophets speak
And witness to our Lord,
Him and only him we seek
Throughout the sacred word:
When we find the Saviour there,
The figures and predictions shine,
Seen with Christ, they all declare
The majesty divine.⁸

If Wesley were to be given a theological contextuality on this issue, perhaps he would come down somewhere between R. Bultmann and W. Vischer. Probably he would agree with Vischer that "all of Jesus' words, acts, and suffering are related to the Old Testament and represent its fulfillment." More than likely, however, he would not have agreed with the title of the article: "Everywhere the Scripture is about Christ alone."

Wesley would not have concurred with Bultmann's view that the new people of God is only an eschatological community. Wesley is a conscious inheritor of a believing and an ecclesiastical community. Hence, for him the people of the Old and New Testaments live with

⁸Manuscript Matthew, 200-1.

God in time and in an existent world with tasks, duties, freedom, temptation, and the church.

(4) Wesley christologizes the Old Testament. Essential to an understanding of Wesley’s biblical interpretation is the recognition that he christologizes the Old Testament. He frequently will give an Old Testament reference as the basis for his lyric only to compose a christologically oriented poem which may be related in essence very little, if at all, to the designated text: for example, the poem based on the Song of Solomon 6:10, “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners!” (AV)

Lo, the church with gradual light
Her opening charms displays,
After a long dreary night
Looks forth with glimmering rays,
Scarce perceptible appears,
Until the Day-spring from on high
All the face of nature cheers,
And gladdens earth and sky.

Fair as the unclouded moon,
With borrow’d rays she shines,
Shines, but ah! she changes soon,
And when at full declines,
Frequent, long eclipses feels,
’Till Jesus drives the shades away,
All her doubts and sins dispels,
And brings the perfect day.

Now she without spot appears,
For Christ appears again,
Sun of righteousness, he clears
His church from every stain,
Rising in full majesty
He blazes with meridian light:
All th’horizon laughs to see
The joyous heavenly sight.

Bright with lustre not her own
The woman now admire,
Cloath’d with that eternal Sun
Which sets the worlds on fire!
Bright she shall for ever shine,
Enjoying like the church above,
All the light of truth divine,
And all the fire of love.
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From her dark, inconstant state
To perfect love restor’d
Stands the church divinely great,
The army of the Lord,
Wide his blood sign displays;
And lo the hosts of Satan fall;
Terrible in holiness
She more than conquers all.

Who shall live to see the day
of her Redeemer’s power?
Jesus, come; no more delay
Thy kingdom to restore!
Or if first to rest I go,
Yet let me in that day appear,
Meanest of thy saints below,
Thy saints triumphant here!

Wesley has written a superb poem on the growth of the church’s self-awareness illuminated by Jesus, but it has nothing to do with the biblical passage upon which it is supposedly based.

On the other hand, there are other instances where his christological understanding of love as revealed in Jesus Christ as the centrifugal force of life and creation becomes the fundamental avenue through which an Old Testament text’s meaning comes into focus. “Come, O thou Traveller unknown” is one of the finest examples of this type of christological interpretation of an Old Testament text (Genesis 32).

Wesley’s view of the Old and New Testaments is very much like the “reciprocal” view of Dietrich Bonhoeffer wherein each sheds light upon the other. The Bible is the place God speaks to human beings in the past and present. The whole Bible is a witness of and to one God. The Bible is the witness of love of God in Jesus Christ. The Bible is the book of the church. Like Bonhoeffer he sees prototypes and foreshadowings of the New Testament in the Old.

“Come, O thou Traveller unknown” is unquestionably Charles Wesley’s own spiritual autobiography. He sees the struggles of his own life mirrored in Jacob’s wrestling with the angel. Furthermore, all of life focuses on one issue: the quest for the Unknown Traveller. Even after his “conversion” experience of May 21, 1738, when he grasped for the first time the reality of God’s love for him in Jesus Christ, the struggle to know the heights and depths of such love and

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the God who gave and gives of self in that love continued until his
deadth at age eighty-one.

Wesley sees Genesis 32 as raising the question: Who is God?

Who I ask thee, who art thou?

This is an unthinkable question for him even in the context of an Old Testament story without asking the question: Who is Jesus?

Art thou the man that died for me?

Then he raises the question the scriptures are ever asking: Is it possible to know God?

Wilt thou not yet to me reveal
Thy new, unutterable name?

This is Israel’s experience time and again and the Old Testament moves through the revelation of various names of God, each with its own significance.

This poem is an artistic meeting of the redemptive worlds of the Old and New Testaments and does not christologize the Jacob story in such a way as to damage its integrity. Wesley fuses with artistic genius the redemptive experience of both testaments. Both affirm the struggle to know God’s name and nature—the grasp for the Unknown, to hold fast that which one cannot see. There is perhaps a strong Moravian influence here on Charles, which can also be found expressed eloquently in the Gerhard Tersteegen hymn translated by John Wesley.

Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
   Whose depth unfathomed, no one knows,
I see from far thy beauteous light,
   And inly sigh for thy repose;
My heart is pained, nor can it be
   At rest, till it find rest in thee.\(^2\)

Both testaments affirm that the quest of the Unknown is also an identity crisis. In the Bible story Jacob must first be asked who he is before he can receive the blessing. Wesley says, however:

I need not tell thee who I am,
   My misery, or sin declare,
Thy self hast called me by my name,
   Look on thy hands, and read it there.

Both testaments affirm that God’s suffering with humankind is a vital aspect of discovering who one is and who God is.

Both testaments affirm that the quest for the Unknown requires endurance. Wesley says, therefore:

Wrestling I will not let thee go,
   Till I thy name, thy nature know.

\(^2\)A Collection of Psalms and Hymns (1738), 51–3; first stanza only is quoted.
\(^{13}\)Hymns and Sacred Poems (1742) 99–100.
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Wesley sees wrestling "till the break of day" as Israel's experience and universal human experience. Furthermore, endurance in the quest alone leads to a grasp of God's nature and name as one and the same: LOVE.

Wesley, the poet and theologian, sees the miracle and parable in history which reveal God's grace and human need. He uses the figures of parable legitimately and poetically in shaping a view of biblical reality that is functional. The concept of functional reality is essential to Wesley's biblical interpretation. Functional reality may be described in the following manner: the view of reality portrayed in Holy Scripture is the most valid picture of the world and the human condition in the past and present. This view functions for Wesley as truth and real existence. This is why, for example, he understands that the mercy which enshrouds the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, enshrouds him also. Hence, one finds an entwining of fact, figures, and symbol in his biblical interpretation.

(5) Wesley allegorizes many biblical narratives. Allegory is for him primarily a means of translating biblical reality rather than stretching its veracity. Excellent examples of this positive use of allegory are found in the poems on "The Pool of Bethesda" and "The Woman of Canaan". Allegory is a means by which Wesley focuses functional reality.

In the Bethesda poem he moves the experience of the healed man from the pool to the foot of the cross and then takes his place as one pardoned by God and upon whom God bestows love.

Wesley personalizes the place, Bethesda, as a form of address for God and sees within the story a universal summons to God's healing mercy.

Thou my true Bethesda be;
I know within thy arms is room,
All the world may unto thee,
Their house of mercy, come.

The individual experience is transformed into universal experience.

All the world is justified.
By universal love.
Halt and wither'd when they lie,
And sick, and impotent, and blind,
Sinners may in thee espy
The Saviour of mankind.

The act of healing by Jesus, which may be interpreted as an act of love, expresses for Wesley the love alone, which heals all sinners'
sickness. Of course, physical sickness is transformed into spiritual sickness which is described in part as anger, pride, lust and unbelief.

The struggle, frustration, and failure of the man to get into the waters when they were troubled embodies for Wesley the struggle to be made whole by all. Finally, the bed or pallet which the man is told to pick up and take with him as he departs is transformed into the cross of Jesus, as the bed upon which he lay at death.

Bid me take my burden up,
The bed in which thyself didst lie,
When on Calvary's steep top
My Jesus deign'd to die.

Wesley's treatment of the story of the woman of Canaan in Matthew 15 is fascinating for its allegory and for its penetrating elucidation of this much debated and difficult passage.

The passage in Matthew 15 about the woman of Canaan raises questions about the tension between Jesus' mission to the Jews and the Gentiles. Canaanites are spoken of with some reproach in the Old Testament (see Genesis 24:3; Ezra 9:1; Zechariah 14:21), but why here? Indeed, Mark refers to her as being of Syrophoenician descent. Were the Syrophoenicians descendants of the Canaanites?

There are other problems with the passage. Jesus' calling the woman Kuvápia, the diminutive for dog, has troubled Christian readers for centuries. Is he castigating his own disciples and trying to teach them a lesson with this language? Is Jesus putting the woman's own sincerity, humility, and faith to the test? Is he bestowing upon those outside the fold of the Jews that which his own have rejected? What of Jesus' utter silence to her plea for mercy? "He did not answer a word." (15:22) Then follow his piercing words of rejection: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (15:24)

Wesley transports the reader into the innermost part of this woman, as he writes the poem in the first person as though she were speaking. It is interesting that in the entire poem there is no mention of the plea for her daughter to be healed of demon possession nor the subsequent healing, unless these are implied in the following words:

Save me from this tyranny
From all the power of Satan save me.

Even so, the plea is for her own salvation, not that of her daughter.

There can be no question about what Wesley finds to be primary in the story: (a) the earnest desire for the reception of God's mercy and grace and the triumph of faith—

Canaanite, thy faith is great,
Thy faith hath made thee whole.

Does a non-Jew demonstrate more faith here than those of the house of Israel? (b) The universality of the covenant—
But the Gentiles now behold
In thee their Covenant.

(c) Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament messianic anticipation which is reflected in the repeated address of Jesus as Son of David (see Matthew 15:22). (d) the virtue of humility—

Nothing am I in thy sight,
Nothing have I to plead;
Unto dogs it is not right
To cast the children's bread;
Yet the dogs the crumbs may eat,
That from their master's table fall;
Let the fragments be my meat,
Thy grace is free for all.

Jesus' words of reproach become her words of self-examination and reflection. If indeed the woman answered Jesus with persistence and quick wit, Wesley's words certainly accentuate this by putting Jesus' own words into her mouth. (e) The universality of God's grace—

Canaanite, thy faith is great,
My grace is free for all.

Wesley, the poet and theological artist, is not limited in his interpretation of John 5 or Matthew 15 by form or structural criticism, or source analysis. The language of the artist shapes the reality beyond the "realities" which the canons of exegesis seek to establish. Hence, allegory here is not a manipulative exegetical and poetical method through which Wesley arrives at calculable pictures of biblical truth/reality. It is part of his poetical approach to scripture which sees it embodying the viable and living view of reality past, present, and future. He seeks to create the shape, the form, the mood, the color of that reality through his art.

It is not suggested here that Wesley's allegorical interpretation of scripture is infallible. What is suggested is that Wesley, the theological artist, is interested in verity not verities. He often realizes the questions the scripture is always asking without raising the questions critics are ever asking of the scripture. The artist responds with sensitivity more than sensibility, but does not sacrifice sense to sound.

(6) Wesley internalizes scripture, that is, he digests and appropriates it in lyrical language for inner growth, direction, wholeness, and a daily walk with God and others. Once more, the result is not nicely packaged devotional or homiletical ruminations on truly inspirational scriptural passages. Wesley struggles, questions, and wrestles with the scripture, faith, and God. Persistent questions are a dominant aspect of his poetry which precipitates the inner journey.

There are times when the internalization of the scripture cuts through extremely difficult theological problems. He addresses, for example, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the Book of Exodus
through internalization. There are two related Exodus passages which indicate two traditions surrounding the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart: (1) Pharaoh hardens his own heart (8:15), (2) God hardens Pharaoh’s heart (9:12). The traditions have been juxtaposed and retained as a part of the Hebrew view of the reality of God’s relationship to the world and the weakness of human nature. Theologians and exegetes have long struggled with the idea of a God who hardens the hearts of human beings who are part of divine creation. As simplistic as this may seem to the sophisticated theologian and philosopher, there is a question about human beings’ understanding of themselves and God which persists: To what extent is the quality of their relationship and response to one another dependent upon and/or independent of the other? So far as the Exodus passages are concerned exegetically numerous attempts have been made to explain away the “problem” of the two traditions. For some it is an “either/or” question: either Pharaoh hardened his own heart or God did it and, therefore, the issue of reconciling the matter is paramount.

Behind most of Charles Wesley’s hymns and scripture poems lies the internalizing question—What does this mean for me, the church and the world? Hence, he writes of the “problem” of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus:

There needed be no act of thine,  
If Pharaoh had a heart like mine.  
Leave me but an hour alone  
And mine alas is turned to stone.15

By looking inward at his own nature the exegetical and theological problem vanishes. He does not question God’s power or authority in the divine/human relationship, but senses the power and inclination of his own heart, or inner self, apart from God. The supposed “either/or” question disappears, though the tension remains. It is the choice of theological apologetics which submits to the artist’s sensitivity to human nature and the need to deal with it as it is and as it should be. The sense of who he is, is more viable than making sense of the questions and deducing acceptable and logical answers.

It is here that Wesley bears a kinship to the mystics and eastern philosophies. This makes trouble for him with western theologians, his brother John, the Calvinists, the Church of England, and hosts of others. He has a holistic view of creation and the universe. When he speaks in phrases such as “I” and “thou” are one, John is uneasy and often wants to clean up Charles’ theology and language. Fundamental to his ability to internalize scripture is a holistic view of creation. The man of the muse, the poet-artist, looks at the world which transcends

human compartmentalizations and the boxing of realities in packages to fit a particular theology, prejudice, or even occasion.

One of the best examples of the above is Wesley's paraphrase of part of Psalm 104 (verses 24–30).\(^6\)

Author of every work divine,  
Who dost through both creations shine,  
The God of nature and of grace!  
Thy glorious steps in all we see,  
And wisdom attribute to thee,  
And power, and majesty, and praise.

Thou dost create the earth anew,  
(Its Maker and Preserver too,)  
By thine almighty arm sustain:  
Nature perceives thy secret force,  
And still holds on her even course,  
And owns thy providential reign.

Thou art the Universal Soul,  
The Plastic Power that fills the whole,  
And governs earth, air, sea, and sky;  
The creatures all thy breath receive;  
And who, by thy inspiring, live,  
Without thy inspiration, die.

The poem is a paraphrase of one of the great nature psalms and it is true to the spirit of the psalm. It is a hymn of praise which transcends any nationalistic sentiments and is fully universal. It expresses a theology of the whole creation being renewed by God's creative process. The earth, as well as its creatures and nature, is created anew. This is an emphasis found in many eastern religions and is being brought to effective expression in the twentieth century by Native Americans. In the past history of western Christianity, and still today, such an emphasis often is sacrificed to the church's theology of human redemption. Charles Wesley's holistic theology would not allow him the luxury of such a sacrifice.

(7) Charles Wesley's biblical interpretations are often life-oriented. The tendency of his potential exposition of scripture is to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the practical. Perhaps a contemporary parallel, although in another context, would be the church-struggle oriented Bible studies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They are, of course, prose but reflect a similar tendency.

The Wesley poetry yields a wellspring of intuition spawned by life experience. In the *Scripture Hymns* (1762)\(^7\) he published a series

\(^6\)Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father (1746) No. 28. Only three stanzas of the original six stanzas are quoted here.

\(^7\)Vol. I, 91–3.
of lyrics on Deuteronomuym 6:4–7, which illustrates how the Shemā is to become a part of the matrix of daily life.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (6:4–7, RSV)

The table of my heart prepare,
    (Such power belongs to thee alone)
And write, O God, thy precepts there,
To shew thou still canst write in stone,
So shall my pure obedience prove
All things are possible to love.

Father, instruct my docile heart,
    Apt to instruct I then shall be,
I then shall all thy words impart,
    And teach (as taught myself by thee)
My children in their earliest days,
To know, and live the life of grace.

When quiet in my house I sit,
    Thy book be my companion still,
My joy thy sayings to repeat,
    Talk o'er the records of thy will,
And search the oracles divine,
'Till every heart-felt word is mine.

O might the gracious words divine
    Subject of all my converse be,
So would the Lord his follower join,
    And walk, and talk himself with me,
So would my heart his presence prove,
And burn with everlasting love.

Oft as I lay me down to rest,
    O may the reconciling word
Sweetly compose my weary breast,
    While on the bosom of my Lord
I sink in blissful dreams away,
And visions of eternal day.

Rising to sing my Saviour's praise,
    Thee may I publish all day long,
And let thy precious word of grace
    Flow from my heart, and fill my tongue,
Fill all my life with purest love,
And join me to thy church above.

How does Wesley seek to bridge Christian experience and theology here? (a) Following the admonition—"You shall love the Lord your
God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” he affirms in stanza one:

All things are possible to love.

There is a realm of the realizable and possible made real through love. Love is a realm of reality not mere abstraction.

(b) We are to be living, didactic personifications of a life of grace so that others know and live that same life, because they have learned it from us (stanza two).

(c) Stanza three is extremely pragmatic, for it says in essence: [i] set aside a quiet time for self, God and the scriptures, [ii] repeat the sayings of scripture as the source of great joy, [iii] study the scripture in depth.

(d) Stanza four prescribes the substance of conversation throughout the day. One is to focus so sharply on God’s Word that wherever one goes, whatever one does, and whomever one encounters God will be the partner in all conversation, and one is to be aflame with love.

(e) Stanza five says simply: God’s Word is the divine prescription for rest. Prepare for rest and composure with God’s Word in the mind and on the lips.

(f) Stanza six prescribes what to do upon rising and throughout the day: sing the Savior’s praise. Wesley sees here three resolves: [i] to be the voice of God’s praise, [ii] to be the vehicle of God’s grace, [iii] to be the vessel of God’s love.

Wesley’s life-oriented biblical interpretation persists throughout his scripture poetry.

Conclusion

Charles Wesley’s medium of interpreting the scripture is song/poetry. Just as one does not learn the significance of prayer life by merely studying about prayer, rather by praying, so Wesley is convinced that the way the scripture becomes a part of being, who one is in all facets of one’s life, is to sing it and its songs. The scripture testifies to the great Mystery, the Unknown Traveller, and the mystery of life, and his poetry and hymns testify that singing the mystery, not defining it, is a viable avenue of biblical interpretation. It is one, however, for which developed critical methods of biblical exegesis and interpretation have had little use. Charles Wesley solves no problems by careful scholarly research, but perhaps he too may come of age, for his art often cuts straight to the heart of the biblical message.