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Julian of Norwich, the Bible, and creative, orthodox theology: always novel, never new

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Abstract

Scholars have spent considerable time attempting to characterise Julian of Norwich's relationship to biblical texts. This article will first survey the state of scholarship with respect to Julian and the Bible, defending a minimalist thesis: that Julian thinks theologically in the rhythms of scripture, rendering suggestions that she haphazardly borrows from biblical language demonstrably false. Subsequently, literary-critical readings of biblical texts echoed in the parable of the lord and servant will be deployed to show how Julian echoes not only the language of the Bible, but also its themes, narratives and theology. By highlighting a particular kind of imaginative theology that is nevertheless deeply biblical, the article argues that Julian is at once creative and orthodox: always novel, but never new.

Keywords: biblical criticism, Julian of Norwich, literacy, orality, parable, Vulgate

Julian's knowledge of the biblical texts

Traditional inquiries into Julian's relationship to scripture have been based on what we know – or, as it turns out, what we do not know – of her biography. In the interests of organising the historical debate about Julian's life around her use of the Bible in her theology, imagine the following two images as extreme poles on a spectrum.[1] At the first pole we picture Julian the Anchoress hunched over her desk in the cloister, leafing through the

[1] Compare our image to what Anna Grotan (*Reading in Medieval St. Gall*, Cambridge Studies in Palaeography and Codicology, 13 (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), p. 15) cites as the regnant distinctions held in traditional literacy studies in medieval German: 'The general situation in the Germanic-speaking areas has in the past been summarized by means of three basic dichotomies: (1) the Latin "father script" vs. a vernacular "mother tongue" . . . ; (2) Christian vs. indigenous secular; and (3) clerics vs. laity.' Grotan will go on – as will we with Julian's biblical knowledge – to complicate these poles, pushing against a view that sees orality being replaced or overtaken by literacy. Following Marco Mostert's argument for a 'more or less' rather than an 'either/or' system of classifying literacy (*New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999)), Grotan notes that 'Latin texts were influenced by aspects

pages of the nunnery's copy of the Vulgate, having been for twenty years pensive, preparing to pen the Long Text in the vernacular of her day. At the far pole we see Julian the laywoman at her home, responding at first viscerally to her visions, and then after years of reflection on both the visions themselves and Christian dogma, setting down to edit the Long Text. She is literate, of course, but not Latinate, living not as a religious, having no access to a written Bible – vernacular translation or otherwise – but nevertheless bathed in the diction and syntax of scripture from oral repetition and daily devotions. These two poles are, as biographical sketches, pure caricature, but as heuristics they can provide us an entrée into the discussion.

The contemporary debate over Julian's biblical literacy – if we may put it that way – begins with the publication of Edmund Colledge and James Walsh's critical edition of the short and long texts of Julian's *Showings* in 1978.[2] In a progress report on their historical findings, Colledge and Walsh had concluded that Julian read Latin and was familiar with Jerome's Vulgate.[3] But this view enjoys nothing like consensus.[4] The problem from the standpoint of historical reconstruction is that Julian's texts demonstrate an abiding and, as Colledge and Walsh characterise it, 'minute and exact' knowledge of scripture.[5] Not only does Julian adapt the words of the Apostle Paul, she frequently makes use of biblical imagery and uses biblical language as if spoken directly to her. So, for example, she writes, 'I had no other answer in a vision of our Lord but this: "That what is impossible for you is not impossible for me"' (425.48). As Colledge and Walsh point out, this is clearly Julian appropriating Jesus' words in Luke 18.[6] At the same time, however, she does

of a substrate, vernacular "primal" orality, and vernacular oral poetry was influenced by classical rhetoric.'

[2] Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Universa Press, 1978).

[3] Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, 'Editing Julian of Norwich's Revelations: A Progress Report', *Mediaeval Studies* 38 (1976), pp. 404–27.

[4] Alcuin Blamires argues 'on the evidence of library data and wills' that medieval nunneries would rarely have possessed a copy of the Vulgate: 'The Limits of Bible Study for Medieval Women', in Leslie Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor (eds), *Women, the Book and the Godly* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), p. 4. Marilyn Oliva is similarly sceptical about widespread Latin literacy, but does show that 'there is a significant amount of evidence to suggest that most nuns in the [diocese of Norwich] could read English and that some could read French and even a little Latin': *Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1450*, Studies in the History of Medieval Religion, 12 (Bury St Edmunds: St Edmundsbury Press, 1998), p. 74. She shows that convents were in possession of a number of vernacular translations of parts of the Bible.

[5] Colledge and Walsh, 'Editing Julian', p. 409.

[6] Colledge and Walsh, *Book of Showings*, p. 46.

not (if Latinate) follow the convention of quoting scripture in Latin. Since she is literate, then, the simplest conclusion would be that she knows biblical texts from an English translation. Colledge and Walsh report, however, that if this is the case, then the version with which she is familiar is lost to us. In fact, there is no indication that Julian's use of scripture has any relation whatsoever to her contemporary vernacular editions.[7] Colledge and Walsh therefore take the following line: since Julian must have been familiar with scripture, and since she is not using an English translation, she must be relating her own vernacular readings of the Vulgate.

But here the evidence becomes murky. Colledge and Walsh argue that Julian follows the Vulgate syntactically. They have to make this argument because Julian so rarely uses exact quotes. As in the aforementioned allusion to Jesus' words in Luke, Julian appropriates texts personally, weaving them into her theological narrative. Let us examine their favoured example. In the Short Text of *Showings*, Julian writes, 'I saw such pain that all that I can describe or say is inadequate, for it cannot be described. But each soul should do as St. Paul says, and feel in himself what is in Christ Jesus' (234.32). Colledge and Walsh claim that she is translating Philippians 2:5 from the Vulgate into the vernacular: '*Hoc enim sentite in vobis quod et in Christo Jesu*.'[8] Colledge and Walsh capitalise on Julian's maintenance of the imperative and her tendency to associate 'mind' and 'feeling'.[9] On their view, then, Julian has translated *sentite* to emphasise the sense of 'attitude' or 'feeling' rather than 'mind' or 'thought'. The obvious difficulty with this interpretation is, as Annie Sutherland has noted, that '[Julian] produces no equivalent of the Vulgate's *quod et*'.[10] Surely, Sutherland argues, if Julian works from the Vulgate, preserving syntax as she goes, she ought to preserve something of Paul's 'which also' – which she does not. From Colledge and Walsh's perspective, this is to be accounted for by the fact that Julian is not *quoting* scripture; she is instead *appropriating* it. She has dropped the portion of Paul's language that does not move her theological work forward.

At this point we have reached the realm of pure conjecture. Colledge and Walsh surmise that deploying a kind of redaction criticism – wherein we

[7] Colledge and Walsh solicit the opinion of Henry Hargreaves, reprinting a large portion of his response. He notes that 'it is almost uncanny how she never, in any passage, uses exactly the same words for the crucial Latin words as the translations'. Colledge and Walsh, 'Editing Julian', p. 409.

[8] Ibid., p. 410.

[9] Ibid., p. 411.

[10] Annie Sutherland. '"Oure Feyth is Groundyd in Goddes Worde": Julian of Norwich and the Bible', in E. A. Jones (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2004* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), p. 6.

read Julian as consciously selecting from the known Latin text – results in a deeper reading of her theological moves. Sutherland remains agnostic about Julian's facility with Latin. Her view suggests – and even Colledge and Walsh agree here – that for the most part, Julian's greatest familiarity with scripture comes from oral repetition and daily devotions.

> [I]t must be recognized that, as both devout laywoman and enclosed contemplative, Julian would have fed night and day on the words of the scriptures, presented in various guises and by various means. That being the case, it is inevitable that her language should become infused with that of the Bible to such an extent that we need not assume that whenever she echoes scriptural terminology, she is always doing so consciously and deliberately.[11]

This should all be relatively uncontroversial; that it may not be is due to Colledge and Walsh's insistence that substantive readings of Julian demand recognition of the Latin lurking behind her English and the networks of echoes to which it gives rise.

To give one example, Colledge and Walsh contend that when Julian writes, 'and within him there was a secure place of refuge, long and broad, all full of endless heavenliness' (523.125), the 'meaning ... has escaped those who did not perceive the allusion to such places in Scripture as "*susceptor meus et refugium meum*" (Psalm 58:17), "*elevator meus et refugium meum*" (2 [Sam] 22:3)'.[12] It is difficult to know what to make of this claim. The quote is pulled from the parable of the lord and the servant in the Long Text. Julian's image of the lord places him alone in the desert, standing on the ground. It is only 'within him' that there is a 'high place, long and broad'. If Colledge and Walsh are merely positing that the language and imagery of the parable of the lord and the servant borrows liberally from biblical texts, it would be hard to disagree. But they seem to want to ascribe more intentionality to Julian's literary choices, opening the door to intertextual readings. Unfortunately, Colledge and Walsh do not attempt any of these readings themselves; how they might have looked is left to the imagination.

It is worth noting, however, why it is that a historical reconstruction of Julian's facility with the Bible is of more than passing interest. The concern is fundamentally theological: a strong command of the ebb and flow of scripture will ensconce Julian's writings in the canon of orthodox Christianity. By demonstrating that her work is in keeping with the teachings of the Bible, we head off readings in which Julian is characterised or, worse,

[11] Ibid., p. 7.
[12] Colledge and Walsh, *Book of Showings*, pp. 46–7.

imitated as a creative heretic. It is not hard to see how this could be done. Sarah McNamer, for example, suggests that Julian 'stresses growing and awakening to the reality of a God who is immanent in all things'.[13] This statement by itself is not, of course, heretical, but McNamer does seem to be aligning Julian's view with something like Moltmann's contemporary panentheism; and while views of this sort may not fall outside the bounds of orthodoxy, they are certainly controversial. Denise Baker reads the parable of the lord and the servant as a reinterpretation of Genesis 3 wherein Julian 'entertains the possibility of universal salvation'.[14] Here again we have Julian characterised as flirting with controversial theological claims, which Baker then describes as exegetical debates held by Julian's near contemporaries.[15] Julian often genuflects to church dogma; it is worth demonstrating that she is doing so sincerely.

As for the purely historical debate, what is wanted is an updated view of the relationship between orality and literacy. As we have already seen, even Colledge and Walsh will be happy to admit that Julian encountered biblical language in oral contexts, which might have happened whether she lived in or out of the cloister. In a recent essay, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe examines discrete moments of interaction between orality and literacy in Anglo-Saxon England.[16] Conceiving of orality and literacy 'less as two hypothetical states than as interconnected social conditions', she notes, 'At some point in their lives all people are "oral" peoples, and the evidence of early medieval European cultures shows the "oral" and the "literate" affecting and forming or deforming one another.'[17] Practically speaking, admitting the complex interactivity between the spoken vernacular and the written Latin or Latin-sourced translation suggests two possibilities: (1) if Julian was in fact Latinate and did possess a copy of the Vulgate, then her vernacular 'translations' were embedded in the daily rhythms of her Middle English; or (2) if Julian had no access to biblical texts at all, the Vulgate's

[13] Sarah McNamer, 'The Exploratory Image: God as Mother in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love', *Mystics Quarterly* 15 (1989), pp. 21–8.

[14] Denise Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 80. Baker does admit that Julian retains a doctrine of hell, but describes this as 'guarding' her proposal; cf. Felicity Riddy, 'Women Talking about the Things of God: A Medieval Sub-culture', in Carol Meale (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain: 1150–1500* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), p. 117.

[15] Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings*, pp. 80–1.

[16] Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Orality and Literacy: The Case of Anglo-Saxon England', in Karl Reichl (ed.), *Medieval Oral Literature* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 121–40.

[17] Ibid., p. 121.

influence on Julian's imagination was nevertheless profound.[18] Compare this with Felicity Riddy's suggestion that medieval women living *in familia*, that is, informal convent-like communities, may have formed reading groups in which they shared biblical language textually and orally, further complicating the relationship between the Latin or Latin-sourced texts and the vernacular 'translations'.[19] Regular encounter with written biblical texts is simply not necessary for Julian to be 'soaked in scripture', as it were. The advantage of this more pragmatic position on the relationship between the oral and the written in the medieval period is that it can account for either the idiosyncratic translations of the Vulgate hypothesis or the difficulty faced by the Julian-as-unfamiliar-with-written-texts hypothesis in explaining her often nuanced knowledge of the Bible. More germane to our purposes, however, is that the pragmatic – or we might say more realistic – perspective allows for readings of the *Showings* that are highly interactive with scripture at the level of theme, narrative and theology, even when the precise textual links are unclear. We are poised then, to finally overturn readings wherein Julian and the Bible are estranged or Julian's allusions to biblical texts are desultory, 'the unconscious borrowings of a mind steeped in the language and thought of the Bible',[20] or 'spontaneous incorporation of biblical texts and allusions in [her] descriptions of visionary experiences'.[21] The following section features critical readings of texts alluded to in Julian's parable of the lord and the servant. These interpretations show the extent to which Julian's theology interacts with the biblical texts whose language it borrows.

[18] Ad Putter shows how written romances were dependent on orality and performance for composition and transmission. Since Julian's use of scripture bears little resemblance to contemporaneous surviving vernacular translations, we should think that, if she is translating from the Latin, she is doing so at a discrete interactive moment with her 'mother tongue'. In the unlikely case that she has no access to written biblical texts whatsoever, she is still swimming in a linguistic pool whose water has been, in large part, the Latin Vulgate and its various renderings in the vernacular. Putter's manuscript evidence indicates that even many written texts bear testimony of memorial transmission. In Julian's case, this might mean hearing the words of scripture in a multitude of contexts and 'carrying' them until they are deployed in the *Showings*. Real-world interaction between orality and literacy guarantees that her world is shaped by the echoes of scripture. Ad Putter, 'Middle English Romances and the Oral Tradition', in Reichl, *Medieval Oral Literature*, pp. 335–52.

[19] Riddy, 'Women Talking', p. 109.

[20] Anna Marie Reynolds, 'Some Literary Influences in the Revelations of Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342–post-1416)', *Leeds Studies in English* 7–8 (1952), p. 22.

[21] Patricia Demers, *Women as Interpreters of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 70.

The parable of the lord and the servant

Summing up her appraisal of the *Showings*, Annie Sutherland writes, 'it is only in this text that a scriptural mode of utterance is subsumed almost entirely to the authorial narrative, and that the conventional tools of biblical interpretation are applied to the "living" text of personal visionary experience'.[22] Sutherland is – I think rightly – most impressed by the Long Text's parable of the lord and the servant. She catalogues a number of places where Julian's allusions to scripture demonstrate both an abiding knowledge of biblical texts, as well as an understanding of what they mean and tacit agreement with the doctrines gleaned from them.[23] But these do not merit extended comment. Instead, what sets Julian apart from other medieval handlers of scripture is that she takes a 'scriptural mode of utterance' and subsumes it 'almost entirely to the authorial narrative'. The mode of utterance in question is, of course, the parable. In almost every way, Julian's parable is fashioned from imagery derived from the Gospels.[24] The central characters are a lord and his servant, a common Gospel trope (e.g. Matt 18:21–35; 25:14–30). As in the biblical master-servant parables, the servant has a commission to be a labourer in the fields, thus paralleling a number of Jesus' parables concerning farms and vineyards. The servant is injured, in need of rescue, which may echo the parable of the lost sheep (Matt 18:12–14; Luke 15:3–7). Moreover, Julian explains the parable using what Sutherland deems 'the conventional tools of biblical interpretation'. That is, Julian first shares the parable, then she proceeds to explain its symbolism. This should remind us of, for example, the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15).

The following two readings demonstrate the role of the Bible in Julian's parabolic theology. Sutherland explains – and we have just seen – that in the first place, the scriptures supply the fabric, the material content of Julian's 'profoundly original narrative'.[25] The narrative of the lord and the servant is

[22] Sutherland, 'Our Feythe', p. 18.

[23] An outstanding example: in ch. 12 of the Long Text, Julian writes, 'The precious plenty of his precious blood ascended into heaven in the blessed body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is flowing there in him, praying to the Father for us, and this is and will be so long as we have need' (344.26–9). The language here echoes a number of passages in Hebrews, e.g. 7:25, 9:14, 12:24, and shows Julian comprehending Christ's blood as interceding on our behalf.

[24] Jenny Rebecca Rytting, 'Parallel Parables: Julian of Norwich's Lord and Servant and the Biblical Good Samaritan', in J. Jenkins and O. Bertrand (eds), *The Medieval Translator* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 95–107, and Annie Sutherland, 'Our Feythe', pp. 17–19, provide a number of these similarities.

[25] Sutherland, 'Our Feythe', p. 18.

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novel, but it is not, as it were, altogether new. Julian's imagination has been furnished by biblical tropes and language, and, as we are about to see, its themes, narratives and theological logic as well.

Reading 1: Psalm 58 and the servant's sinless fall

Earlier, we noted that Colledge and Walsh seemed insistent on the necessity of a working knowledge of the Vulgate in order to catch the significance of the biblical allusion when Julian writes, 'and within him there was a secure place of refuge, long and broad, all full of endless heavenliness' (523.125). Colledge and Walsh draw our attention to 'susceptor meus et refugium meum' in the Gallican Psalter's rendering of Psalm 58:17. The Latin Vulgate's translation of the psalm, following the Greek Septuagint, is close to translations based on the Masoretic Text, but departs in several points, a few of which we will examine below.[26] The introduction to the psalm sets it in David's mouth during an ambush – planned by Saul – at his home (1 Sam 19:9–10). The resulting prayer divides into two parts: a plea and an expectation. The psalmist begins by begging God for deliverance from cruel enemies (vv. 2–7) and ends by expressing confidence that God will in fact hear these pleas and do justice (vv. 8–16). If Julian is in fact echoing this text, she is associating the servant of her parable with the psalm's narrator, which is ostensibly David. This in turn associates the psalmist's enemies with the servant's many deprivations, an interesting allegorical move that accords well with the theme of the parable as a whole. In the psalm David frets over the armed men outside his door intent on killing him. In the parable the servant, later revealed to be Adam, has fallen and taken a number of injuries, leaving him at death's door.

Read from within the world of Julian's parable, the psalmist's attitude in the second half of the prayer might be characterised as eschatological. Having first made the situation known, the psalm anticipates the kind of deliverance appropriate both to God's nature and to the nature of the oppression. And this is exactly what Julian has done in the parable of the lord and the servant. The Lord appears as a man alone in the desert, but nevertheless has within him 'endless heavenliness'. This is Julian's way of creating an image of the man Jesus who is nevertheless equal to the Father and who is able to participate in much the same sort of two-part drama as we hear from David's lips in the psalm and read in the narrative within which it is set. Julian explains:

[26] So e.g. in Ps 58:7, 15 (LXX), where the Masoretic Text has *keleb* ('yelp', 'howl'), we find *limōxousin* ('they will hunger'). The Latin Vulgate follows the Septuagint with *famem patientur*. As we will see shortly, there are other differences as well.

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> The compassion and pity of the Father were for Adam, who is his most beloved creature. The joy and the bliss were for the falling of his dearly beloved son, who is equal with the Father. The merciful regard of his lovely countenance filled all the earth, and went down with Adam into hell, and by this continuing pity Adam was kept from endless death. (524.134)

The lonesome lord of the parable has entered into the world of the stranded servant, been with him through trial and hell, and, in keeping with his compassionate nature, effected redemption from the ultimate enemy, death. This is in keeping with David's deliverance from the murderers outside his door: the Lord provides rescue from what surely would have been his death. This should draw our attention to what is perhaps the most interesting thematic similarity between Julian's parable, the psalm, and the story of David's escape: that in none of these is sin the problem. Julian writes:

> I was amazed that this servant could so meekly suffer all this woe; and I looked carefully to know if I could detect any fault in him, or if the lord would impute to him any kind of blame; and truly none was seen, for the only cause of his falling was his good will and his great desire. (515.33)

Now, compare this with Psalm 58:5 from the Vulgate, which reads, 'neque iniquitas mea neque peccatum meum Domine sine iniquitate cucurri et direxi'. Again reading the psalm from David's point of view, enemies have set on him through no fault of his own. In fact, if we refer to the narrative in Samuel, it has been a function of David's *excellence* that he has encountered Saul's wrath and the subsequent threat to his life (1 Sam 18:6–9). Only Saul's jealousy of David's fame, fame garnered for valorous service to Lord and state, puts him in peril. Julian's parable imagines the servant, Adam, in a similar condition. On account of Adam's great love for his Lord, we read that 'not only did he go, but he started suddenly and ran with great haste'. He is not just innocent; he is in love with doing the Lord's will. So when he is told to go he not only goes, he runs.

Returning to the psalm for a moment, the Vulgate's use of the Septuagint makes for a small textual departure from modern editions sourced in the Masoretic Text. Contemporary English versions base the action of v. 4 on the Hebrew verb *y'rusun*, the imperfect ending of which depicts David's enemies as the verb's subject, so that the NRSV, for example, has, 'they run'. The Latin translators of the Greek Psalter were faced with a decision, since the Septuagint's *edramon* can be read either as third person plural aorist ('they ran') or as a first person singular ('I ran'). The translators opted for the latter reading. The resulting imagery suggests a David-on-the-run, praying that the

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Lord will come to meet him as he escapes the snares of his enemies. And as we have seen, Julian's servant appears much the same way: running to do the Lord's will, he finds himself tripped up through no fault of his own, desperately needing God's rescue.

We should say that these similarities between Julian's parable, David's story and the Latin psalm are quite suggestive – but perhaps not in the way that Colledge and Walsh might want. That is, we have developed strong resonances with Julian's Long Text and the Latin Vulgate. The resonances are thematic, narratival and theological; they are not *textual*. But consider the extent to which the original aspects of Julian's vision and the thematic, narratival and theological elements of the biblical texts interpenetrate each other. Insofar as Julian expounds a soteriology that demotes the role of individual fault, she does it with and through scripture. She is creative, but her creativity sprouts from the seed of biblical interpretation.

Reading 2:2 Kings 19 and the great root

Elsewhere in Julian's exposition of the parable of the lord and servant, she meditates on the further meaning of the servant's fall insofar as this represents the incarnation of Christ. The servant's groaning indicates 'that he might never rise from the time that he fell into the maiden's womb until his body was slain and dead' (541.295). After his death, 'he first began to show his power, for then he went down into hell; and when he was there, he raised up the great root out of the great depth, which rightly was joined to him in heaven' (542.299–303). Colledge and Walsh suggest that the 'great root' likely echoes 2 Kings 19:30–1 where we read: *et quodcumque reliquum fuerit de domo Iuda mittet radicem deorsum et faciet fructum sursum*.[27] While they mention several other possible biblical source-texts such as Isaiah 11:1 (*flos de radice Jesse*), Apocalypse 22:16 (*radix Dauid*), and Ephesians 3:17–18 (*in caritate radicati et fundati*), the 2 Kings allusion is particularly suggestive.

At the textual level, of course, the connections are stronger here than in the other passages. In Julian's parable the servant – a gardener – is tasked with retrieving from the earth 'a treasure', a 'meal which is lovely and pleasing to the Lord' (529.185; 530.187). The servant must plant and 'seek the depths' (530.194) in order to find the right soil from which the 'noble plenty of fruit' will 'spring' (531.196). Both texts feature parallel elements of space and movement, diving down to plant and good fruit subsequently rising up.[28]

[27] Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, p. 542, n. 300.

[28] Carmel Bendon Davis makes similar comments on this section of the parable, suggesting that the image of Christ's sacred blood flowing down from heaven, into

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In 2 Kings 18–19 we are told the story of God's miraculous preservation of Jerusalem during the rule of King Hezekiah.[29] The Assyrians are coming. City after city falls to the implacable army. Jerusalem, having recently bucked her Assyrian yoke, appears to us as the last domino, her destruction unavoidable, her people terrified. As the Assyrians approach, they send messengers and commanders to mock and terrify the people, announcing that, unless they capitulate, they will be reduced to eating and drinking their own excrement (2 Kings 18:27). The drama centres on King Hezekiah's faithfulness to a deity that, according to the Assyrian commanders, will not save him or his city. Though the hypothesis has been nuanced considerably over the years, the basic conviction that 2 Kings 18:17–19:9a is penned by a discrete author, has received considerable scholarly support.[30] For our purposes, what are of interest are the three lists of cities that have been destroyed by the Assyrian armies (2 Kings 18:34; 19:12–13; 17:24). Source-critical scholars suggest that the variations between listed cities indicate different authors, the historical accuracy of each helping the source-critic to determine who was temporally closest to the actual invasion(s).[31] By the time of canonisation, however, the final redactor's broad inclusion of variegated lists of cities

hell, and back up to heaven attests to the 'metaphorical vastness' of Christ's saving power: *Mysticism and Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle*, The Cloud of Unknowing *Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), pp. 230–1. Davis' point, I take it, is that Julian is expanding the salvific possibility of the incarnation and passion to include all of creation.

[29] Traditional scholarship relies heavily on redaction criticism to identify the story's source material. See the classical studies by B. Stade, 'Miscellen 16 Ammerkungen zu 2 Ko 15-21 Zu 18,13-19,37', *ZAW* 4 (1886), pp. 172–86, and Brevard Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 69–103. Paul Evans' recent monograph, *The Invasion of Sennacherib in the Book of Kings: A Source-Critical and Rhetorical Study of 2 Kings 18–19*, VTSupp 125 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 1–27, begins with a superlative summary of the research. The following section owes much to canonical final form studies, especially Paul Evans, 'The Hezekiah-Sennacherib Narrative as Polyphonic Text', *JSOT* 33 (2009), pp. 335–58; Dominic Rudman, 'Is the Rabshakeh Also among the Prophets? A Rhetorical Study of 2 Kings XIII 17–35', *VT* 50 (2000), pp. 100–10; the canonical-literary interpretation offered by Donna Nolan Fewell, 'Sennacherib's Defeat: Words at War in 2 Kings 18:13–19:37', *JSOT* 34 (1986), pp. 79–90; and Walter Brueggemann's ideological reading, 'II Kings 18–19: The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic', *HBT* 7 (1985), pp. 1–42.

[30] For a concise rundown of the various arguments, see the remarkable footnote in Evans, *Invasion of Sennacherib*, pp. 13–14, n. 62. Evans himself demurs, identifying four discrete authors in what the Stade-Childs hypothesis deems the B_1 section (*Invasion of Sennacherib*, p. 78).

[31] So e.g. Nadav Na'aman, *Ancient Israel and its Neighbors: Interaction and Counteraction: Collected Essays*, vol. 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), p. 184, following Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), suggests that the B_2

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indicates a basic unfamiliarity with the times – and possibly the locations – of the cities being named. This suggests that early hearers of the canonical text would have been ignorant of the locations in a way similar to both medieval and contemporary hearers/readers of the narrative. The increasing temporal distance creates a particular kind of rhetorical effect, one hinted at by Danna Fewell. Her literary-critical reading begins by noting that the 'taking of the fortified cities of Judah is presented as if it occurs instantaneously'.[32] Her point is that time and space can be manipulated by the narration so as to emphasise particular dramatic strands over and against others. In this case, the Assyrian sacking of Judahite cities in 2 Kings 18:13 is telescoped, highlighting the implacability of the enemy and the inevitability of defeat. Similarly, when, in 2 Kings 18:33–4, the Rabshakeh shouts, 'Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered its land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand?' the cumulative effect of these far-off places – vaguely determined to be to the north of Jerusalem and culminating in Samaria – is as of dominoes falling, of gods failing far away in the north, then progressively closer, deeper into Jerusalem's territory, now threatening to topple Yahweh and smash Jerusalem's gates. If we are to conceive of the telling in terms of space, the Assyrian army resembles nothing so much as a drill, grinding downward into God's city, the heart of the world.[33]

Or to shift the metaphor to one more germane to Julian's *Showings*, we might liken the Assyrian army to a seed being sunk into the deepest of shafts. And perhaps it is an image of this sort against which the prophet utters his oracle: the Assyrian seed will not be planted in Jerusalem. Instead, 'The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward' (2 Kings 19:30). Dominic Rudman has argued that the Rabshakeh's speech is crafted to resemble the oracles of Israel's

section (2 Kings 19:9b–35) must have been penned late, since the author is unfamiliar with Assyrian conquering practices and the list of conquered cities occurs closer to the 560s than the 600s BCE.

[32] Fewell, 'Sennacherib's Defeat', p. 80.

[33] For anthropological work regarding the temple as *imago mundi*, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 36–47; cf. Jon D. Levenson, 'The Temple and the World', *JR* 64 (1984), pp. 275–98. Eliade shows how Josephus (*Ant.* 3.7) conceives of the sections of the temple representing the various portions of the cosmos. For our purposes it is worth noting that sacking the temple would involve symbolically possessing the depths (the temple courts), the earth (the outer sanctuary) and the heavens (the inner sanctuary).

prophets.[34] On Rudman's rhetorical reading, the final form of 2 Kings 18–19 presents the Assyrian challenge in a series of escalating counter-prophecies. As Hezekiah and the people refuse to answer, the Rabshakeh moves ever closer to – and eventually commits – clear blasphemy. Perhaps it is the case that Sennacherib's fabulous military success is a sign that God has had enough, that Israel's failures have gone too far, and now it is time for a different kind of covenant. Rudman writes, 'In effect, Sennacherib is offering a new covenant to supersede that already in force between Yahweh and Israel, with similar blessings attached to it.'[35]

Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem are not asked to abandon faith in Yahweh's power. Instead, they are asked to question the veracity of God's promise. Will the covenant last forever? Or has Yahweh transferred the promises to the Assyrians? If it is the case that Yahweh has indeed abandoned the covenant with Israel, superseding it with a new Assyrian covenant, then Yahweh does not have the power to execute promises. Yahweh is not, then, the all-powerful God of the heavens. From the perspective of theodicy, the events of history appear in such a way that Yahweh's supremacy as God has been challenged in a particular manner. For God, the easy way out would be to hitch God's apple cart to Sennacherib's horse. Has Israel done everything she can to make being her God impossible? So be it; let her travail under another master. But this is no solution for Yahweh, who is both all-powerful and ever true to the covenant. The problem is acute. What can be done such that (a) Judah's sins are not overlooked; (b) pagan usurpers are not accorded more than their due; (c) the covenant remains sacrosanct; and (d) the way is paved for God's covenantal partners to renew their faithfulness? The answer given by the prophet Isaiah turns out in due course to be just the thing. The Assyrians are given limited freedom to sack the territories of Israel, but, in the end, they suffer humiliating loss – and the death of their lord – when God has finished with them. Subsequently, Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem will plant their seeds and harvest anew.

2 Kings 18–19 thus weaves together a number of related theological issues. There is the question of which seed will be planted in Jerusalem. Will the Assyrians complete their march into the heart of the universe and supplant God's holy city? Has God given up on the covenant? Where is the true power located, in Yahweh, the God of Jerusalem, or in Sennacherib, the master of human armies? Viewed in this manner, we can see that the narrative takes on cosmic significance: the deliverance of Jerusalem becomes a defence and vindication of Hezekiah's God.

[34] Rudman, 'Is the Rabshakeh', pp. 100–10.
[35] Ibid., p. 108.

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The reader will not be surprised to find that slight variants on these questions lie at the heart of Julian's parable. At the macroscopic level, Julian's parable helps address the question, 'Why sin?'[36] That is, Julian has already confessed that history did not need to turn out in just this way. Surely God could have created a free, sinless humanity but chose not to do so.[37] In fact, it turns out that sin is 'necessary'.[38] But why? As we have already seen in the allusion to the plight of the psalmist, the servant's fall and his suffering, that is, the consequences of sin are not his fault. Both clearly happened – Julian sees as we do the manifold sufferings caused by sin – but in the parable sin is not a reality that needs to be explained by blaming human beings, or, for that matter, God. Sin is something else entirely.

Let us now return to Julian's root. Commentators rightly note that it symbolises the sinful human condition.[39] Kerrie Hide proposes that the 'context of the image in the parable suggests that the root is union with Christ'.[40] As we noted at the beginning of this section, the servant – who is both Adam and Christ – is a garden labourer, tasked with extracting suitable food for the lord from the 'depths' (531.195). Interestingly, the lord lacks nothing, 'save the treasure that was in the earth, and that was grounded within the Lord in marvelous depths of endless love' (532.205).[41] Hide

[36] Denys Turner reads the *Showings* as a theodicy that accounts for the existence of sin. See his *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

[37] Julian, *Book of Showings*, 404.4.

[38] Ibid., 405.13. With the publication of David Aers's *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2009), there has been a renewed interest in Julian's hamartiology. Aers, bucking recent trends, accuses Julian of all but dropping the fault from *felix culpa* (166), challenging her orthodoxy. Turner's response, that this reading fails to account for the scope of Julian's concern, namely an eschatological account of the world's history with God, is right on the mark.

[39] Many leave the language unpacked. See e.g. Rebecca Prichard, *Sensing the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in Feminist Perspective* (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), p. 42; Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 44; cf. Heath's article 'Judgment without Wrath: Christus Victor in "The Servant Parable"', *ATJ* 30 (1998), pp. 37–50, 41. From context however, we gather that something like 'human nature' is meant.

[40] Kerrie Hide, *Gifted Origins to Graced Fulfillment: The Soteriology of Julian of Norwich* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 125; cf. Davis, *Mysticism and Space*, p. 230, and Joan M. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 199.

[41] Colledge and Walsh translate 'groundyd' with 'founded' (*Book of Showings*, p. 274). This choice may reflect the allusion to Eph 3:17, where the Vulgate reads *fundati*. If so, it is unfortunate, since in both middle and contemporary English, 'to found' carries a strong association with 'start' or 'begin'. My sense is that the text supports something

equates the 'man's soul' that is 'not all seemly' (525.145) with the treasure that is 'not all to his worship' (532.207). Because both must be made fitting before they are suitable for the lord, Hide suggests that the 'great root' is the union wherein this takes place. Hide notes Julian's language here, where the root 'rightfully was knit to him' (542.301).[42] 'Knitting' suggests the hypostatic union. Christ therefore descends into the depths of hell to retrieve the substance of humanity, joins it to himself and ascends to heaven, presenting the now purified treasure to the waiting Father.

It is worth noting that this is not a revisionist history. It is parabolic allegory, setting historical events in their cosmic contexts. Joining sinful humanity to himself in hell does not indicate that the hypostatic union was somehow incomplete until after the crucifixion. It is rather a telescoping of events so as to draw out significance. As Julian writes, 'When Adam fell, God's son fell; because of the true union which was made in heaven, God's son could not be separated from Adam, for by Adam I understand all mankind. Adam fell from life to death, into the valley of this wretched world, and after that into hell' (533.218–534.223). And elsewhere, 'For the soul that beholds the kindness of our Lord Jesus, it hates no hell but hell is sin, in my view' (684.6).[43] The great root, the hell of sin, and Christ's descent into ontological hell therefore retell real-world events in light of the eschaton.

Seeing humanity's plight in this way sets sin's necessity in context. Indeed, since all of Adamic humanity suffers in the state of hell and death, only a Christ willing to suffer *in extremis*, only a God willing to taste a passion of 'the greatest and surpassing pain' (406.23–4) will suffice. This is, of course, a version of the doctrine of *felix culpa*, and, on Julian's telling, is a vindication

more along the lines of 'sourced', 'established', or *groundyd*'s etymological daughter, 'grounded'. The treasure in the earth shares something of the lord's being in that it issues out of endless love. Moreover, Julian is not using gardening language by happenstance.

[42] Hide, *Gifted Origins*, p. 125.

[43] Despite the evidence of the earliest printed texts, Colledge and Walsh's critical edition (*Book of Showings*, p. 684) emends the text to read 'helles synne' ('sin of hell'). They justify the move based on the omission in the later S_1 and S_2 printed editions and the supposition that 'but hell is sin' is 'nonsensical in this context'. *Showings*, p. 328, n. 375. On the contrary, 'but hell is sin' is thematically appropriate. Julian is considering how the Christian regards sin in light of the Holy Spirit's teaching. Sin is to be hated more than hell – by which Julian indicates ontological hell – because Christ's compassion instructs us not to hate those who suffer there. By 'hell is sin', Julian recalls the state of soul death that she has many times predicated of Adam and, by extension, all humanity. We hate sin because within its grasp we share in the privation of ontological hell, except we are 'blinded' to our true state. In this regard sin is worse than hell because, unlike hell's pain, sin camouflages its own 'vileness' and 'hideousness' (684.5–6).

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of the divine nature. Without sin and the pain it causes, there is no adequate expression of the cosmic nature of God's loving compassion. Conversely, the graciousness of union with the divine would be (to put it crudely) denigrated by the absence of the perspective granted by the experience of sin. The issue of who is to blame for sin is therefore immaterial to the pressing questions. What kind of God is God? What sort of power do sin and hell possess? What purpose might they serve? The picture of Christ, digging furiously into the deepest depths of the universe to retrieve and embrace a sinful people, suffering hideously and outrageously to do so, is itself humanity's answer. And it is in its way the basis for believing God's saying, 'All shall be well' (431.25). To borrow an old image: sin is the black velvet that recedes to nothingness when we take up the diamond.

At last we see the theological logic of Julian's echo of 2 Kings 19. Jerusalem's rescue, like the parable of the lord and servant, is a demonstration of how it is that God can be the God God claims to be. Isaiah's oracle proclaims that God is ever-faithful to the covenant, all-powerful over the kings of the earth, both just and merciful to a wayward people. God finds a way to be God *in extremis*; in fact, it is *in extremis* that God is most free to express God's endlessly creative, endlessly loving nature. Jerusalem's cosmic crisis, the inconceivable divine experience of death in the bowels of hell, these are the events through which humanity discovers God's perfection as perfect and not desultory. Julian's theology is again shown to be creative and biblical. The themes of scripture play in and through her reflection, providing the space for novelty while circumnavigating the newness of heterodoxy.

The theological logic of Julian of Norwich: always novel, never new

Julian's theology is thoroughly biblical. We make this claim while remaining wholly agnostic concerning her being Latinate or having access to vernacular translations. We can claim that Julian interprets the scriptures theologically because her creative theology is so thoroughly immersed in theological interaction with the texts she echoes. This is a modest historical claim; it need not be anything more. The real value of tracing Julian's interaction with scripture is found elsewhere, namely by reflecting on how biblical texts interact with creative theological reflection. We cannot say that Julian merely repeats or reports on the meanings of texts (though she can and does do that, too). We cannot say either that Julian runs roughshod over the Bible, treating her visions as somehow superior to biblical revelation. Instead, scriptural language is infused in her theology, biblical themes, narratives, and theology cleave to her visions, resonating, deepening and expanding them. In this way, we might say that Julian's relationship to scripture is dialectical. First,

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the Bible affords the imagery and mode of utterance. Then, when Julian has received her vision, the scriptures offer her the themes, narratives and conceptions of God against which she articulates her genius. And so it is that her hermeneutics make Julian – blessed as she was with revelations denied to many of the rest of us – an exemplar of a creative orthodox theology: always novel, never new.

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