A project exploring John Wesley’s concept of “Scriptural Holiness” should permit a short detour to explore the adjective in that phrase. Wesley is passionate about this fundamental experience of ‘holiness without which no one shall see the Lord’ (Heb.12:14) and fond of adjectives to qualify the various nouns he uses for it – ‘Christian Perfection,’ ‘Entire Sanctification’ and ‘Perfect Love’ – but he has left us no comprehensive treatment of his understanding of the Bible. He did write a number of theological treatises including the *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*¹, but his preferred way of writing theology was in the published sermon. As, therefore, there is no sermon on the Bible itself, Wesley’s views on Scripture have largely to be deduced from how he uses it. I gratefully, therefore, take the use of the adjective in ‘Scriptural Holiness’ as an invitation to explore a little of Wesley’s attitude to Scripture, and then to ask if that attitude is sustainable today.

Wesley described himself as *homo unius libri*, a ‘man of one book’². Of both his commitment to reading and studying the Bible and his scholarly ability in so doing, there is little doubt³. Any reading of the *Standard Sermons*, however, shows that he was not a reader of only that one book; that he was in fact widely read both in the classic literature one would expect a highly educated gentleman of his day to have read and in the literature of the Church down the ages⁴. Nor did he tell the early Methodists that they should read only that one book, as his production of the ‘Christian Library’ shows. As he was well and widely read, so he encouraged the Methodists to be the same. He was, therefore, ‘a man of one book’ only but significantly in the sense that he accorded supreme ‘regard’ to the Bible⁵ and that for him ‘Scripture was the primary rather than the exclusive authority’⁶.

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¹ Published in 1766, see *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Epworth Press, London, 1952.

² cf, ‘I want to know one thing – the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of man. I sit down alone: only God is here. In His presence I open, I read His book; for this end, to find the way to heaven’ – *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, ed E H Sugden, Epworth Press, London, 1968, vol.1, Preface to the Sermons, paragraph 5, pp31f.

³ A point amply confirmed and illustrated in J T Clemons, ‘Was John Wesley a Biblical Literalist?’ in *Epworth Review*, vol.6 no.3, September 1979, pp61-69, although the article is asking a very specific question. The expectations Wesley had that other ministers would emulate him in this regard, as set out in his *Address to the Clergy* of February 6th 1756, quoted on pp64f, are daunting!


⁵ As can be seen from the word ‘comparatively’ in an aside in *A Plain Account* when he is speaking of the views on Perfection he held in 1730. He describes that year as the year ‘when I began to be homo unius libri,’ ‘a man of one book’, regarding none, comparatively, but the Bible’ (p15).

Something of what Wesley thought of the Bible can be seen in this paragraph from the Preface to his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* of 1754,

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelists wrote. This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: this is that ‘word of God which remaineth for ever’; of which, though ‘heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away.’

The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all writings of men, however wise or learned or holy.

Eleven years later he produced the *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, in which he aimed to ‘give the direct, literal, meaning of every verse …sentence … word in the oracles of God’ so that the ordinary reader can ‘keep his eye fixed on the naked Bible’. Both Notes were adaptations of the work of others, the first of J A Bengel’s *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* of 1742, and the second of Matthew Henry’s famous *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* of 1708-1710 and, more so, the *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* of Matthew Poole of 1665, with considerably more editing than he had used with Bengel. The Notes on the New Testament form part of the ‘doctrinal standards’ of British Methodism, those on the Old Testament do not.

Wesley was, of course, a prolific writer and selecting anything from his voluminous works to make any kind of point in a short paper like this is bound to be seen as tendentious. Fortunately, Scott Jones has done the spadework and those who want more detail can read there. Here I will simply cite a few details from both sets of Notes, the Sermons and, given the project of which this paper is a part, *A Plain Account* to illustrate the fairly obvious point that Wesley is a pre-Enlightenment reader of the Bible - a fact and not a value-judgement on him or his writings.

In the Old Testament Notes he calls Moses ‘the inspired penman in this history’ (ie Genesis) uses Archbishop Usher’s chronology and thinks of David as the author of Ps.103. He reads the Old Testament Christologically throughout. In the New

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9 He acknowledges his dependence in para. 7 of the Preface and para. 10 quoted above is itself heavily dependent on Bengel. In para. 3 he declares that he writes for ordinary people, and in para. 6 that he has omitted scholarly, critical material - ‘curious and critical inquiries’ – from these Notes.

10 Adam Clarke comments: ‘The notes on the Old Testament are allowed, on all hands, to be meagre and unsatisfactory’ and he blames the printer for using too large a type and so reducing the amount Wesley could write. He adds, ‘This account I had from the excellent author himself’ (General Preface to vol.1 of his *Bible Commentary* published in 1810).

11 S J Jones, *op.cit*.


13 Noting on Gen.7:11 that ‘the six hundredth year of Noah’s life was 1656 years from the creation’.
Testament Notes his comment on 2 Tim.3:16 is brief and low-key, ‘All scripture is inspired by God – The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer. Hence it is so profitable for …’. In a sermon, however, after quoting this verse in the form ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God’ he adds the heavier note – ‘consequently, all Scripture is infallibly true’ and reminds the hearers that St Paul is here speaking ‘primarily and directly’ about the Old Testament. On that other proof-text, 2 Pet.1:20-21, he interprets ‘being moved by the Holy Ghost’ as ‘Being moved – literally, carried’. They (ie the Bible writers) were purely passive therein. In these Notes Wesley offers his own translation from the Greek in which he is prepared to amend the Authorised Version and to offer alternative textual readings on the basis of the developments in textual criticism pioneered by Bengel. He also regards the Rich Man and Lazarus of Luke 16:19-31 as real people. Jones, paying particular attention to the Sermons, groups Wesley’s use of Scripture into five classes: textual – the use of texts as in preaching, explanatory – the use of Scripture to explain a doctrine or idea, definitional – ‘Scripture serves as a sort of authoritative dictionary’ settling the meaning and definition of terms, narrative – in which stories, characters and events are used as illustrations and semantic – ‘Scripture can provide the words and phrases to make a point that could easily have been made in other words without a change of meaning’ – ‘a substitution of words to take advantage of the authority associated with their source’. He also distils seven rules from him for interpreting Scripture: Speak as the oracles of God - use scriptural language wherever possible (cf the semantic use of Scripture just noticed), Use the literal

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14 I cite this detail because it invites comparison with Adam Clarke’s treatment in vol.4 of his Commentary, published in 1822, which dismisses the Davidic authorship of this and other psalms. Clarke retains belief in the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and Usher’s chronology. Arguably Clarke’s work represents the first stirrings of critical Old Testament scholarship in Methodism.


16 Sermon 12, ‘The Means of Grace’ (1739), paragraphs 3.8 and 3.9. There is an interesting entry on ‘infallibility’ in the Journal for August 24th 1776. Wesley is commenting on a book receiving much attention in the reading classes, written by a writer recently returned to the Faith who was promoting it in a way of which Wesley disapproves. Thus Wesley writes, ‘I read Mr Jenkyn’s admired tract on the Internal Evidence of the Christian Religion … If he is a Christian he betrays his own cause by averring that ‘all Scripture is not given by inspiration of God, but the writers of it were sometimes left to themselves and consequently made some mistakes.’ Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that Book, it did not come from the God of truth’, Journal of Rev John Wesley, ed N Curnock, Epworth Press, London, 1909-1916 vol.6, p.117. See also Scott, Conception and Use, pp23-31 and p38 of Larry Shelton, ‘John Wesley’s approach to Scripture in historical perspective’, Wesleyan Theological Journal, vol.16, no.1, Spring 1981, pp23-50.

17 All the italics in the quotations from the Notes in this paragraph are Wesley’s.


20 Ibid p134.

21 Ibid p135.

22 Ibid chapter 4.
sense unless it contradicts another Scripture or implies an absurdity. Interpret the
text with regard to its literary context, Scripture interprets Scripture according to the
Analogy of Faith and by Parallel Passages, Commandments are covered promises,
Interpret literary devices appropriately and Seek the most original text and the best
translation. Most of these uses and rules can be seen at work in almost any sermon
you care to choose, and most are commonplace in the evangelical/Protestant
tradition of Wesley’s day. On only one of these does Jones point to a special -
unique is perhaps too strong a word - emphasis on Wesley’s part, and that is his
particular use of ‘the analogy of faith’ which we shall examine below23. Most of these
features can also be seen in A Plain Account, which sets out in the form of a diary to
track, defend and explain Wesley’s preaching of this theme throughout his ministry.
Although he admits his debt to other books and other writers, this tract could more
accurately be named ‘A Scriptural Account...’ In it he begins and ends his reasoning
from the ‘Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure
religion’24, insists that his understanding of this doctrine is found clearly stated in ‘the
oracles of God’25, that it is in conformity with ‘the whole tenor of the New
Testament’26, and that it is provable from ‘express texts of Scripture’ and with
examples from Scripture27. There is no doubt of the importance which Wesley
ascribed to Scripture and the facility with which he used it.

Jones examines both Wesley’s conception of the Bible and his use of it, and
concludes that his use of the Bible is largely consonant with what he says about it28.
He demonstrates that for Wesley there are five components to religious authority, of
which Scripture is hugely primary though all are interdependent29. He shows that for
Wesley Scripture functions authoritatively as both source and norm, the place from
which basic doctrines are obtained and the court of appeal in all disputes about
teaching or behaviour, and that for him there are no doubts about the sufficiency,
clarity and wholeness of Scripture. The rationale for Scripture’s authority lies in the
concepts of revelation, inspiration30 and infallibility, about which Wesley uses the

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23 ibid pp45-53, 109-205 and passim.
25 ibid p10.
26 ibid p19.
27 ibid pp37 and 106.
28 In Conception and Use of Scripture, passim.
29 His five, rather than the Quadrilateral of four, are: Scripture, Reason, Christian Antiquity, Experience
and the Church of England, op.cit chapter 3. Cf, ‘No one who reads Wesley carefully could possibly
miss the primacy of Scripture over the others. However the introduction of geometric metaphors is a
mistake from the start. For Wesley the elements are defined in such a way that they constitute one
locus of authority with five aspects. Christian faith and practice are governed by Scripture, which is
reasonable in its claims, exemplified in antiquity, vivified in personal experience and most fully
institutionalised in the Church of England’ (p64). Jones is indebted in part here to the language of the
1996 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, that Wesley believed that the living core of the
Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience and
confirmed by reason, see pp51 and 80.
30 On inspiration there is an undated tract, A Clear and Concise Demonstration of the Divine Inspiration
of the Holy Scriptures, found on p484 of The Works of John Wesley, ed T Jackson, Wesleyan
Conference Office, London, 1872, vol.11. It reads: ‘There are four grand and powerful arguments which
strongly induce us to believe that the Bible must be from God: viz. miracles, prophecies, the goodness
of the doctrine and the moral character of the penmen. All the miracles flow from divine power; all the
prophecies, from divine understanding; the goodness of the doctrine, from divine goodness; and the
moral character of the penmen, from divine holiness. Thus Christianity is built on four grand pillars: viz.
the power, understanding, goodness and holiness of God. Divine power is the source of all miracles;
commonplace arguments of the time. He points out that Wesley reads the Bible with one aim in mind, which is to find the way to heaven. And it is clearly this reading, this agenda - his own salvation and the salvation of the individual - which gives Wesley his particular interpretation of the ‘analogy of faith’ or the ‘general tenor of Scripture’ by which the whole Bible is read, through which conflicting passages are reconciled and in which the meaning and unity of the whole Bible is seen to subsist.

The elements of this determining way of reading the Bible are variously listed by Wesley: but the common core element of his key interpretative device – the ‘analogy of faith’ - is threefold: original sin, justification by faith and sanctification. In effect, therefore, Wesley offers us an example of a ‘Personal-Salvationist Reading of Scripture’.

All this, of course, needs to be understood in its context; which is prior to the beginnings of Enlightenment, critical, Biblical scholarship; prior to the debate on the authority and inspiration of the Bible associated with the birth and rise of ‘Fundamentalism’ in the twentieth century and prior to current debates. It is anachronistic, therefore, for any of the protagonists in these fields today to claim Wesley as ‘their man’ or their position as ‘his’. Methodists do, however, like to say that ‘the way in which Wesley used Scripture and his understanding of the nature of its authority are foundational issues’ and official formularies of the Church imply as much. But how the methods and views of someone who inhabited a radically different world than ours can be adopted by us as ‘foundational’ is a huge question. We can, and Methodists usually do, treat Wesley with respect. We can set him in his historical context, read him as a representative of mainstream interpretative tradition, and explore and appreciate his hermeneutics in a historical study of that discipline and of our own tradition of faith. It is questionable, however, whether we can do any more.

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31 Jones concludes that Wesley takes the authority and infallibility of the Bible for granted – ‘Wesley has difficulty conceiving of any Christian faith that has questions about the authority and veracity of the Bible’, op.cit p28. See also Wesley’s reaction to Mr Jenkyns in note 16 and the tract in note 30. Wesley’s comments there and Jones’ statement illustrate beautifully how different Wesley’s world is from mine (and I suspect from that of most European Methodists) – I cannot conceive of any Christian faith that does not have such questions.

32 The phrase ‘analogy of faith’ is taken from his translation of Romans 12:6, on which see the note in Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. Cf also Clemons, op cit and Scott, opcit pp43-53, 199-205 and passim.

33 See Shelton, op.cit, especially pp38, 40 and 42f. He is particularly insistent that since Wesley is both pre-critical and pre-Fundamentalist in his approach to Scripture (p40), Methodism must refute any suggestion that Wesley’s position is nowadays represented most clearly in Fundamentalism. Jones’ attempt to say how Wesley might interpret Scripture if he were around today in Gunter et al pp58-61 illustrates the unwisdom of the project.

34 The quote is from Shelton, op.cit. p23. The statement on the nature of authority in general and that of the Bible in particular in British Methodism in clause 4 of the Deed of Union is, however, subtly and to some notoriously, imprecise. See also A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path, Methodist Conference, 1998.
Jones argues that Wesley is not a pre-Enlightenment figure but that living in the period of transition between pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment ways of thinking, he offers an ‘alternative way into modernity’ and a different way of interpreting Scripture. To justify this view he cites the value Wesley places on ‘experience’ and his particular understanding and use of the ‘analogy of faith’ as his key interpretative device. Whist Jones is right in these observations of Wesley’s methodology, the conclusion he draws from his observation is much less secure. And if the arrival of Enlightenment ways of thinking in Biblical Studies is to be recognised by the birth of the, now recently deceased, Historical Critical Method, as is usually thought, then Wesley must remain a pre-Enlightenment figure because he neither employs even the rudiments of such methodology nor shows any interest in its principal concerns. He may on occasion refer to authors and their settings in life, he may amend the Authorised Version and occasionally employ new text critical insights: but these are minor features of an approach which reads the whole Bible Christologically and soteriologically. He is not interested in any kind of historical investigation, he reads Scripture for one purpose only, ‘to find the way to heaven.’ His reading strategy and agenda, which shapes what he reads and enables him to read the Bible as a whole, see a single message in it and handle contradictory passages, is that the Bible teaches the individual soul the way to heaven. That is, put simply, the ‘analogy of faith’ or ‘general tenor of Scripture’ which determines how Wesley reads the Bible, and this is not at all consonant with the Enlightenment or the ‘modern’ agenda for reading the Bible.

Wesley’s reading of Scripture has, of course, resonances with ‘post-modern’ readings of Scripture, which, among other things, encourage individual readers to read for their own benefit, according to their own experience and for their own fulfilment. And that was certainly part of Wesley’s reading strategy and agenda. But before we acclaim Wesley as a postmodern, we need to remember that post-modernity rejects any meta-narrative and every claim to authority, and Wesley would have said that both were essentials, givens, found in and possessed by Scripture.

Neither modernity nor post-modernity can provide a home for Wesley. He is a pre-Enlightenment reader of the Bible. Despite all his competencies and all that can be learned from him as a reader of Scripture in his particular setting, the hermeneutical problem remains. How can a person who reads the Bible as he does and the method he uses function as an authority for people who live in a different world?

Finally, to that modern invention which seeks to relate the Bible to other sources of authority for Wesley and for Methodism – the Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. Wesley priviledged the Bible over all other books, and I suspect that few Methodists or Christians of any kind would disagree with doing that. Much more controversial, however, has been the debate about the true locus of authority in the Faith. This debate has been a violent one throughout the history of the Church and continues in its own little way in Methodism today in differing views of

35 Jones, Conception and Use, p36, adding that as a man of reason in the ‘age of reason’ Wesley is able to take on board developments in science which seem to be in conflict with Scripture (pp38-41). In his more recent work, which is in many respects a summary of the book (chapter 2 of Gunter et al, see note 5 above) he recognises that new knowledge has ‘rendered his views on inspiration and inerrancy untenable today’ (p59).

36 Usually associated with the names of the German scholars W M L de Wette (1780-1849) for the Old Testament and F C Baur (1792-1860) for the New.

37 See note 3 above.

38 See especially Gunter et al, op.cit and Scott, Conception and Use pp62-64.
the proper relationship between these four sources of authority in the so-called Quadrilateral. Jones’ argument against geometric metaphors and for seeing one locus of authority in four aspects (five for Wesley) is sound\(^39\); but debate continues nonetheless with growing use of the slogan of the ‘primacy of Scripture’. Despite its popularity, however, this slogan has little substance; not only is it ‘hermeneutically impossible,’ because in any reading whatever primacy there is lies with the reader, but it is also historically anachronistic, because the Bible came on the scene last of the four. If we must talk of any ‘primacy’ within the Quadrilateral, though that is not really a very helpful way of speaking, the only conclusion we can draw in the light of contemporary hermeneutics and of Wesley’s own methodology, is that whatever primacy there is lies with the Reader\(^40\). Wesley’s use of the Bible illustrates this contention beautifully. He reads Scripture out of a deep personal need – albeit a need in part created by hearing others read Scripture in that way, for hermeneutics is always circular – which provided his reading strategies and his agenda. He sought what he needed in Scripture and found it, and taught others to seek, read and find in the same way. That is how it was for Wesley, and how it inevitably is for us too, no matter how different our contexts, interests and reading strategies are from his.

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\(^{39}\) See note 29 above.