Given its centrality in British life and culture, the Bible (and especially the King James Bible) framed the British experience of the First World War. In a Bible-conscious and scripturally literate society such as wartime Britain, Scripture served either to justify or condemn the conflict, it helped to explain its deeper meaning, it provided inspiration for soldiers and civilians, solace for the many bereaved, and profoundly affected the idiom of remembrance. Nevertheless, the experience of the First World War also exposed some of the Bible’s inherent tensions and even perplexities, becoming a battleground for Christians who supported or opposed the war, and seeming to offer little on the nature of the afterlife, into which all too many young men had departed.

Nevertheless, and if the war deepened confusion for some, in general terms the Bible served as a rock to which the nation clung during the storm of war, a rock that endured for another generation of Britons when faced with the still greater threat of Hitler’s Germany 20 years later.

The centrality of the Bible in pre-war Britain

According to Timothy Larsen, a leading historian of the Bible and Victorian Britain, the Bible enjoyed a ‘unique and extraordinary centrality’ in the Victorian era. This situation is profoundly important given that the generation of Britons that fought the First World War – its generals, its politicians and even the young conscripts of 1916 to 1918 – were practically all born in the reign of Queen Victoria and were very much products of Victorian society. This was a society upon which the Christian Scriptures exerted a profound and formative influence. Holy Scripture was common to the services of all Christian denominations, from the Quaker meeting to the Roman Catholic mass. Although subject to different interpretations, the King James Bible was very much a shared text for Anglophone Protestants all over the world, and the Douai version of the Bible had a similar function for Anglophone Catholics. The teachings and values of this common text underpinned the British legal system, and dictated contemporary notions of public and personal morality: Biblical themes, stories, language and imagery saturated British art, literature and music. Scripture coloured and informed political discourse across the political spectrum, from Irish Unionism to Christian socialism. The Bible infused Britain’s historic sense of national identity (like ancient Israel, Britain was a nation chosen by God for his providential purposes) and, through the missionary movement which sought to take the gospel to the world, it furnished a clear moral and spiritual justification for the British Empire. Their shared Scriptures endowed the British people with a powerful sense of the workings of divine providence in national and international life and, at the very heart of the British state, the coronation ceremony showed how deeply the concept of monarchy was rooted in Old Testament themes and conceptions.

Regardless of social class or religious denomination, knowledge of the Bible was generally understood to be the mark of a good education and a respectable background. It was widely read at home and in private, and, no less than reading, writing and arithmetic, it was integral to the curricula of the nation’s schools. Whether in the public schools, church schools, or even the notionally secular board schools, British children were routinely exposed to biblical stories and teachings, the Bible also being central to the Sunday schools attended
The Bible continued to inform and to fortify the soul of the nation

NOTES


The Bible is not a transparent or exhaustive rule book for the Christian life and some of its ethical teachings are clearly in tension (e.g. as in the case of Jesus’ teachings on divorce). This is especially true of its teachings on killing in the context of war, with the debates of 1914 to 1918 emphasising its position as a contested text. For those inclined towards pacifism, the sixth commandment and the Sermon on the Mount, among other passages of Scripture, seemed both clear and binding. Against their arguments, supporters of the war could deploy large portions of the Old Testament, much better known than now, plus other sayings and teachings of Jesus and St Paul, such as, ‘Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword’ (Matthew 10.34). Appeals to the underlying spirit of Scripture were no more conclusive. As the parable of the Good Samaritan does not hint at what its protagonist would have done had he stumbled across an armed robbery rather than its aftermath, in the context of Britain’s war with Germany (and of the unprovoked invasion and rape of Belgium in particular), was it the duty of the Christian to shun the war or to go to the assistance of one’s neighbour? Both approaches were problematic. Those who invoked the sixth commandment could be accused of privileging one commandment over the other nine and, given recent progress in biblical scholarship, of misrepresenting a commandment against wilful murder. Equally, those who invoked ‘Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’ (John 15.13) seemed to be overtaxing its application in connection with the nation’s growing number of war dead.

Ultimately, the Bible furnished a rich and varied repertoire of themes and figures that could be invoked to support Britain’s war effort, while simultaneously providing a store of proof texts that could be cited just as fervently by the small minority of Britons who opposed the war for religious reasons. According to various British commentators, Germany was the new Assyria, the arrogant despoiler of nations (Isaiah 10.12–14). Furthermore, in view of Germany’s transgressions, the righteousness of Britain’s cause, and the redemptive connotations of its self-sacrifice, the manner and purpose of the deaths of Britain’s soldiers (all of whom were volunteers before the introduction of conscription in 1916), were widely conceived as analogous to that of Christ himself. Besides the reassurance that could be found in John 15.13, Jesus had also said, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’ (Luke 9.23).

However, the introduction of conscription in 1916 gave rise to the new phenomenon of the conscientious objector, men who were required to make their case for an exemption from combatant service before local tribunals. Although by no means all of them based their objections on religious grounds, and not all religious objectors were ‘absolutists’ who would play no part in the war effort, the place of the Bible in British society ensured that religiously motivated objectors were able to offer the most cogent and compelling arguments in favour of their case. At many local tribunals, therefore, committees of assembled worthies (which could include clergymen) had ample opportunity to bandy scriptural texts with those seeking exemption. At Preston, for example; the case of one conscientious objector was dismissed after he misquoted Matthew 10.34, wrongly claiming that Jesus had come to bring peace, not a sword; on the other hand, another had his case upheld after he demonstrated a more persuasive knowledge of the Sermon on the Mount.³

The Bible and the armed forces

It says a great deal about the enormous value attached to the Bible in British society that Holy Scripture had...
been part of the standard kit of the British soldier since 1825, when the Duke of York, the army’s commander-in-chief, had ordered that every literate soldier should be issued with a Bible at public expense. Despite the fact that the War Office issued portions of Scripture and approved prayer books to the other ranks as a matter of policy, as in previous conflicts an immense effort was devoted by civilian agencies to the task of supplying the Word of God to the soldiers of the British army. According to Sir Arthur Yapp, the YMCA alone distributed ‘Millions of Testaments and gospel portions’ free of charge to serving soldiers during the First World War. These were, however, only some of the 40 million Bibles, prayer books, hymn books and tracts that Alan Wilkinson estimated were distributed to British troops by civilian religious agencies in the first half of the war; the equivalent of approximately six items for every British soldier or sailor who served in the course of the entire conflict.

According to the Anglican chaplain GA Studdert Kennedy, the celebrated ‘Woodbine Willie’, the prevailing attitude of soldiers towards the Bible was affectionate and idiosyncratic: ‘Yes, I’ll ‘ave one, sir; you never know your luck; it may stop a bullet.’ According to Kennedy, who was writing in 1917, ‘There are thousands of Bibles carried that are not read. That is certain. If you give them out broadcast, that is bound to be so. The Bible, specially the New Testament, has an enormous circulation in the trenches, yet I very rarely come across a man who knows very much about it.’ Kennedy went on to make a telling comparison: ‘I find quite common among men who was writing in 1917, ‘There are thousands of Bibles who were simple men. They saw no reason to hide that which was a part of their daily lives.’ Naturally, for the fearful and wounded the Bible was a very common and accessible resort. Maurice Peel, an Anglican army chaplain and the grandson of a former prime minister, relayed biblical texts to the men of his battalion by word of mouth before they went over the top, his last message to them being ‘Jesus said, “I am with you always”’ (Matthew 28.20). A few weeks after the carnage of 1 July 1916, the bloodiest day of the First World War for the British Empire, Gerald Brennan, an officer in the 5th Gloucestershire Regiment, remarked on the manner and extent to which the Bible had been used by those fatally wounded on the first day of the Battle of the Somme: “The wounded, who could not be brought in, had crawled into shell holes, wrapped their waterproof sheets round them, taken out their Bibles, and died like that.”

For generals as well as ordinary soldiers, the Bible also proved a source of solace and inspiration. Bearing a colossal weight of responsibility, Sir Douglas Haig, the often unfairly maligned Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front from December 1915, frequently reflected on Scripture in his diary and to a select group of confidants. According to Haig’s chaplain, the Scottish Presbyterian George S Duncan: ‘The Bible’ influenced, perhaps unconsciously, both his ways of speech and his general outlook, without necessarily implying that he knew much about its origins or its theology. I have no reason to think that Haig’s knowledge of the Bible was either profound or extensive. He certainly gained from it a sense of the divine Presence and Power; and this assurance meant much to him. In a broad general sense he valued it especially for the deep seriousness that characterised its message from the beginning to the end, and for the light which it shed for him on the whole duty of man.’

The wider experience of a world war inevitably evoked a variety of responses to Scripture from among Britain’s fighting men. Products of a pre-war culture that was steeped in knowledge and awareness of the Bible, many of the war poets evinced a literary response to the war that was heavily coloured by Scripture. For example, and inspired by the wayside shrines that dotted the landscape of northern France and Belgium, Wilfred Owen’s poem ‘At a Calvary near the Ancre’ invoked the Beast of the book of Revelation, as well as the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion.

For many others, the ethical dilemmas of killing were never properly resolved. While on the Somme, the Anglican chaplain EC Cross was tasked with one still burning question: ‘Come on, Padre, what is your answer to this? Thou shalt not kill. What do you make of that commandment now?’

The Bible also underlined the British soldier’s commonality with his German adversary, sometimes helping to moderate the conduct of the war on the Western Front. Most famously, the spirit of Luke 2.14, ‘on earth peace, good will toward men’ (KJV), was at the heart of the legendary Christmas truce of 1914. In the heat of battle, demoralised German soldiers were also observed to produce their own Bibles and Testaments while trying to surrender. Away from the Western Front, for hundreds of thousands of British soldiers the hard campaigns against the Turks in Palestine and Mesopotamia took place against a biblical backdrop that seemed familiar, if only from childhood memory and imagination. Significantly, and conscious of Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem...
prior to his Passion, and of the Kaiser’s showy entry into the Holy City on horseback some years earlier, General Sir Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem on foot, and essentially as a pilgrim, when the city fell to the British in December 1917.14

A heightened interest in Scripture

For civilians no less than soldiers, the war engendered a heightened interest in Scripture, a common practice on the home front being to follow an agreed scheme of Bible reading with a spouse or near relative in the armed forces in order to ease the pains of separation and anxiety.15

Inevitably, a war of this magnitude also stoked an appetite for prophetic and even apocalyptic readings of the Bible. As war had traditionally been perceived as a divine means of chastising a sinful nation, another perception grounded on the biblical history of ancient Israel, churchmen often urged Britons to examine their own sins, both personal and societal. Acting on these convictions, during the latter half of the war both the Church of England and the principal Presbyterian churches in Scotland sought to renew church life by means of national campaigns which focused on the need for national self-examination and repentance. However, given Jesus’s words in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark concerning the signs that would herald his return and the end of the world (Matthew 24.6–7 and Mark 13.7–8), the unfolding events of the war were widely construed in light of the book of Revelation.

Although reflected in the wartime boom in sensational pamphlets such as The Years 1914 to 1923 in Bible Prophecy (1914) and The Great War as Foretold in the Bible (1915), these intimations of apocalypse also stoked the widespread credence that was given to the story of the Angels of Mons, and lent credibility to rumours of a Canadian soldier who had been crucified by the Germans near Ypres – a typically blasphemous parody of the crucifixion. Later, the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 fed apocalyptic speculation on both sides of the Atlantic, the British government’s pledge of support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine seeming to mark the beginning of the end times for many premillenarian evangelicals.16 Significantly, at the same time the war also served to undermine the credibility and respectability of higher criticism and other manifestations of German theological ‘modernism’. With its intellectual roots in Germany, some British commentators were even tempted to link the gradual, pre-war undermining of Christian orthodoxy in Germany with its lapse into apostate barbarism in 1914.17 As one Anglican commentator lamented, ‘As a scholar you may cut the Bible into shreds, but as a citizen you must not snip a button from the Kaiser’s uniform’.18

In one vital respect, however, some of the bereaved appeared to look to the Bible in vain. Belief in Hell and in eternal punishment had been waning in British society since the mid-Victorian period, and the mass mortality of the war years did nothing to urge the revival of this old and fearsome orthodoxy. Unfortunately, for Protestants Scripture seemed silent on the nature of the afterlife, and especially on the fate of those souls that seemed unfit – for the time being at least – to enter heavenly glory. While this fuelled an often desperate dabbling in spiritualism on the part of some of the bereaved, a practice that orthodox Christians believed to stand condemned by the Old Testament’s account of Saul’s dealings with the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28.3–25), it was also reflected in the fuzzy and allusive manner in which the war dead were remembered, there being no firms consensus as to whereabouts.19 Nevertheless, the Good Book proved to be an enduring source of comfort, if not detailed explanation. Gathered at the war memorial in Royston in 1922, one speaker advised the bereaved that they should return to their callings, like King David had done, despite the loss of their sons.20

On a more intimate level, scriptural texts were commonly chosen as inscriptions for the headstones of loved ones—favoured texts being John 15.13 (‘Greater love hath no man …’) and Matthew 25.21 (‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant …’). The Bible also influenced the design and inscriptions of large numbers of public war memorials. That of the Machine Gun Corps, for example, when erected in 1925, featured a statue of the boy David and bore the inscription ‘Saul hath slain his thousands but David his tens of thousands’ (1 Samuel 18.7). Under the aegis of the Imperial War Graves Commission, a Cross of Sacrifice and Stone of Remembrance became standard fixtures of every British war cemetery. The legend inscribed on the base of the Cross of Sacrifice was devised by Rudyard Kipling, inspired by a text from the deuterocanonical Book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), ‘Their name liveth for evermore’ (Sirach 44.14). Furthermore, the ‘Great Stone of Remembrance’, a simple stone altar, evoked Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the angel’s consoling words ‘now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not witheld thy son, thine only son from me’ (Genesis 22.12 KJV).

Conclusion

Deserving of much greater and deeper study, the experience of the First World War underlined, rather than diminished, the abiding importance of the Bible in British society. A perennially complex, contradictory and perplexing text, it nevertheless conditioned the response of a whole generation of Britons to the worst conflict in their nation’s history. Simultaneously a source of legitimation and condemnation of the war, and of fevered speculation as to its meaning and outcome, it nonetheless provided millions of British soldiers and civilians with an indispensable sense of consolation, inspiration, unity and stability. Though the Bible was variously appreciated and digested in society at large, and although its integrity and standing had been challenged by scientific and scholarly advances in the nineteenth century, in the cauldron of the First World War it continued to inform and to fortify the soul of the nation, proving a resilient and vital means through which the war and its unprecedented sacrifices could be understood, remembered and endured.
Want to teach about World War One and the peace that followed it in your local primary or secondary school? We can help. You can download free lesson plans for your school here. Thoughts on peace. Peace then. Find out how people felt about the coming of peace in 1918. Peace now. The life of 21-year-old British soldier, Pte Frank Viner, was saved at the Somme by his Bible. Read more. Bible ‘major support’ during Gallipoli campaign. The Gallipoli campaign that began in April 1915 is often remembered as a sideshow to the fighting in France and Belgium. Read more. The man who saved others’ lives at Passchendaele. Get the latest on how we’re bringing the Bible to life around the world in a short, weekly email. Sign up. Email preferences. World War I was the first major conflict to harness the power of planes. Though not as impactful as the British Royal Navy or Germany’s U-boats, the use of planes in World War I presaged their later, pivotal role in military conflicts around the globe. At the dawn of World War I, aviation was a relatively new field; the Wright brothers took their first sustained flight just eleven years before, in 1903. World War I brought about massive social upheaval, as millions of women entered the workforce to replace men who went to war and those who never came back. The first global war also helped to spread one of the world’s deadliest global pandemics, the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, which killed an estimated 20 to 50 million people. (Image credit: The British Library Board). The Book of Exodus claims that the Jewish people fled from Egypt while being pursued by Egypt’s army. Moses supposedly called on god to part the Red Sea, allowing the Jewish people to cross. The Hebrew Bible tells of numerous battles between the Israelis and the Philistines. In one of the most famous battles an Israeli force led by David battled a Philistine force led by a giant named Goliath. The Hebrew Bible says that the Babylonian force looted and set fire to the First Temple, the holiest temple for the Jewish people. The Babylonians also tore down Jerusalem’s walls, sacked and destroyed much of the city and deported much of the populace to various sites around the Babylonian Empire. When Britain entered World War One, it did so in the name of 19th century liberal values - the rights of small nations and the rule of law. What justified these claims, which became the touchstone of British propaganda, was Germany’s invasion of Belgium, as its army bypassed France’s eastern defences by swinging round them to the north. Britain and the Great War 1914-1918 by John Bourne (London, 1989). Blighty: British Society and the First World War by GJ de Groot (London, 1996). British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict by John Turner (New Haven and London, 1992). About the author. Hew Strachan is Chichele Professor of the History of War and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford.