The Bible in British Folklore

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Abstract

This article surveys magical and mantic uses of the Bible as attested in British folklore reports, with an eye to developing a model of the Biblicist tradition as that tradition was received by the British laity. The evidence shows that (1) in contrast to the church's emphasis on the Bible's meaning, the laity exploited the Bible's textual and artifactual properties as supernatural means to practical ends; (2) charmers made use of particular biblical (or taken-for-biblical) texts, whereas the Bible generally was used in exorcisms, which seem to have remained the purview of clergy; (3) lay traditions about the Bible seem to have been focused on specific issues, though a general uncertainty about what powers Bibles might have is also indicated.

> Old Mrs. Wesby of N. Walsham used to give pills composed of paper on which texts of scripture were written, and on being remonstrated with by the Vicar…defended her practice by saying that it was in the Bible, and on being pressed to give the locality, quoted,—" 'The word of God is good for all things, for doctrine and for instruction in righteousness,'—now you give it for instruction in righteousness, and I give it for doctoring" (M. R. Taylor 1929, 132).

Practices like Mrs. Wesby's raise a broad problem for anyone interested in the ways Christians have received, understood, and manipulated scripture. Of course, the primary thing people do with Bibles, and have always done with Bibles, is to interpret them. But people have also pressed Bibles into service in other ways, ways that elude easy categorization beyond vague notions of "ritual," "magic," or "superstition." These Bible practices indicate

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that many lay Christians regarded the Bible as a text not only *meaningful*, but *efficacious*. Such an understanding is quite alien to us, the compulsively literate, and so such practices tend to be neglected in studies of the Bible's reception.

In this article I survey Bible uses from British folklore—to my knowledge, the first time that these materials have been gathered together. In preparing this article, I relied heavily on the work of the English Folklore Society, which has published collections and studies of folklore since 1878. I consulted as many other collections of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish folklore as possible, in the hope of providing, if not a comprehensive survey, then at least a broad one. But the purpose of this survey is not merely the cataloguing of exotic Bible practices—as helpful as such might be—but also the development of a model of the Biblicist tradition as that tradition was received by the laity in the British Isles.

Some limitations of the present study should be noted. Although I have grouped different practices based on similarity in the way they used the Bible, it is important to recognize that these traditions were not passed on as a single, coherent body of lore. There is no reason to think that any one person knew all of these charms and procedures: they had overlapping distributions, and some were much more widespread than others.

It is also important to recognize that these traditions were thoroughly intermingled with traditions that did not involve Bibles or biblical texts. In collecting this material, I tried to include all folklore that involved either the manipulation of Bibles as physical objects or invocation of what people understood to be biblical texts. Some apocryphal texts were thought to be from the Bible, and I have included these, because the purpose of this study is to explore the Bible's social and psychological reception. In a few places, I have, unhappily, had to guess whether people thought a given charm was from the Bible. I have included charms involving the actions of biblical figures—especially Christ—and charms very similar to charms that were clearly thought to be biblical. I have not included folklore that merely refers to people or places from the Bible, such as explanatory stories, magical formulae that invoke the evangelists' names, or the use of *Judas* as a verb, because these show only that biblical stories were part of British folk knowledge. Some such distinction between biblical and extra-biblical lore was necessary for the present study, but such a division bisects the folklore corpus unnaturally: I am nearly certain that British folk did not distinguish between biblical lore and ecclesiastic lore more generally, and even the boundary between ecclesiastical and general lore seems to have been more transgressed than observed. But I think I have cast the empirical net in a way that makes sense for the present study.

Other limitations had to do with the nature of the material collected. Most of the reports I found were not first-hand observations, but descriptions related second-hand, or based on earlier printed reports, the evidential

basis for which is uncertain. The reports are fragmentary by ethnographic standards, and there is much more we would wish to know in all cases. Despite these serious limitations, I believe the basic facts are reasonably secure, and sufficient to ground my analysis.

Magical Acts

Given the length of time Christianity had been in Britain and the emphasis on the Bible in important strands of British Christianity, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are documented a number of "magical" uses of Bibles. The following practices are all magical acts, in the sense that they employ Bibles to achieve some effect, and practitioners regard the effect as an unmediated result of the procedures.[1]

Simple Artifactual Uses

Probably the most widely known of the Bible's simple artifactual uses was in the trial of witches. King James instituted an evidentiary standard wherein an accused witch would be weighed against a church Bible or a family Bible.[2] If the woman weighed more than the Bible—a virtual certainty, as James intended—she was freed. Most uses, however, were not nearly so institutionalized.

Bibles were used as simple artifacts in a variety of protective practices. Possession of a Bible on one's person was said to offer protection from fairies, ghosts, and the devil.[3] When it was impractical, owing to age, child-bearing, or death, to have a Bible on one's person, Bibles were touched or put in close proximity: a Bible was placed under the pillow of a woman in labor to protect her and her child from witches or fairies; a baby born on a Friday was set upon a Bible after having its head washed with rum; a Bible was opened next to an infant when the mother stepped away; Bibles were placed on coffins to keep away evil until the body could be buried.[4] The same principle of "protection through possession" was extended also to homes: in Wales some of "the bettermost farms" kept a Bible in a locked

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1. On the category *magical acts*, see Barrett and Malley 2007.
2. *Church Bible*: Aspin 1832, 20; Banks 1943; Gurdon 1893, 175; Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:442. *Family Bible*: Simpkins and Rorie 1914, 106-107.
3. *Fairies*: Briggs 1957, 276; Gregor 1883, 56. *Ghosts*: Ozanne and Carey 1915, 200; Tongue and Briggs 1965, 55. *The devil*: Owen 1896, 150-51; Underwood 1911, 330-31.
4. *Witches*: E. M. Wright 1913, 231. *Fairies*: Kirk and Lang 1893, 29-30; Opie and Tatem, *s.v.* "Bible Protects" (http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY. html?subview=Main&entry=t72.e93, accessed 2 February 2007). *Babies set on Bible*: Carrick 1929, 278. *Open Bible next to child*: Napier 1879, 40. *Bible on coffin*: Banks 1927, 399; Craigie 1898, 374.

chest to protect the house from evil, and in England Bibles were to be among the first items carried into a new home.[5]

Bibles were also used in laying to rest ghosts, as the following procedure describes:

> The *modus operandi* of laying a ghost was to wait till it was on the prowl, and then a parson…got on the grave with a Bible and a lighted candle, thereby cutting off its retreat… If the laying is to be done regardless of expense, there should be seven or even more parsons, all with Bibles and lighted candles, for there is great virtue in the light… In laying a ghost, the great thing is to corner it, keep your candles burning, and pray like fury (Moss 1898, quoted in Simpson 1976, 91).

Specific incidents of ghost laying were reported from Herefordshire and Fife (Leather 1912, 30-31; Simpkins and Rorie 1914, 42).

The Lord's Prayer was also used as a protective artifact: writing out the Lord's Prayer on a piece of paper, dissolving the ink in water, and drinking it was supposed to cure the effects of the evil eye, and one man kept on him a charm of the Lord's Prayer written backward in order to stave off the ghost of his "cantankerous" wife (M. R. Taylor 1929, 126, 132). Another man attached the thumb of a glove, with the Lord's prayer written on a paper inside, to the neck of his horse. The reporter said it was to prevent stumbling and to counter the evil eye (E. S. Taylor 1852, 480).

Other Bible passages too were used as curative and protective artifacts. Mrs. Wesby, with whom this article began, used scripture pills to treat various ills in humans. Unspecified texts from Old Testament genealogies were hung in a bag from a child's neck to protect a child from an outbreak of scarlet fever (Hayward 1938, 228). Another passage could be used to curse: a woman forsaken by her lover was said to be able to curse him by writing out a copy of Psalm 59 and sending it to him (Gregor 1881, 87). An amulet containing a paper on which were written the first three verses of John's Gospel was said to protect the wearer against sickness, and another amulet, in which appears John 1:1-14 and the Lord's Prayer in Greek, is in Oxford's Bodleian library.[6]

In Shropshire, for cure of an animal's bad knee joint, a charmer wrote an unspecified verse from the Bible on a paper and gave it to a man to put into the animal's manger to be eaten (Hayward 1938, 230). The passage is not specified, but it is possible that it was similar to the following charm widely used for sprains:

> Our Lord Jesus Christ rode over a bridge. His horse lighted [? limped] and he lighted. He said "Marrow to marrow, and bone to bone, and sinews to sinews, and blood to blood, and skin to skin" (and to the

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5.   *Bible in locked chest*: Owen 1896, 246. *Bible carried into new home*: Burne 1897, 91; Harland 1873, 236; Peacock 1889, 315; Winstanley and Rose 1926, 174.
6.   Black 1883, 92; Ettlinger 1943, 242; Wilde 1902, 211. See also Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:460-61, where this is said to be a Catholic practice.

others). In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, I cast this sprain away. Amen. So be it.[7]

The story here is of course apocryphal, but a number of charms involved stories attributed to the Bible.

A very widely reported cure for ague involved the following charm:

> When Jesus saw the Cross whereon he was to be crucified he trembled and shook, and the Jews asked him "art thou afraid, or has thou the ague?" Jesus answered and said, "I am not afraid, neither have the evil ague; whoever wears this about them shall not be afraid nor have that evil ague" (Simpson 1976, 105).[8]

This charm had many variants. Owen Davies notes that in one variant the words "or witchcraft" were added after the final *ague* to adapt the charm to a different use (O. Davies 1998, 42, discussing "Sixteenth Report" 1899, 112).

Another widely used apocryphal text was the following charm for toothache:

> As Peter sat weeping on a marvel stone, Christ came by and said to him, Peter, wat hailest thou—Peter answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God, my tooth eaketh. Jesus said unto him, Arise, Peter, be thou hole; and not the only but all them that carry these lines for my sake, shall never have the tooth ake (Latham 1878, 40).[9]

Usually this text was to be memorized, worn as an amulet around one's neck, carried on a paper in one's pocket, or sewn into one's clothes, but Charlotte Latham reported that "the belief is that the possession of a Bible or Prayer Book with this legend written in it is a charm against toothache."[10] In some reports, this charm was said to be found in the Bible.[11] An

7.   "Sixteenth Report" 1899, 113; see also "Thirteenth Report" 1895, 65; Baring-Gould 1925, 144; Black 1833, 78-79; Carmichael, Watson, and Watson 1928, ii. 14, 19, 21; "Charms from Devonshire" 1851, 258-59; Dyer 1880, 149; "Orkney Charms" 1854, 221; Tongue and Briggs 1965, 37. For a variant in which St. Agnes cures her own broken ankle with this charm, see Wilde 1890, 11.

8.   See also "Charm for Ague" 1852; Courtney 1887, 202; O. Davies 1996, 22-23; 1998, 42; Dyer 1880, 158; Henderson 1879, 169; *The Physicians of Myddvai; Meddygon Myddfai* 1861, 455-56; Rushton 1980, 116; "Sixteenth Report" 1899, 112; Wilde 1890, 11; A. R. Wright 1912, 235. It is probably this charm that Gurdon 1893, 15 reports was "taken, it was believed, from the Gospel of St. John."

9.   See also "Seventeenth Report" 1900, 91-92; Opie and Tatem, *s.v.* "Toothache, Charm For" (http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t72.e1471, accessed 25 June 2007); Black 1833, 77-78; Bruce 1850; "Charms from Devonshire" 1851, 258-59; O. Davies 1996, 22; T. A. Davies 1937, 54; Denham 1892, 9-10; Dyer 1880, 156; Northall 1892, 134-36; "Orkney Charms" 1854, 221; Townend 1948; and E. M. Wright 1913, 249. For an account of a toothache charm being applied, see Hunt 1871, 417-18.

10.   *Memorized*: T. A. Davies 1937, 54. *Worn as amulet*: "Charm for the Tooth-Ache" 1851, 20; Harland 1873, 226. *Carried in pocket*: Simpson 1976, 104. *Sewn into clothes*: Simpson 1976, 196; Wilde 1902, 196. *Inscribed in Bible*: Latham 1878, 40.

apparently well-known "conjurer," Nicholas Johnson, used an unspecified "Bible text" (probably this charm) or Bible reading to cure toothaches (T. A. Davies 1998, 46). Another charm for toothache involved Jesus and his brother:

> Christ pass'd by his brother's door,
> Saw His brother lying on the floor.
> What aileth three, brother?
> Pain in the teeth?
> Thy teeth shall pain thee no more.
> In the name [of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost] (Black 1833, 77; Hunt 1871, 414).

For our purposes, the following charm for toothache is of particular interest:

> In the name of God, when juses saw the Croos on wich he was to be crucified all is bones began to Shisver. Peter standing by said Jesus Christ cure all Deseces. Jesues Christ cure thy tooth ake (Jackson and Burne 1883, 182).

Owen Davies notes that the text of the charm has been generalized ("all Deseces"), and may have been adapted to specific cases merely by changing the condition identified at the end (1996, 22).

Finally, a printed copy of a putative letter from Christ to Agbarus, King of Edessa, was carefully kept by an old woman as an amulet for protection from witchcraft and the evil eye, and in South Berkshire the same text was used as a charm for protection against illness and for protection in childbirth.[12]

I have called the foregoing simple artifactual uses because in them the text-artifacts—Bibles or written passages—are touched, kept, worn, or consumed, but not read or expounded. That is, their semantic properties serve as the background for these uses, but are not part of the practices themselves: the scriptures were regarded as efficacious objects. In contrast, the next group of practices involved the reading or recitation of some biblical text.

Simple Performative Uses

The act of Bible reading afforded protection from ghosts and was part of exorcisms, usually involving religious specialists, especially clergy. An extravagant procedure reported from the Kennet Valley involved thirteen ministers reading simultaneously from the Bible—six reading forward and

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11.   "Charm for the Tooth-Ache" 1851, 20; Barclay 1894, 338; Jackson and Burne 1883, 183; *The Physicians of Myddvai; Meddygon Myddfai* 1861, 453-54.

12.   Latham 1878, 24; Salmon 1902, 424. Black 1833, 87, notes that it was regarded as a "genuine epistle of Christ."

seven backward.[13] Bible reading was also used to exorcise the Devil and to remove witches' spells.[14]

Recitation of the Lord's Prayer was also regarded as efficacious to protect against the Devil and to remove spells, "fairy stroke," or other fairy mischief.[15] The inability of an accused witch to recite the Lord's Prayer accurately was taken as evidence of guilt.[16] The Lord's Prayer was also used in many curative charms: for a thrown arm or shoulder, for burns, for whooping cough, for a hernia, for hiccups, for a toothache, for bleeding or a hemorrhage, "or anything."[17]

Other texts were also used in curing. Psalm 8 was to be read seven times for three mornings over the patient for cure of a sore throat or thrush (E. M. Wright 1913*, 240; "Sixteenth Report" 1899, 111). Charms to treat the bite of an adder involved quotation of Ps 67:1-2 or Ps 68:1-2.[18] (Curiously, charmers do not seem to have made use of the biblical encounter between St. Paul and a serpent, or Jesus' promise that his followers could handle serpents safely.) The following text, derived from Ezek 16:6 and 9, was used to stop bleeding:

> And when I passed by thee (here give the name of the person in full) and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee, when thou wast in thy blood, "Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live." Then washed I thee with water; yea, I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen ! Amen ! Amen ! ("Thirteenth Report" 1895, 68).[19]

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13.   *Ghosts*: Craigie 1898, 374. *Exorcisms*: Owen 1896, 215. *Religious specialists*: Courtney 1887, 27; Evans 1892, 274-76; Simpson 1976, 92-93. *Procedure*: Salmon 1902, 429.

14.   Jackson and Burne 1883, 146-47; Owen 1896, 245; Spooner 1961, 325.

15.   *Devil*: Read 1911, 314. *Spells*: Dempster 1888, 169, 223; Burrows 1939, cited in Maple 1965, 214; Napier 1879, 135, 157, 159; Wilde 1890, 17-18. *Fairy-stroke*: Wilde 1902, 233. *Fairy mischief*: Westropp 1910, 195-96.

16.   Gurdon 1893, 175; Kingsbury 1950, 136, 143-44; Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:442; Newman 1946, 23; see Tongue and Briggs 1965, 66, for lore about how witches would change the prayer so as to be able to recite it.

17.   *Thrown arm*: Eyre 1905, 168. *Burns*: Eyre 1905, 168; Latham 1878, 36. *Whooping cough*: Leather 1912, 82. *Hernia*: Hartland 1913, 506-507. *Hiccups*: Tongue and Briggs 1965*, 40. Courtney 1887, 202 and Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 1:499 have it that the Lord's Prayer must be recited backward. *Toothache*: Wilde 1890, 12. *Bleeding or hemorrhage*: Tongue and Briggs 1965, 36, 40. *Anything*: Eyre 1905, 168.

18.   *Psalm 67*: O. Davies 1996, 26; E. M. Wright 1913, 240. *Psalm 68*: "Second Report" 1877, 97; Hunt 1871, 420.

19.   See also "Manx Folk-Lore and Superstitions" 1891, 294; T. Brown 1970, 42; E. M. Wright 1913, 240.

Sometimes this charm seems to have been memorized, other times it was the reference that was passed on:

> The verse to stop nose-bleeding is the 6th verse of the 16th chapter of Ezekiel which must be repeated by one of the opposite sex of the patient ("Seventeenth Report" 1900, 92).

Either way, this cure for bleeding occurred in many variants.[20] John 17:15 was recited in the treatment of burns ("Charms" 1933, 126-27). The recitation of an unspecified verse was used to treat ringworm, and another unspecified text could be said over the burial of a stillborn calf to prevent further stillbirths in the herd (Vickery 1978, 157; Napier 1879, 84-85).

Again, extracanonical texts were sometimes taken to be canonical and regarded as efficacious. The following three charms were used to stop bleeding:

> Jesus came to the River Jordan and said, Stand and it stood, and so I bid thee blood stand in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (Hockin 1882, 175).[21]

> Christ was born in Bethlehem,
> Baptised in the river Jordan;
> There He digg'd a well,
> And turned the water against the hill,
> So shall thy blood stand still.
> In the name [of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost]
> (Black 1833, 76).[22]

> Three wise men came from the East, Christ, Peter, and Paul—
> Christ bleeding crucified,
> Mary on her knees at the foot of the cross.
> And Christ drew a cross over the three women that were crossing the waters.
> One said, Stop,
> One said, Stand,
> One said, "I will stop the blood of [here name the person.]
> In the name [of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost"]
> (Henderson, 1879, 170).[23]

The first charm was described as "a verse of the Psalms" and was used by an old woman as part of a charm to stop nose bleeds. The first two of these charms were in widespread use; the third is reported only from northern England.

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20.   "Manx Folk-Lore" 1891, 294; Baring-Gould 1925, 144; T. Brown 1961, 395; 1970, 42; Rhys 1901, 297; E. M. Wright 1913, 240.
21.   See also O. Davies 1996, 20-21; "Seventeenth Report" 1900, 91; Gurdon 1893, 16.
22.   See also "Charms" 1857; "Charms from Devonshire" 1851, 258-59; Henderson 1879, 169; Hunt 1871, 410, 414.
23.   I have found no other reports of this charm.

Several apocryphal stories about Jesus were used in the removal of thorns.

> Our Blessed savour Came Down from heaven, was pricked with a thorne, his Blood went up to heaven again, his flesh Neither Kankered, Eaukled, nor fustured, Neither shall thine [insert client's name], in the name of father, &c., &c. Amen ("Thirteenth Report" 1895, 65-66).

> Christ was of a virgin born,
> And he was prick'd by a thorn,
> And it did never bell nor swell,
> And I trust in Jesus this never will (Hunt 1871, 413).[24]

> Christ was crown'd with thorns:
> The thorns did bleed, but did not rot,
> No more shall thy finger.
> In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (Hunt 1871, 413; see also "Charms" 1857).

The following variant deserves particular mention because, as Owen Davies notes, it appears to be derived from John 19:5:

> To Drawe a thorn.—Then came Jesus forth whering the crown of thorns and the purpel robe and pilat said write [? unto] them behold the man Amen Amen Amen—to be said 9 times and the Lordes praier before and hafter hold your midil finger on the place and go round it each time and marck it thus ✠ (Morgan 1895, 203).[25]

It is quite possibly one of the preceding charms that was in view when L. Salmon reported that a "witch" gifted in removing thorns would "whisper some words out of the Bible backward"—there were many variants of the same charm.

The following apocryphal text was to be repeated three times, for three mornings, while kneeling before a cross, as a cure for measles:

> "The child has the measles," said John the Baptist.
> "The time is short till he is well," said the Son of God.
> "When?" said John the Baptist
> "Sunday morning, before sunrise," said the Son of God
> (Wilde 1902, 190).

A number of charms for inflammation also involved apocryphal stories. One invoked a tender moment between Mary and one of Jesus' young brothers:

> As our Blessed Vergen Mary was walking over along leading her youngest son by the hand he hang down his head. "Why dew you hang youre hed so low my son"? "My hed doth ake and all my bones." "I fear some ill things you have. I will bless you for ill things" (red ill, wite ill, black or

24.   See also "Folklore of South Northamptonshire" 1850, 37; Henderson 1879, 171.
25.   See also O. Davies 1996, 27-28; Dyer 1880, 173; Salmon 1902, 426; "Seventeenth Report" 1900, 91; "Thirteenth Report" 1895, 65-66.

> blew or all other) down to the ground in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I bless you (you must mention the name of the person) in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen—of the Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen ("Sixteenth Report" 1899, 112-13).

This charm was to be followed by a motion of "the hand the same way as the sun goes, and pass it towards the ground." A second charm also involved Mary, this time treating Jesus:

> The Virgin Mary set the Babe on her lap, and there an Inflammation caught and a blister rose. She blew on it, and the Child also; and the Blister left. So shall it leave…in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (To be repeated thrice.) (Baring-Gould 1925, 144).

A third charm involved an apocryphal meeting between Jesus and Abraham:

> Our Lord Jesus Christ came from the Mount's foot (&) saw Abraham asleep on the cold ground—Our Lord spoke and said "What liest thou here for"? Abraham spoke and said "It is good to know what I lie here for. (I am) taken, without blow, acheing, burning that I know not what to do." Our Lord Jesus Christ said "Rise up Abraham, rise up Abraham from the cold ground—I will make thee safe (&) sound. In the name of the Father of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen" ("Sixteenth Report" 1899, 113).[26]

Stranger still is the following apocryphal encounter between Jesus and a queen:

> Our Saviour Christ blessing for an inflammation or any other evil thing or any like evil. (bless.) The Queen of parest is gone into a far country to kill and destroy both men women and children, and then her meet our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He said "Where art thou going thou Queen of parest?" "I am going into a far country to kill and destroy both men women and children." "Thou Queen of parest turn again : thy evil shall never do no harm, in the name of the father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen" ("Sixteenth Report" 1899, 111).

A final charm for inflammation involved an apparent mixture of biblical and apocryphal stories:

> Our dear Lord Saviour Jesus Christ hee sawe Joseph lying on the cold ground thy side-lese year.
> Joseph—I are stricken sordbolt, sordbolt, sordbolt, stricken stabing, pricking, aching; I know not what to do.
> Our dear Saviour—Take up thy Bed and walk.
> Our dear Lord saw Jesus Christ and pailet sit at the gate of Jerusalem weeping. Faith I hope the Lord will Bless it to thee wherever it is. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost ("Thirteenth Report" 1895, 65).

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26.   For another apocryphal encounter between Jesus and Abraham, see Bonser 1963, 279.

It would appear that this charm has undergone some corruption in its transmission, suggesting that whatever role the sense of the text might have originally played, it was being transmitted as a formula by the time it was reported.

A charm for snake-bite involved an apocryphal story about Jesus and Mary:

> Our Blessed Vergen Mary sot and soad
> her Blessed Babe sot and Plead
> Their Ting Worm out of Eldern wood
> did Ting our Blessed Saviour by the foot
> his Blader Blud and never broke
> Thine shall Break [insert client's name]
> Ting Ting or Rye Ting in the Name
> of the Father Son and Holy Gost
> Amen, Pray God expell the Ting.[27]

Reading and recitation are ambiguous activities, not only because they might be carried out with various intentions, but also because their object may be the text in itself or the text as an avenue to meaning. The foregoing I have classified as simple performative uses because the practices involve reading or recitation of the text as text. In some cases the reading is clearly reading aloud; other reports are ambiguous in this regard. Evidence that it is the text itself, not the meaning, that was regarded as efficacious comes from practices in which the text was inverted. Backward Bible reading could be used to summon a witch and repeating the Lord's Prayer backward was part of procedures for raising the Devil, apparently learned by children, and also in divination.[28] The meaning of a text is inverted by negating its sentences: backward reading is a means of inverting the text. The practices just discussed involved performance of the text, the assumption being that the text itself, as performed, was efficacious.

Mixed Uses

Although most Bible use involved just one mode, a few practices involved using the Bible both as text and as artifact. According to one method for the removal of spells, a

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27.   "Seventeenth Report" 1900, 92. In the "First Report" 1876, 55, this charm, in combination with the Lord's Prayer said "afore and arter," is said to cure a "worm in a bullock's tongue." However, I suspect the folklore collector misunderstood the purpose of this charm. Traditionally, the stinging organ of a snake (one kind of "worm") was thought to be the tongue (OED), and I suspect that this cure was for a bull bitten by a snake. This makes the most sense of the cure's title, apparently given by the folklorist's informant: "cure for a ting bullock."

28.   *Witch*: March 1899, 488. *Devil*: Fenwick 1879; Parker 1913, 84; Salmon 1902, 427; Tongue and Briggs 1965, 69. *Learned by children*: Leather 1912, 40; P. Opie 1963. *Divination*: Wilde 1890, 118.

> key should be laid on two crossed sticks, one of witty (mountain ash),
> and one of yew, both held potent against witchcraft. These are placed on
> the verses in the Bible beginning "put on the whole armour" (Ephesians
> vi., 13, 14, 15). These verses are to be read aloud nine times, and at
> each repetition a little tear is made in a piece of white paper. To break
> the spell, the paper is to be folded up, and sewn into the clothing of the
> person thought to be bewitched, without his or her knowledge (Leather
> 1912, 66).

This practice involved using the text as a physical object upon which the
key and sticks were placed, and also as a text to be read aloud nine times.
In Devon, the Bible was used in the cure for croup—"Place a Bible on the
child's head and recite 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings…' etc."
(T. Brown 1961, 395)—and from Wales comes report of a method how
to call up a ghost, which involved reading Psalm 70 from a Bible
consecrated by sprinkling it with the performer's own blood and reciting the
following:

> I do by the power of the holy names Aglaon, Eloi, Eloi, Sabbathon,
> Anepturaton, Jah, Again, Jah, Jehovah, Immanuel, Archon, Archonton,
> Sadai, Jeovaschap, etc., of this holy work, in the name of the Father,
> Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen" (J. C. Davies 1908, 328-29; see also 1911,
> 253-54).

In these uses the compounding of Bible modes seems intended to com-
pound effects. A similar strategy seems to have motivated the use of
several Bibles in exorcisms, but I found no report wherein several distinct
charms were coordinated to achieve a cure.

Analysis

Several important points emerge from the magical uses of the Bible just
described. These have to do with the Bible's efficacy, the distinction
between general and specific Bible traditions, the difference between the
functions of whole Bibles and specific passages, and social mediation
between text and artifact.

Efficacy

The first point that emerges from this catalogue is that the Bible was con-
sidered efficacious as a text and as an artifact. This point might seem a
truism to scholars of religion, but seldom has the required evidence been
marshaled to demonstrate this unambiguously. As will be seen from Table
1, in the majority of practices described here, the Bible itself enabled
ordinary folk to resist evil powers and to effect cures, without the aid of any
kind of religious specialist.

Table 1. Practices and whether religious specialists were required

Description	Specialist required?
Weigh witch against Bible	Probably
Have Bible on person	No
Put Bible in bed or under pillow	No
Set baby upon Bible	No
Place Bible on coffin	No
Bring Bible to new home or keep Bible in home	No
Read Bible as part of exorcism	Clergy
Drink dissolved ink from written copy of Lord's Prayer	No
Have Lord's Prayer on person	No
Eat copy of Lord's Prayer	Charmer
Write out and send Psalm 59	No
Wear ague charm about neck	No
Wear toothache charm around neck, carry in pocket, etc.	No
Recite Lord's Prayer	Charmer in some
Recite Lord's Prayer backward	No
Recite Psalm 8 seven times a day for three days	No
Recite Ezek 16:6, 9 or charm derived therefrom	No
Recite Ps 67:1-2	No
Recite apocryphal text to stop bleeding	Charmer
Repeat apocryphal text three times	No

Not included in Table 1 are a few practices that might have introduced redundancies that would skew the data: reciting an unspecified text to cure ringworm (no specialist required), whispering an unspecified passage backward to remove thorns (carried out by a charmer), and reading an unspecified passage to summon a witch (the report is ambiguous regarding the involvement of a religious specialist). Reports describing the practice of weighing a witch against the Bible do not specify that any kind of specialist was involved, but I suggest it is "probable" because it was a legal, evidentiary procedure. In many cases the texts were charms, transmitted and sometimes administered by charmers. I have not categorized charmers as specialists, in this analysis, because reports indicate that it was the charm, not the charmer, that was regarded as efficacious:

> A retired farmer, still living, claimed to be able to charm ringworm in cattle, and a woman who claimed to be able to charm human ringworm lived in the parish for several years. Her remedy was to recite a certain verse from the Bible. She did not do this by herself, but would tell her patient which verse was used and leave him to find and recite it (Vickery 1978, 157).

Another folklore collector commented:

> All these charms were regarded as holy, not as magical; sometimes they were passed down openly in families, as for instance by being written down in the family Bible, but more often they were taught in confidence, there being a great reluctance to reveal them unnecessarily, or to strangers. When used, they were generally muttered too low and too fast to be heard, or else they were written down on a piece of paper which the sufferer was given, but which he was told must not unfold and read. Some said that in order to be effective they ought only to be used by a woman to cure a man, and by a man to cure a woman, but this rule was not always followed. Many of the "charmers" and "conjurors"…used them, but since their effectiveness lay in the sacred words and allusions themselves, they were believed to work even when applied by ordinary people; indeed, the toothache charm was often self-administered (Simpson 1976, 104-105).

The role of charmers seems primarily to have lain in their *expertise*, that is, in their knowledge of charms, though Owen Davies (1998, 43-44) points out that there does seem to have been a minor tradition of regarding charmers as possessing a special gift. In most cases, however, it is clear that anyone who knew the charm might use it, the efficacy inhering in the charm itself—hence the oft-reported desire of charmers to keep their charms secret.

The Bible was not used by itself, however, for exorcisms. For exorcisms, clergy or other religious specialists (in one case, a Sunday school teacher) were required. An obvious interpretation of the need for a religious specialist for exorcisms is that the Bible was regarded as insufficiently powerful for this purpose. There is evidence to support this interpretation: possession of

a Bible was not always sufficient to protect from malicious spirits; several Bibles were often used in exorcisms, as if more Bibles concentrated more power; and Bibles were used in combination with other religious implements, such as candles and crosses. On this interpretation, religious specialists were required to supplement the power of the Bible.

But this leaves unexplained the specific need for religious specialists: if religious specialists were just one more source of power, then they should be replaceable by any other efficacious person or object (of which, in British folklore, there were many). We should find occasional, but hardly exclusive, use of religious specialists, and at least some accounts should say what could be substituted for them. But this is not what we find.

What we find in the sources is simply the assumption that clergy will participate in exorcisms. I suggest that this results from the fact that exorcism was an official function of the church and from the folk belief that the church had all spiritual matters in its purview. If we look about the religious landscape of the British laity, we find the church offering itself as the agent of exorcisms, obviating the need, when an exorcism was required, for the laity to look elsewhere. The assumption that clergy will be involved in exorcisms is a result not of a folk theory about the limited efficacy of the Bible, but rather of the self-promotion of clergy for this purpose. To be sure, not all clergy were eager to perform exorcisms, and many were quite skeptical of folk belief in ghosts, but, at an institutional level, the church had for centuries promoted itself as the sole authority in matters spiritual, and, perhaps partly owing to its remunerative potential, many clergy seem to have been willing to satisfy the folk demand for exorcisms.[29]

In descriptions of how exorcisms should be performed, clergy are always the ones performing them. But in the story of one specific exorcism, it is a Sunday school teacher who is involved (Evans 1892, 274-76). This story presents a problem because, according to church doctrine, Sunday school teachers, not having been ordained, were not supposed to be able to perform exorcisms. It may be significant that, in this story, the Sunday school teacher takes it upon himself to perform the exorcism—he is not asked—but the story is nonetheless an exception to the general rule.

An implication of this interpretation is that, for healing, people turned to charmers because clergy did not offer the required services. The church might have claimed for itself medical functions—as it has in various times and places—but by this period the division between mundane and heavenly realms had shaped both church doctrine and folk understandings. This division, in Britain and elsewhere, apparently went back at least to Anglo-Saxon times when, although monasteries reproduced medical texts such as the *Lacnunga* and even provided accommodations for a physician, the physicians themselves are depicted without tonsure (Grattan and Singer 1952,

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29.   Remuneration implied in Moss 1898, as quoted in Simpson 1976, 91.

12-17). But if the church left healing to others, physicians and charmers found a place in their practice for Christian names, prayers, and the Bible. Yet this adoption created a tension, to which we will return.

General and Specific Traditions

Traditions about *specific* uses for the Bible were complemented by ideas about the Bible's *general* efficacy. Several lines of evidence point to beliefs that the Bible was generally efficacious, with uncertain powers. One line of evidence is the interchangeability of functions across procedures: it will be noted that Bibles were used in diverse procedures to achieve the same goal, and in the same procedures to achieve diverse goals. The following charm was designed to be used for a variety of injuries:

> "When our Lord Jesus Christ was upon earth, He pricked himself with a [*here name the cause of the injury*], and the blood sprang up to heaven. Yet His flesh did neither canker, mould, rot, nor corrupt; no more shall thine. I put my trust in God. In the name," & c.—say these words thrice, and the Lord's Prayer once (Henderson 1879, 169).

Owen Davies has noted that other charms appear to have been adaptable to different conditions (1998, 42, discussing "Sixteenth Report" 1899, 112; see also Davies 1996, 22). It is very much as if, somewhere in a curative tradition's history of transmission, someone reasoned that if the Lord's Prayer was effective against ghosts, it might also work quite well against the evil eye—as if the ends for which it was efficacious were ill-defined.

A second line of evidence comes from statements about a charm's general efficacy, as when an old charmer told a young woman that a charm involving the Lord's Prayer could be used to treat a thrown arm or shoulder "and the same if it was scalds or burns or toothache, or anything" (Eyre 1905, 168; see also O. Davies 1996, 22).

A third line of evidence has to do with creative uses of the Bible, such as that of the London woman who placed a Bible over her baby's head following the visit of an "obeah woman"—obeah being a kind of folk sorcery from the West Indies, similar to Voodoo (Newall 1978, 41)—and the following anecdote about "Old Mr. Hodgson," after some boys had raised the devil:

> Mr. Hodgson knew that the only way to get rid of him would be to give him a task he could not perform, and that, if in three trials they could not hit upon such a task, the case would be hopeless.
>
> Mr. Hodgson first desired him to count the blades of grass in the Castle Croft. This task the Devil performed directly. He was next ordered to count the grains of sand on the School Brow. This gave him no more trouble than the former feat. Only one chance was left. A happy thought occurred to Mr. Hodgson. He commanded the Devil to count the letters in the large Bible in the Parish Church. In an instant the Devil descended to the lower regions… (Burne 1909, 205).[30]

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30. The reason the devil could not perform this task is unclear.

These uses, while analogous to established practices, are innovative extensions of existing practices, and as such indicate a kind of faith in, or at least uncertainty about, what powers the Bible might have.

A final, fourth, line of evidence are miscellaneous stories, unconnected to practices, in which the Bible effects some unpredictable transformation: a hunchbacked stone was said to be a man who stole a church Bible and placing a Bible upon a particular disappearing island was said to cause it to remain above water.[31] Related to these uncertain consequences were beliefs that one should set nothing on top of a Bible, or that tearing or dropping a Bible would bring ill luck.[32]

British Bible folklore therefore includes traditions both about procedures employing Bibles to achieve specific effects and clues that the Bible was regarded as generally efficacious. In scholarly discussions, the former have tended to be aggregated to the latter, as if the specific uses were *derived from* general ideas about the Bible's efficacy. But this is to reverse the inference actually attested in the sources. The sources suggest, rather, that ideas about the Bible's general efficacy were secondary to traditions about specific cures: that specific curative procedures tended to be generalized, and served as the analogical source of innovations. Notions about the Bible's general efficacy are attested, but not so robustly as traditions about specific cures.

Contests and Cures

A third observation has to do with a distinction between the functions of Bibles as whole objects and as specific biblical texts. Table 2 compares the functions for which whole Bibles (or reading from the Bible, without respect to passage) and specific Bible texts were used.

Table 2. Comparison of Bible modes and functions

	Protect from a being	Exorcism	Protect from a disease	Cure
Whole Bible	×	×		
Lord's Prayer	*			×
Other texts	*		×	×

As Table 2 reveals, there is a systematic difference between the uses of whole Bibles and those of specific passages. There is no evidence that

31.　*Theft*: Grinsell 1937, 254; see also Grey 1977 [1934], 143-44. *Island*: Paton 1940, 288.

32.　Opie and Tatem, *s.v.* "BIBLE, treatment of," (http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t72.e93, accessed 25 June 2007).

either entire Bible artifacts or generic Bible text was used to protect from or cure diseases. Rather, the generic Bible was primarily used in contests between spiritual powers. When it came to curing diseases, specific biblical or taken-for-biblical texts were used instead.

The two asterisks in Table 2 designate two cases that constitute probable exceptions to this rule. The first has to do with the Lord's Prayer: in one report, "an old man of eighty…since his wife's death a few months ago, goes about with the Lord's Prayer written backwards as a charm against the return of that erstwhile cantankerous old lady" (M. R. Taylor 1929, 132). In another report, an elderly woman regarded daily recitation of the Lord's Prayer as a form of protection from the Devil. Both of these cases are reported as unique instances rather than as indicators of general practice, but they do employ the Lord's Prayer in spiritual contests. More ambiguous is recitation of the Lord's Prayer to remove spells and against "fairy stroke" and other "fairy mischief." In these cases the Lord's Prayer is used to treat the *effects* of witches and fairies—effects often identified with physical maladies. These uses should perhaps be classified as curative, but the evidence is too partial to allow certainty. It is better to allow that the Lord's Prayer is a specific biblical text that was used in contests with spiritual beings.

The second asterisk is warranted by two reports. The Letter of Agbarus was reportedly used by an old woman to protect her household from witchcraft and the evil eye. This letter is otherwise mentioned only once, as a charm against illness and for protection in childbirth. It may explain her exceptional usage that the old woman understood the Letter of Agbarus to be written by Jesus, and perhaps then as a kind of holy text in its own right. Certainty is precluded by the limited evidence. The second case is more ambiguous: one variant of the widely attested cure for ague has the added ending "or witchcraft." Again, this may be only a way of referring to miscellaneous ailments. Both of these cases are unusual, but at least the first constitutes an exception to the rule I propose.

Still, admitting these exceptions, the general pattern is that the Bible as a whole was used in contests with ghosts, witches, and fairies, and that specific Bible texts were used in curing.

Textual Attribution

A final point also has to do with the relation between Bible-as-artifact and Bible-as-text. In my earlier ethnographic work, I analyzed how meanings were attributed to the Bible by American evangelical Christians (Malley 2004, Chapter 3). There I argued that the relation between meanings and the text involves a cognitive process of *attribution*, and that interpretive traditions make heavy use of this process. Here a similar point emerges about the relation between the Bible as artifact and the Bible as text. As we have seen, charmers and other folk often attributed apocryphal texts to the

Bible. The reports suggest that in part this was due to illiteracy, but this was not so in all cases. Consider the following conversation between a Dame Grey and a parson:

> Parson: Well, Dame Gray, I hear you have a charm to cure the toothache. Come, just let me hear it; I should be so much pleased to know it.

> Dame Grey: Oh, your reverence, it's not worth telling.

> *(Here a long talk—Parson coaxing the Dame to tell him—old lady very shy, partly suspecting he is quizzing her, partly that no charms are proper things, partly willing to know what he thinks about it.) At last it ends by her saying—*

> Dame Grey: Well, your reverence, you have been very kind to me, and I'll tell you: it's just a verse from Scripture as I says over those as have the toothache:—
> "And Jesus said unto Peter, What aileth thee? And Peter answered, Lord, I have a toothache. And the Lord healed him."

> Parson: Well, but Dame Grey, I think I know my Bible, and I don't find any such verse in it.

> Dame Grey: Yes, your reverence, that is just the charm. It's in the Bible, but you can't find it![33]

In this and other reports we see that literacy did not—could not—ensure a perfect mapping between the published Bible—the artifact—and the text, as that text was understood by readers. The attribution of an apocryphal text to the Bible, a kind of tradition about what the Bible said, had intervened. The existence of such traditions forces us not only to distinguish between the Bible as text and the Bible as artifact, but also to recognize that social processes may intervene in this relationship.

Bible Divination

The preceding practices are all magical acts, manipulations of Bibles or biblical texts to achieve some effect. Another common sort of practice, however, was Bible divination.

Sortes Biblicae
Very widespread was the consultation of a Bible at random to achieve some kind of foreknowledge. This practice was sometimes connected with New Year's Day, as in the following account:

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33.   "Old Charms" 1850, 293. I have modified the quotation by consistently marking speakers. For another story involving the same charm, see Barclay 1894, 338.

> This superstitious practice is still in common use, and much credit is attached to it. It is usually set about with some little solemnity, on the morning of New Year's Day before breakfast, as the ceremony must be performed fasting. The bible is laid on the table unopened, and the parties who wish to consult it are then to open it in succession. They are not at liberty to choose any part of the book, but must open it at random… Wherever this may happen to be, the inquirer is to place his finger on any chapter contained in the two open pages, but without any previous perusal or examination. The chapter is then read aloud, and commented upon by the company assembled. It is believed that the good or ill fortune, the happiness or misery of the consulting party, during the ensuing year, will in some way or other be described and foreshewn by the contents of the chapter (Forby 1830, ii. 400).

Another variant of this practice was less formal: it involved an individual taking a Bible to bed and opening it at random when first waking on New Year's Day (Gurdon 1893, 137-38; Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:343; Tongue and Briggs 1965, 152). The practice was not restricted to New Year's Day, especially when important decisions were to be made.[34]

The historian of religion will recognize this practice as a form of what was, in the classical world, called *sortes Homericae* or *sortes Virgilinae* (using the works of Homer or Virgil) and is more commonly called *Bible dipping* today. Although a couple of folklorists suggested that this form of bibliomancy was a *continuation* of the ancient practice, the rate of reinvention is probably high enough that the mere fact of resemblance is not sufficient evidence of continuity (Malley 2004, 101-103).

The information thought to be yielded by this form of bibliomancy is sometimes said to be one's fortune and sometimes God's will, but it is not clear that the folklorists distinguished these interpretations—in fact, Simpkins, quoting an earlier writer, describes it both ways as if they are equivalent (Gurdon 1893, 137-38; Simpkins and Rorie 1914, 117). My hunch, based on ethnographic work among American evangelicals, is that the practitioners probably did not distinguish these interpretations either.

Another practice, also reported as an example of the *sortes Virgilinae*, is a kind of birth date divination (Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2: 343; Simpkins and Rorie 1914, 117). In this, Proverbs 31 was used, supposedly because it has 31 verses, and the relevant verse was selected according to the day of the month on which a person was born. For example, because I was born on September 7, Prov 31:7 would tell my fortune. (Unfortunately for me, Prov 31:7 reads, "Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.") A man could also use this form of divination with a potential spouse's birthday, to determine what kind of life he would lead with her (Gurdon 1893, 95; Hunt 1871, 428; Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:343).

34.   Aubrey and Britten 1881, 115-16; Harland 1873, 237; Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:344; Simpkins and Rorie 1914, 117.

Bible & Key

The second bibliomantic practice was so prevalent that it appeared in two novels: the curious practice called the Bible & key (Hardy 1997; Naipaul 1961). The following instance is reasonably typical:

> One Mrs. White, it seems, had lost some property, and agreed with the neighbours to resort to the Bible & key in discovery of the thief. They placed the street-door key on the fiftieth Psalm, closed the volume, and fastened it tightly with a string. The Bible & key were then suspended to a nail, and the name of Mrs. Blucher (the person on whom suspicion had fallen) was repeated three times by one of the women, while another recited these lines: "If it turn to thee / Thou art the thief, and we are all free." The key then turned, or was thought to do so, and Mrs. Blucher was proclaimed to be the thief (Henderson 1879, 234-35).

Although this is a prototypical instance of the Bible & key, the practice is reported in many procedural variants: in fact, there were almost as many variants as there are reports.[35] But for our purposes the only variations that are important are those pertaining to the purpose of the ritual and the text on which the key was placed.

The primary purpose of the Bible & key was discovery, either of a person's future spouse or of the identity of a thief. Regarding marriage, there were many variants as to what precisely the Bible & key would reveal: whether a woman would marry, which of two people would be married first, which of two people would have a better marriage, whether a particular admirer would offer marriage, whether a woman would accept a suitor, whether a woman would be a good wife, whether a couple would marry, or whether the course of love for a prospective couple would be smooth.[36] Most commonly, the procedure was used to discover the initial letter or two of the future husband's or wife's name.[37] Should the key not turn at all,

35.   Adams 1904, 515; Aubrey and Britten 1881, 31; Banks 1943; Billson 1895, 58; R. Brown 1884; T. Brown 1961, 395; Courtney 1886, 111; J. C. Davies 1911, 13-14; Forby 1830, 398-99; Grey 1977 [1934], 150-52; Groome 1895, 118; Gutch and Peacock 1908, 138, 141; Hadow and Anderson 1924, 352; Henderson 1879, 233-36; Hone 1967, 254-55; Kilvert and Plomer 1960, 1:300-301; Latham 1878, 31; Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:338-39; Leather 1912, 65; Napier 1879, 106-107; "Notes and Queries" 1883; "Notes and Queries" 1884; Owen 1896, 288-89; Parker 1913, 80; Salmon 1902, 422-23; Tongue and Briggs 1965, 152; "Twelfth Report" 1894, 82-83; Westropp 1911, 205.

36.   *Whether a woman would marry*: Billson 1895, 58. *Married first*: Henderson 1879, 236; Latham 1878, 31. *Better marriage*: Aubrey and Britten 1881, 31. *Particular courter*: Courtney 1886, 111; Napier 1879, 106; Westropp 1911, 205. *Accept suitor*: Owen 1896, 288-89. *Good wife*: Gurdon 1893, 95. *Couple marry*: T. Brown 1961, 395. *Course of love smooth*: Gurdon 1893, 95.

37.   Billson 1895, 58; J. C. Davies 1911, 14; Forby 1830, 399; Gutch and Peacock 1908, 141; Hadow and Anderson 1924, 352; Henderson 1879, 236; Leather 1912, 64; Parker 1913, 80.

lifelong celibacy was indicated.[38] The Bible & key was similarly used to identify a thief, the expectation being that the key would turn at mention of the guilty person's name.[39]

A few other uses appear in scattered reports. Related to its use in discovering a thief, the Bible & key could be used to discover the location of stolen or lost goods (Gutch and Peacock 1908, 138). There is also mention of the procedure being used to determine which of two "mesmerisers" had the strongest will and in the trial of a witch (Henderson 1879, 236; Groome 1895, 118). Reports from Gloucestershire and Shropshire describe a curative use of the Bible & key in healing a nose bleed, and a report from Norfolk says the Bible & key was used to effect the successful departure or arrival of a ship (Eyre 1905, 169-70; E. M. Wright 1913, 240-41; Gerish 1893).

The passages used show a small degree of variation. For marriage, the passages were Ruth 1:15-16 or Songs 8:6-7. The passage in Ruth 1 (KJV) reads:

> And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. 1:16 And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

Songs 8:6-7 (KJV) reads:

> Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.

Proverbs 31 was used for the identification of a good wife. For the discovery of a thief, the passage was Ps 50:18 (KJV), "When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him."

Like Bible dipping, the Bible & key is reported to be a variant of an earlier form of divination known as the sieve and shears, or what the ancient Greeks called *coskiomancy*, which was also an ongoing practice in Ireland (Henderson 1879, 233-34; Wilde 1902, 207). The resemblance between these different practices is so considerable, and the likelihood of independent invention so low, that it is probable we have a single, ancient tradition that has appeared in two major variants in addition to a host of minor ones.

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38.   Billson 1895, 58; J. C. Davies 1911, 13-14; Forby 1830, 399; Gutch and Peacock 1908, 141.
39.   Banks 1943; T. Brown 1961, 395; R. Brown 1884, 156-57; Forby 1830, 398-99; Kilvert and Plomer 1960, 1:300-301; "Notes and Queries" 1883; "Notes and Queries" 1884, 380-81; Salmon 1902, 422; E. M. Wright 1913, 264.

It is important to note that, at least in some instances, the practitioners took the results of the Bible & key quite seriously: in one case the Bible & key was accepted as exonerating a female servant suspected of theft; in some cases the results were brought to the police.[40] Accused persons took it seriously too: one man accused of thievery consulted a lawyer in response, and an accused woman came and beat the person who initiated the ritual. In another case the man identified by the Bible & key as a thief was forced to relocate. The Bible & key thus seems to have been a mechanism affecting reputation and social status.

Two folklorists reported on the opprobrium with which the Bible & key was regarded, even by those who practiced it. Leather quotes one informant describing the Bible & key as "wicked work" (1912, 65). Another commented to her that "when you sees a thing like that, you feels there's a power on earth besides the power o' human beings," to which a second replied "Ay, ay, but some says as the power as does it is a bad power." James Napier too comments:

> This method of divining was not frequently practised, not through want of faith in its efficacy, but through superstitious terror, for the movement of the key was regarded as evidence that some unseen dread power was present, and so overpowering occasionally was the impression produced that the young woman who was chief actor in the scene fainted. The parties holding the key and Bible were generally old women, whose faith in the ordeal was perfect, and who, removed by their age from the intenser sympathies of youth, could therefore hold their hands with steadier nerve (Napier 1879, 107).

Yet it was not always taken seriously: a report from Suffolk relates a man trying it at a Christmas party, though it left him "right scared" (Hadow and Anderson 1924, 352). It is interesting that, despite use of a Bible, people did not attribute the turning of the key to God—they seemed to have only vague ideas about a "bad" or "dread" power.

Other Forms of Bibliomancy

Other forms of bibliomancy were also practiced. An amalgam of Bible dipping and the Bible & key had the inquirer "place a key at random in a Bible, and note the letter to which it points" (E. M. Wright 1913, 259). The Bible was also used in two procedures that promised to give the inquirer a vision of her future spouse:

> read the verse: "Lay down now, put me in a surety with thee; who is he that will strike hands with me?" *Job* xvii. 3, after supper, then wash up the supper dishes and go to bed without speaking a word, placing the Bible under your pillow with a pin stuck through the verse previously

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40.   Banks 1943; R. Brown 1884, 156-57; "Notes and Queries" 1883, 333; "Notes and Queries" 1884, 380-81.

read (E. M. Wright 1913, 262; see also Lean, Woodward, and Williams 1902, 2:371).

Presumably, the variety of divinations related to courtship, usually practiced by young women, was related both to normal romantic interest and to young women's social dependence on their husbands.

Bibles were sometimes integrated with other forms of divination. There is a report of a London woman accused of fortune-telling, in whose home was found "a Bible…interleaved with extracts from a dream-book" ("Notes and Queries" 1887, 73-74). While this mixed book was clearly used for divination, the procedure is unspecified. A report of similar inscriptions—in German—in a Psalter comes from Liverpool ("Auguries" 1899). Another elaborate procedure combined the Lord's Prayer with a kind of moon divination.

> If you want to see whom you will marry, miss, you must go out of the house in the first quarter of the new moon (Hallows Eve is the best, but the moon must be in its first quarter, if not you will see nothing). And you must see it for the first time. When you get a sight of it kneel down, and with a *black-handled knife* lift a sod from under your right knee and from under the toe of your right foot, repeating:
>
> > "New moon, true moon,
> > Happy may I be;
> > Whoever is my true love
> > This night may I see."
>
> Then repeat the Lord's Prayer; lift a sod of earth, and with the earth you took from under your right knee and foot, hide it somewhere outside the house till you are ready to go to bed, then bring it inside. You must not speak a word to a living soul once the earth is brought into the house. Then put the earth into the right-foot stocking, and put that under your head. But be sure you speak to no one till morning (Singleton 1904, 461).

Such practices again suggest that the Bible was thought an efficacious power in its own right.

Analysis

Two major additional points emerge from this examination of bibliomantic practices, the first having to do with the creation of context, the second with the role of artifactual and textual properties.

Context Creation

At a glance, the *sortes Biblicae* might seem a variety of reading. After all, the Bible is a big book, and might a person not decide to start somewhere other than "In the beginning"? And do not many Bible readers expect the text to speak to their lives? Of course.

But a critical difference has to do with the construction of context. In normal reading, a passage is naturally understood as a part of a larger text,

the larger text forming the context in which the passage has meaning. Were we, in reading a work of fiction, to interpret each sentence as an independent text, we would never enjoy the story—we might not even be aware that there *was* one. And we need context: seldom is an isolated sentence of much interest.

In the *sortes Biblicae*, the context within which a Bible passage is interpreted is not the larger literary work, but the life circumstances of the diviner. The Bible is opened and the passage is read, but what is interpreted is the encounter between a specific diviner, in specific life circumstances, and this specific text. The mechanical manipulation of the text corresponds to a *cognitive* manipulation, a manipulation of the context within which the text is interpreted. Similarly, the Bible & key was occasioned by circumstances—mainly courtship questions or a theft—that set the context for interpreting the turn of the key as a signal.

What is essential in these practices is that the specific signal could not be predicted by those involved. This is not the same as saying that the signal was random: it was not, nor is there any indication that the users sought to make it so. But this interruption of discernible processes of causation, Pascal Boyer has suggested, seems to create the kind of cognitive context in which beliefs about supernatural agents are highly salient (Boyer 1990). This inferential gap theory fits well with the observation that people were uncertain about the agencies involved.

Artifact and Text

The bibliomantic practices described above occur at the intersection of divination and reading. The practices of *sortes Biblicae* and the Bible & key turn precisely on Bibles' (or other books') artifactual properties while also treating them as texts. One difference between bibliomancy and reading is the role that Bibles' artifactual properties play in the procedure: readers treat a physical book as a medium—preferably a transparent medium—for the text, and the text as a vehicle—again, preferably a transparent one—for meaning. In the *sortes Biblicae*, the physical book is manipulated to *disrupt* the text and the text's meaning, allowing the discovery of a different kind of signal and a different kind of meaning. In bibliomancy, the artifact is valued not for its transparency but for its opacity. Such opacity is necessary to create the inferential gap discussed above.

Whereas the *sortes Biblicae* manipulate the artifact to produce a text, the Bible & key uses the text to create a Bible-key artifact. The placement of the key is determined by the occasion, and the focus of the ritual moves from the Bible's textual to artifactual properties. It is noteworthy that the Bible & key involved a Bible, and that, at least when the concerns were romantic, involved biblical texts that were generally relevant to the occasion at hand. It would seem that in these cases, the fact that the text was biblical and topically relevant was important in setting the stage for a ritual

that otherwise made no use of the book's textual properties at all. The text's semantic properties seem to have been important.

The discovery of a thief constitutes an exception to this generalization: Ps 50:18 is relevant only in that it includes the word "thief." But the Bible has many texts that deal with theft, and some would seem more relevant than the passing mention in Psalm 50. Why not Exod 20:15, "Thou shalt not steal"? Or 1 Pet 4:15, "Let none of you suffer…as a thief"? Here a historical factor may be at play: Ps 50:18 is the only place in the book of Psalms where the word *thief* appears. One report refers to the Bible & key as the "Psalm-book and key," and it is possible that the selection of passages was influenced by the existence of an alternate or perhaps earlier variant in which the Psalter was used instead of an entire Bible. Even so, the use of Psalm 50 for detection of a thief seems to have been widespread, and it does constitute an exception to the analysis offered above. The exceptional nature of this practice is strengthened by two reports, which hold that Ruth 1 was used in the detection of theft ("Notes and Queries" 1883; Henderson 1879, 235). This exception suggests that it may have been the text—in this case, the word *thief*—rather than the meaning of the passages that was important for the Bible & key. If so, then in the Bible & key as much as the *sortes Biblicae*, the Bible functioned as an artifact and as a text, quite apart from the semantics of the passages involved.

Conclusion

The British laity seem to have exploited the Bible as text and artifact in rather different ways than ecclesiastical Christianity. Whereas ecclesiastical Christianity has generally emphasized the *message* of the Bible over its status as artifact and even its text, concern with the Bible's teaching is almost entirely absent from the folk practices described here. Indeed, even when the Bible is made to speak, as in the *sortes Biblicae,* it is made to speak in a very different way than either historians or theologians would have it.

One is tempted almost to see a complementarity between the folk and ecclesiastical emphases, but I think it is better to interpret this difference as the result of competitive exclusion: the church, owing to its superior organization as an institution, could claim for itself the Bible in its artifactual, textual, and semantic aspects. And, in various ways, it made use of all of these, but its emphasis was always on the Bible's semantic properties, the Bible's message. But as the church promoted the Bible, it was unable to monopolize it: charmers opportunistically adopted the Bible as a new tool in their arsenal of trinkets, texts, salves, and rituals; those wishing to gain hidden knowledge found it easy to substitute the Bible for other instruments. Charmers and layfolk developed a kind of practical Biblicism that

the better-organized church could perhaps, had it been willing, have claimed for itself.

The relationship between ecclesiastical Christianity and the folk practices surveyed here was varied. Both advocates and opponents of these kinds of folk Biblicism could be found among the clergy. One woman was afraid that her parson would find out that she had not brought a Bible into her new house when first she entered (Winstanley and Rose 1926, 174). Others disapproved of such practices, and at least one charmer felt he had to give up his practice in order to be a Christian (Kilvert and Plomer 1960, 3:273-74). This clash of institutions could be acrimonious and costly to those caught in the middle:

> Mr. Ashmole told me, that a Woman made use of a Spell to Cure an Ague, by the Advice of ————. A Minister came to her, and severely repremanded her, for making use of a Diabolical help, and told her, she was in danger of Damnation for it, and commanded her to burn it. She did so, and her Distemper returned severely; insomuch, that she was importunate with the Doctor to use the same again: She used it, and had ease. But the Parson hearing of it, came to her again, and thundred Hell and Damnation, and frighted her so, that she burnt it again. Whereupon she fell extremely Ill, and would have had it a Third time; but the Doctor refused, saying, That she had contemned and slighted the power and goodness of the Blessed Spirits (or Angels) and so she died (*Miscellanies* 1721, 107-108).

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