

Photography as the Bible's new illumination

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Abstract

Bibles with photographic images included in their production are explored in this essay for theologies of realism. A departure from the centuries-old tradition of manuscripts illuminated with decorative and graphic details, the photograph's modern language of factual, verifiable images offers a particularly rich addition to the Bible's versatility in print. From a study of the first Bible published with photographic illustrations by Francis Frith in 1861 to the art-fashion collaboration produced by *Visionaire* as 'Bible' in 1999, Beaumont asks what theological presuppositions and conceptions are revealed through this particular image-text relationship. Situating her discussion within the cultural and sociological contexts of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, she further argues that the physical production and circulation of such objects reveals visual theology as material, discursive, and mediated. Including a consideration of her own photographically produced Bible with the cyanotype process (*Scriptorium*, 2018), Beaumont explores the particular concepts of witnessing and imagination, past and present, as two sides of a photo-biblical lens.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, illustrated Bibles aspired to be both artistic and literary artefacts. *The Macklin Bible*, printed in England by Thomas Macklin in six volumes, between 1789 and 1800, included seventy-two copperplate engravings representing some of the best painters of the English school. The more popular *Pictorial Bible* followed between 1836–1838, incorporating wood engravings from paintings by Nicolas Poussin and others, and in a similar vein, *Harper's Illuminated and New Pictorial Bible* was published in New York between 1843 and 1846. By the 1860s, when *La Grande Bible de Tours* was illustrated with engravings made from wood cuts by Gustave Doré, and Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld produced *Die Bibel in Bildern*, there was a lively international market for Bibles with artful images. Such illustrated Bibles proliferated, produced with increasingly diverse printing methods and incorporating the aesthetic values and iconography of European biblical painting.

Into this arena early experiments in photography offered direct competition to the array of reprographic printing processes.¹ In the late eighteenth century, what was a long-established trade in line engravings or etchings rapidly expanded with the enthusiastic take-up of the mezzotint and aquatint, followed by the invention of lithography. These newer processes offered a tonal method of reproduction, more closely approximating to the continuous field of a painting. They in turn also competed with stereotyping and electrotyping, in which metal casts of engravings or type (and in combination) provided an extremely durable surface for much longer print runs. When the first photographic prints, heliographs, were made by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in the 1820s, he was concerned primarily with creating a photo-mechanical process for the reproduction of engravings: the impression which the original print (having been

¹ Anthony J. Hamber "A Higher Branch of the Art": *Photographing the Fine Arts in England, 1839–1880* (London: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1996), see Chapter 1 for a useful introduction to the processes, pp.35–102.

made translucent) left on the surface of the sensitised pewter plate was etched with acid and then inked up for copies to make from it.

Key to the ensuing developments and conceptualisation of early photographic processes was this capacity to faithfully copy two-dimensional form: the 'facsimile' was endorsed by William Henry Fox Talbot in his *Pencil of Nature*, published serially between 1844 and 1846. Inventor of the negative-positive paper process in 1839, Talbot presented his images primarily in terms of their fidelity to nature, and though hesitant about their status as an art, he gave significant attention to photography as a copying mechanism for art.² In his early experiments, this included the copying of the Bible and of old master prints of biblical subject matter.³ On the continent, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's announcement of his metal-plate process for photography, also in 1839, was ultimately to disappoint Niépce's hopes for its reproducibility since the daguerreotype made a unique object of the plate itself. But here too, the discourse surrounding the nature of the photographic image concerned itself with representation as part of art's great mimetic and Romantic traditions. As such, daguerreotypes with biblical subjects were inventively produced which traded in their divine and morally edifying purpose across well-known pictorial genres: for example, staged portraits with figures representing consecutive phrases of the Lord's Prayer by John Jabez Edwin Mayall, and a still life composition with a Raphael print of Christ by John William Draper.⁴

In an expanding publishing world with an appetite for art reproductions and the means to produce them, the stage was apparently set for the first photographic illustration within a Bible. But in fact, when this did occur in 1861, the images occupied a very different role, forming a series of landscape views taken to identify and portray the real places mentioned in the Bible. Produced by the Quaker, Francis Frith, the tipped in albumen prints illustrated the text with exclusively topographic views of Egypt and Palestine. Frith's was an early example of photography's theological realism, in which the currents of science and empirical enquiry evidenced both the lingering Deism behind observations of the natural world and Higher Criticism's approach to biblical fact and the origins of the text. In this essay, I begin by exploring Frith's Bible and its photographs within these contexts for the medium's realism. Photographic biblical illustration starts here, and in many ways continues into the twenty-first century with publications marshalling similar depictions of the present-day Holy Land. I reflect on the sway which such realism holds over these publications, and ask what kind of visual theology is being served by this approach to photographic illustration.

² While introducing his work as the 'art of Photogenic Drawing' and employing the capitalised 'Art' to refer to it thereafter, it is telling that Talbot chose the terminology of drawing and impression, rather than painting, hesitantly proclaiming that 'though we may not be able to conjecture with any certainty what rank they may hereafter attain to as pictorial productions, they will surely find their own sphere of utility, both for completeness of detail and correctness of perspective'. (W. H. F. Talbot, from the 'Introductory Remarks' in *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), np.)

³ The online *catalogue raisonné* of Talbot's extant prints includes several copies of a printed page in Hebrew, from Psalm 150, probably made in 1840–1842 (see <https://talbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>, accessed February 2021). Plate XXIII in *The Pencil of Nature* is a reproduction of a sketch by Pier Francesco Mola, titled 'Hagar in the Desert'. There is no indication that Talbot conceived of them together for biblical illustration, probably on account of the individuated status of 'print' that they assumed. Perhaps, too, his learned appreciation of Scripture as word-based text contributed to this: Talbot had published an etymological study of Genesis in the same year that he announced his photographic process, *The Antiquity of the Book of Genesis* (London: Longman, Orme, Green, Brown, and Longman, 1839).

⁴ Mayall's daguerreotype series, made in 1844, is now lost, but a catalogue produced by Mayall describes them in detail (J. E. Mayall, 'Catalogue of Daguerreotype Panoramas, Falls of Niagara, Shakespeare's Birth-Place, Tomb, Relics, Photographic Pictures, Portraits of Eminent Persons etc, in the Daguerreotype Institution, 433, West Strand', London, 1848, pp.6–8. This brochure is in the collection of the National Science and Media Museum, Bradford); John William Draper's, *Composition* (c.1840–1845) is in the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

I then go on to consider how the artistic impetus returns in Bibles whose photographs refer more to fine art traditions, principally *Visionaire's* boardbook publication of 1999. With the inclusion of images by photographers such as Andreas Gursky, Andres Serrano, and Wolfgang Tillmans, the status of the Bible as art object revives something of the intention to illustrate it through careful curation. Like the Macklin Bible, it turns attention to the desirability of, and confluence between, artists of repute and their interpretations of texts rich with metaphor and symbolic meaning. Photography here assumes a different hat, both reemploying an older pictorial tradition and reverentiality (this time to aesthetics as much as to the status of biblical subjects) and revelling in a contemporary idiom of fashion, commerce, and the extravagant.

These threads of photography as fact or art have typically polarised the interpretative field of photography criticism and theory. Here I examine their biblical contexts in order to claim for visual theology its imperative in the partial constitution of both of these threads. To mitigate against their continuing dualism, I close with a consideration of my own photographic work *Scriptorium* (2018), a Bible in which a facsimile of the text is illuminated with its own symbolic trace of nature's hand through the cyanotype process. I offer a reflection of its making and conceptualisation through the perspective of practice (or process). In this way, I present it as a pericope for photography's ultimate hybridity and for its capacity to dialogue with, through, and across various theological concerns.

Victorian contexts and Francis Frith's *Holy Bible*, 1861



Figure 1: *The Holy Bible*, containing the Old and New Testaments, illustrated with photographs by Francis Frith; on the left, the 1861 edition (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode), on the right, Volume 1 of the 1862–1863 'Queen's Bible' edition (Glasgow: William Mackenzie)

Frith's first photographically illuminated Bible was published in 1861, and included twenty tipped in albumen prints as full-page insertions alongside the King James Version of the text (**Figure 1**). A second 'Queen's Bible', published in two volumes between 1862 and 1863, received a larger, more expensive, and more lavish format: elaborately bound and printed in an edition of 170, this Bible with its fifty-seven prints was dedicated to Queen Victoria. The publications followed Frith's three extended journeys to Egypt and the Near East between 1856 and 1860, which were undertaken for the primary purpose of photographing the

landscape using the wet collodion process invented in 1851.⁵ He was to become the leading name for the commercialisation of topographical prints in England, and from these trips alone he published at least eight titled works with text and image in some combination (including the Bibles), with nearly five hundred images between them.⁶

Like those of other British photographers in Palestine, such as Reverend George Bridges and Frank Mason Good, the photographs reflect an interest in topography which would connect the experience of looking with reading the biblical text, and even with direct religious experience. Sometimes the choice of Frith's subjects appeal to the exotic monumentality of ancient sites (particularly in Egypt, **Figure 2**) – as first captured by the early explorations of French photographers such as Maxime du Camp and Auguste Salzmann – but his attention to these and less dramatic landscapes was also closely aligned with the interest in biblical facts (**Figure 3**). As his publisher was at pains to highlight with the first publication of these images:

'The Holy Land' is, perhaps, the theme of all others best calculated for treatment by this art: it is especially requisite that here *facts* should be strictly adhered to, - any object found in this deeply interesting locality would lose by being subjected to fancy; and we should deny to the artist even an atom of his ordinary privilege – introductions for effect. This series will consequently be of surpassing value; for we shall *know* that we see things exactly as they are.⁷



Figure 2: Frith, 'The Court of Shishak Shalmanazar. Thebes.' Albumen print in *The Holy Bible*, 1861; inserted at 2 Kings 17

⁵ By the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer. The process involves the sensitising of a glass plate with a solution applied in the dark, which is then exposed and developed while still wet. Frith describes the considerable difficulties of handling the solutions in stiflingly hot and sandy conditions while abroad (in the 'Introduction' to *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described by Francis Frith* (London: James S. Virtue, 1858), np.).

⁶ The first was *Egypt and Palestine* (ibid.), being produced in monthly instalments over two years. Subscribers were promised seventy-five views, with accompanying commentary by Frith, which could be bound at the end of the period. Others followed with larger prints such as *Egypt, Sinai, and Jerusalem* (London & Glasgow: William Mackenzie, 1860), or with accompanying text written by other writers bringing their archaeological or historical expertise to the observations (such as Sophia Poole and Reginald Stuart Poole in *Cairo, Sinai, Jerusalem, and the Pyramids of Egypt* (London, James S. Virtue, 1860)).

⁷ James Virtue, 'Minor Topics of the Month,' *Art Journal* 20 (1 Jan 1858), p.30; emphasis original. James Virtue was both publisher of *Art Journal*, and of *Egypt and Palestine Photographed and Described by Francis Frith* (1858).



Figure 3: Francis Frith, 'Mount Serbal, The Sinai of the Early Christian Church.' Albumen print in *The Holy Bible*, 1861; inserted at Exodus 16

Devoid of such 'fancy' or 'effect', Frith's photographs asserted a new kind of visual authority which had been called for both in the realm of illustrated books and in interpretation of the Bible. An article about illustrated books in the popular *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* had, in 1844, bemoaned the inappropriate preference of the imaginary over the real, calling the Macklin Bible 'one mass of pictorial absurdity, unmingled with any redeeming quality of truth or probability'.⁸ Where Claude Lorrain is included in *The Pictorial Bible*, whose realism had brought to landscape painting its revitalised naturalism, the editors decry inaccuracy and the inability to 'throw light on the text'.⁹ Attitudes to the Bible had changed too, and the infallible inspiration of divine writ had given way to historically verified report, or document, of divine action. This sea change, driven by European currents of biblical scholarship attentive to the origins and compilation of Scripture (owing, among others, to Johann Gottfried Eichhorn and David Friedrich Strauss in Germany), was felt in England most especially in 1860, when *Essays and Reviews* was published in Oxford. To a wide Church of England readership, the seven essays defended a modern and reasonable approach to interpretation, in which, as Benjamin Jowett put it in his later extended essay:

The office of the interpreter is not to add another [interpretation], but to recover the original one: the meaning, that is, of the words as they struck on the ears or flashed before the eyes of those who first heard and read them. ... His object is to read Scripture like any other book, with a real interest and not merely a conventional one. He wants to be able to open his eyes and see or imagine things as they truly are.¹⁰

⁸ 'Illustrated Books', *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, Vol.3 (Sept 1844), p.105. A brief notice in December's issue alerts the reader to Talbot's publication that year, but as yet the potential for photography as illustration does not excite the editors.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.105.

¹⁰ Benjamin Jowett, *The Interpretation of Scripture and Other Essays* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1907), p.6,7. Can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/interpretationof00jowerich>, accessed February 2021. Jowett's original essay was 'On the Interpretation of Scripture' (1860).

In these socio-religious conditions, with an expanding middle-class already aware of current ecclesial debates and increasingly engaged with the progress of travel and technology, Frith's images found fertile soil. The language of unmediated and direct encounter with the reality of the world, buoyed by rational and empirical approaches from the natural sciences, was photography's truth, a truth whose realism was very much inscribed within Frith's Christian worldview. Douglas R. Nickel settles on the term 'Christian positivist' to describe Frith, drawing primarily on his unfinished autobiography *A True Story of My Life: A Biographical, Metaphysical, and Religious History by Francis Frith* (1884, unpublished), and his later writing such as *The Quaker Ideal* (London: Edward Hicks Jr., 1894).¹¹ An essentially moderate churchman, Frith saw no reason why practical and reasonable accounting for faith could not accommodate the range of Christian experience and knowledge, from life-changing conversion to the questioning of biblical infallibility. As such, Nickel argues, Frith saw fit to present photographs of the Holy Land not simply in terms which recognised their clear scientific accounting for the reality of biblical facts, but also validated the process of such interpretation within the pragmatism of faithful looking and the reimagining of history.

More, then, than dry accounting for the Bible as 'catalogue', more than assuming the text's infallible record against a visual corroboration of the facts, Frith invokes a nuanced theology of looking whose imaginative license included the experiential, even revelatory, aspects of engaged Christian thought. Unlike the Free Church of Scotland minister Reverend Alexander Keith, for whom daguerreotypes were the literal proof of biblical prophecies fulfilled,¹² photographs for Frith were, less dogmatically, prompts for 'thrilling recollection'.¹³ In the Bibles, the evidence for this is downplayed compared to the personal and lively commentary Frith provides in his other publications with these images. However, we may observe that scenes are often presented with foreground figures inviting our correlative identification on the edge of the view, and that the general sense of the landscapes' 'pastness' compounds this. In **Figure 4**, which depicts an area outside Jerusalem, the tents in the foreground are unusually prominent, and in being so they perhaps reach the limit of Frith's intention to 'realise the past'. Speaking of his experience photographing in and around the city, Frith remarked that 'human life, and the changing scenes, and a hundred distractions prevent our realising the past'.¹⁴ Indeed, in the later 'Queen's Bible' the photograph is taken from further to the left, with no tents or people in view, while other images of Jerusalem favour dramatic plunging lines of sight with hillside or wall projections. To Frith, humanity ought to be invited, but usually remained unobtrusive, as in Figure 2, the better to facilitate an immediate connection with holy ground or history.

¹¹ Douglas R. Nickel, *Francis Frith in Egypt and Palestine: A Victorian Photographer Abroad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp.111–136.

¹² Keith's publications, illustrated with engravings from daguerreotypes taken by his son, were extremely popular with *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion Derived from the Literal Fulfilment of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: W. Whyte 1848) running into over fifty editions in the nineteenth century. His argument was essentially an apologetic for the fulfilment of prophecies: biblical prophets predicted the destruction of cities, and this was evidenced by photography's ability to show said destruction of cities. See Sheona Beaumont, 'Photographic and Prophetic Truth: Daguerreotypes, the Holy Land, and the Bible According to Reverend Alexander Keith', *History of Photography* 42:4 (Nov 2018), pp.338–355.

¹³ Francis Frith, text accompanying 'The Pool of Hezekiah, Church of Holy Sepulchre &c., from the Tower of Hippicus, Jerusalem,' in *Egypt and Palestine* (1858) – the first plate in the series representing a site in the Holy Land.

¹⁴ Francis Frith, text accompanying 'The Summit of Gebel Moosa, Sinai,' in *Sinai and Palestine*.



Figure 4: Francis Frith, 'Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives.' Albumen print in *The Holy Bible*, 1861; inserted at Luke 22

It is this sense of sought-for imaginative engagement, which is partly romanticised projection and partly recall of textual reference, that expands biblical photographic illustration beyond the merely topographic. More generally, photography understood as topographic assumes, in any context, ideological, sociological, and often theological explanations of its ostensible reality. In this case, Frith invests the 'simple truthfulness' of the medium with homage to artful composition of nature purveyed, with beneficial moral influence on its Western literary public, and with its own 'divine quality, at the very foundation of everything that is lovely in earth and heaven'.¹⁵ Writing thus in defence of 'The Art of Photography' (1859), Frith gives to our understanding of his biblical images their status as 'faithful pictures'. This is markedly different from photographic biblical reference understood either as strict semantic equivalent between image and word or as demonstrable proof for a particular doctrine or belief: chapter-and-verse identification in Frith's images, though explicit in the captions in the Queen's Bible, seems less important than wider imaginative associations built between Old and New Testament,¹⁶ between Egypt and Palestine, and between viewer and location.

Present day contexts and Visionaire's *Bible*, 1999

Unsurprisingly, the imaginative association brought to photographs of the Holy Land has become a trope with considerable affective and lucrative power in the twenty-first century. In many ways Frith's application of his photography anticipated the appeal of travel itself, though certainly originally based on a home audience spending within the limits of a product or experience available to them. This indeed was the popular appeal of his stereoviews and illuminated presentations: the experience offered surrogate travel in the guise of entertainment as much as in ameliorative intent. Today, of course, travel is widely available, and the

¹⁵ Francis Frith, 'The Art of Photography', *Art Journal* 5 (1859), pp.71–72.

¹⁶ Of the nineteen duplicated prints in the 1862–1883 Bible, only three appear in the same place. Seemingly, the referentiality of the photograph is broad enough at times to accommodate either Old Testament or New Testament reference, with title captions providing the requisite label.

photographic reality of biblical places part of a much-developed tourist industry. In this broad arena of photographically illustrated guides, the topographic tends to receive a more idealised treatment, tapping into the commercialised and aestheticised desirability of going to Israel itself.¹⁷

However, in publications of the Bible itself, we note that the contemporary home of Frith-like landscape photography tends to attach to extended cultural contexts of information about the text. Where such photography appears, its status as auxiliary information accompanies what are often concatenations of the biblical text as grand narrative. In **Figure 5**, a typical spread from the Dorling Kindersley *Illustrated Bible* shows text and image in composite visual array, with text-as-retelling colluding with text-as-explanation, and a variety of image types jostling for attention. In contrast to Frith's singular photograph, Jerusalem's skyline here is low on the horizon at the bottom edge of the page, with a dense field of visual and verbal information taking the place of the sky. As *The Illustrated Bible Retold and Explained* this text is not, properly speaking, a Bible, but purports to open that otherwise 'closed book' by 'bringing to life its extraordinary stories, characters, and teachings for the widest possible readership'. Deferring in his editorial introduction the question as to what kind of textual retelling this entailed, Father Michael Collins does detail the pictorial quest undertaken:

We sought out the most beautiful and informative illustrations, from maps to old masters, historical artefacts to photographs of the Bible lands today. This is, we hope, a book for everyone and for all time.¹⁸



Figure 5: Spread from *The Illustrated Bible Retold and Explained* (Dorling Kindersley, 2012), pp.362–363

¹⁷ As with expansive, full-colour scene-setting found in coffee-table 'keepsake' publications such as *Life's Places of the Bible: A Photographic Pilgrimage* (Tampa, Florida: Time Inc., 2007); Karen Lehrman Bloch, *Passage to Israel* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016); and a host of *National Geographic* publications by Jean-Pierre Isbouts. The idea, of course, of physically visiting places where significant events in history have occurred holds a deeply human appeal, and it is arguably strengthened by the biblical emphasis on witness as coincident with inhabiting or developing the position of faith.

¹⁸ Father Michael Collins, ed., *The Illustrated Bible Retold and Explained: From the Creation to the Resurrection* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2012), in the foreword.

With this view, the Dorling Kindersley Bible has become mediated to a significantly greater degree than Frith's: visibly inscribed with and through exponentially developed media influence and authority (in publishing in this case, but also more widely to mean the twenty-first century communicative habitus of news, entertainment, and social network media). The traditional authority of the Word is visibly diffuse, and the figurative locale which an exclusive use of landscape photography might secure is instead a generalised global locale of cultural representations and information. The shift is from the Bible being internally, discretely, propositionally about religion and its literal places or people, to being externally, transactionally about the religious:

A broader field of representations and practices disseminating across culture and society with no particular organisational foundation or demarcated set of followers.¹⁹

So Stig Hjarvard, and others such as David Morgan and Birgit Meyers, have called attention to the contested and transformative spaces of the media with regard to contemporary shaping of religion and religious discourse.

In the production of illustrated Bibles, what this recent articulation of mediation highlights is that the appeal of this particular religious text in the twenty-first century is its collective ownership, heritage, and spread. Photography reverts to a facsimile role, trading once again in the reproduction of, amongst other things, works of fine art, historical documents, and archaeological artefacts. The imaginative role of the witness is gone, and the intelligent purveyor of global trans-historical culture steps up. Such a viewpoint co-opts superlative visual availability within a loosening of theological realism, at least in the sense of a Victorian publisher's/theologian's mandate to reveal things 'exactly as they are'. What has emerged instead is a theological realism based on visual culture consumption and the aesthetic/moral values of being so widely informed and diffusely literate in regard to a sacred text.

Particularly focussing this point is the desire for photography to express the traditional values of fine art and beauty. Where it copies other artworks as in the Dorling Kindersley Bible or, for example, *The Bible Portrayed in 200 Masterpieces of Painting* (Connecticut: Konecky & Konecky, 2005), the values are invoked as the medium assumes again the ideological transparency of objectivity, devoid of 'fancy' or 'effect' as Frith might say – the better to trade in fine art's superlative aesthetic achievement. More interesting is the example in *Visionaire's* 'Bible' (1999) of a publication in which photography's status itself is assured of its autonomous aesthetic status. Featuring forty spreads of sixteen Old Testament and twenty-four New Testament scenes, this gold-edged board book includes Andreas Gursky's 'The Exodus', Wolfgang Tillmans' 'The Crucifixion', Nan Goldin's 'Mary Magdalene', and Andres Serrano's 'Salome and John the Baptist' to name just four (**Figure 6**).²⁰ Promoted as a luxurious limited edition volume of this art-fashion journal publication, with its specially designed bubble-casing (by the designer Philippe Starck, **Figure 7**), other photographers include Mario Testino, Karl Lagerfeld, David LaChapelle and Richard Burbridge.

¹⁹ Stig Hjarvard, 'Mediatization and the Changing Authority of Religion', *Media, Culture & Society* 38:1 (2016), p.11.

²⁰ Stephan Gan, Cecilia Dean, and James Kaliardos, eds., 'Bible', *Visionaire* 28 (1999). The complete contents can be found online at <https://www.vfiles.com/vfiles/736>, accessed February 2021. The wider journal publications, including themed editions on 'Ritual' (*Visionaire* 66), and 'Religion' (*Visionaire* 60) can be explored at <https://visionaireworld.com/collections/all>, accessed February 2021.



Figure 6: Andres Serrano, 'Salome and John the Baptist', in *Visionaire's* 'Bible', 1999



Figure 7: Philippe Starck, exterior casing and front cover of *Visionaire's* 'Bible', 1999
used with permission of Visionaireworld.com

The scenes represented take the Bible's most iconic and well-known narratives or characters, and give them a modelled, staged, treatment. Most of them include people, often prominently posed, with viewer attention drawn to either face or dress/undress or both, as with Gregory Crewdson's 'The Annunciation', John Akehurst's 'Samson and Delilah', and Steven Meisel's 'Apocalypse' series.²¹ The only photographer with more than one image, Meisel's six scenes from Revelation complete the story, with figures whose pallor and dress are simultaneously futuristic and archaic. **Figure 8** is the closest we get to landscape photography, for which a stark backdrop suffices not so much to locate a real place, but to signify 'realism' as a set for the angelic actors. Indeed, photography's pointing referentiality frequently claims this trope of signification, appealing to a known pictorial language of symbolism and iconography over and above its mode as window on the world. Very much in keeping with such painterly Western traditions of biblical representation, we find, unsurprisingly, Catherine Chalmers' photograph showing a snake coiled round an apple, and François Berthoud's illustrative crown of thorns, among others.²²



Figure 8: Steven Meisel, 'The Apocalypse (Revelation 7:1)' in *Visionaire's* 'Bible' (1999)

As a whole, however, the publication goes beyond the realm of isolated biblical reference in photography, which we often also see commercially adapted to attach the mythic and iconic to

²¹ In *Visionaire's* commissioning process, some photographers make work specifically on invitation (such as Meisel), and some photographers respond by contributing with previously-made work, for example, Gursky's 'The Exodus' is from his famous series of Berlin raves taken earlier in the 1990s, and Sam Taylor-Wood's 'The Last Supper' was originally titled 'Wrecked' (1996), appearing in the Royal Academy's Brit Art *Sensation* exhibition in 1997. Such curation of high-profile names and their existing work reveals that the editors of 'Bible' were as concerned with the representation of established art/fashion-world figures as they were with the representation of biblical narrative – though the choice of forty images and the book's publication on the eve of the millennium, do also infer their awareness of resonant religious meanings.

²² Six of the forty images are in fact not photographs, consisting instead of digitally created design elements, or text, or paintings.

the product. Critics like John Berger and James Elkins in visual culture, and some more recently in biblical reception studies, such as Yvonne Sherwood and Katie B. Edwards, are keyed into the semiotics of photography here. *Visionaire*, however, practices what Michael Fried in his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* has called the 'facingness', or 'worldhood', of the photographic image.²³ With biblical references dominated by people, this becomes the facingness, or personified worldhood, of the Bible. It becomes not so much a detached subject for representation (with all the cul-de-sacs of formalism or more structural semiotics in looking at a picture's content), as firstly an exchange of human referentiality, and secondly a knowing layering of cultural habitus. As we saw with Frith, figures in the frame invoke this present-tense situating of viewer and world that wrests an 'us' into the equation – this time far more directly and frontally. There is this 'us' into which *Visionaire's* mode of meaning plays, not the 'them' or 'there' of biblical history. At the same time, the photographs epitomise a prevalent tendency to create from and with a composite, cut-and-paste approach to the Bible. They suggest engagement with it as hybrid, bite-sized, and incomplete. The editors are seen to dissociate from the Bible as Shakespeare, and reassociate with the Bible as newspaper, to paraphrase David Clines.²⁴

The biblical text itself, we note, has a much-reduced appearance of selected verse, whose quotation serves as a caption for what is more of a photobook or photo-essay than a Bible. The images have their own superior autonomy. Scripture is dramatically externalised from the parameters of reading, into those of looking and, once again, imaginative association. This time, a faith-directed looking appears absent from what are associations built through visual culture's languages of curation and dramatisation – certainly there is no overtly declared religious intention. Yet we are not far, as it happens, from the kind of expansive biblical interpretation which found expression in the fourfold sense of Scripture from as early as the fourth century. This indeed celebrated the allusivity of visual reference and visual realism in words, claiming the priority of the reader's self-identification in interpretation from single verses or passages. *Visionaire's* enterprise in curating specific biblical scenes imposes a kind of corporate/consumer orientation on this process of imaginative association: but instead of a reader's self-identification in interpretation, we have a viewer whose self-identification may be fulfilled in the ownership of this book and its kudos traversing celebrity, art, financial privilege, and, perhaps only marginally, spirituality.

Praxis and the author's *Scriptorium*, 2018

Visionaire's 'Bible' might give cause for concern in traditional equations of theology with (reading) the Word, but I do want to assert its possibility for new equations through the mediatised Word, and its photographic representation in particular. Instead of finding twenty-first century knowledge of the Bible as residual, throw-away, and inaccurate, what if such knowledge were seen as being continually renewed, disseminating, materially embodied, and refigured as event? The online availability of multiple English, international, and original

²³ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p.50, 111. Fried is particularly addressing large-format tableau photography, including that of Andreas Gursky. An interesting treatment of the 'theo-aesthetic language' of Fried is found in Randall K. Van Schepen's article, 'From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form', in Elkins & Morgan, eds., *Re-Enchantment* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.47–68.

²⁴ David J. A. Clines, *The Bible and the Modern World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), p.66. See also my reading of artist David Mach's photographic collages in this vein: Sheona Beaumont, 'The Bible as Photo-Collage and Tableau: David Mach's Precious Light Series (2011)', *Bible in the Arts*, Issue 3, 2019, online at <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/die-bibel-in-der-kunst/>, accessed February 2021.

language Bibles heralds a new era for Bible use, which, in some ways, mirrors the precipitous change of reproduction brought about by photography in the nineteenth century.²⁵ The simultaneous preservation of original material and its duplicated digital proliferation – often by photographic means, such as the Codex Sinaiticus and the Dead Sea Scrolls online²⁶ – is, doubtless, an emerging threshold for theology’s cultural horizon. I explore this idea in my work *Scriptorium* (2018), in which my photographic treatment of the digitally available, public domain, King James Version of the Bible brings the verbal forms themselves into the frame (**Figures 9 and 10**).



Figure 9: Sheona Beaumont, *Scriptorium*, 2018; cyanotype prints

²⁵ See <http://www.biblegateway.com>, accessed February 2021.

²⁶ See <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/> and <http://dss.collections.imj.org.il>, both accessed February 2021.

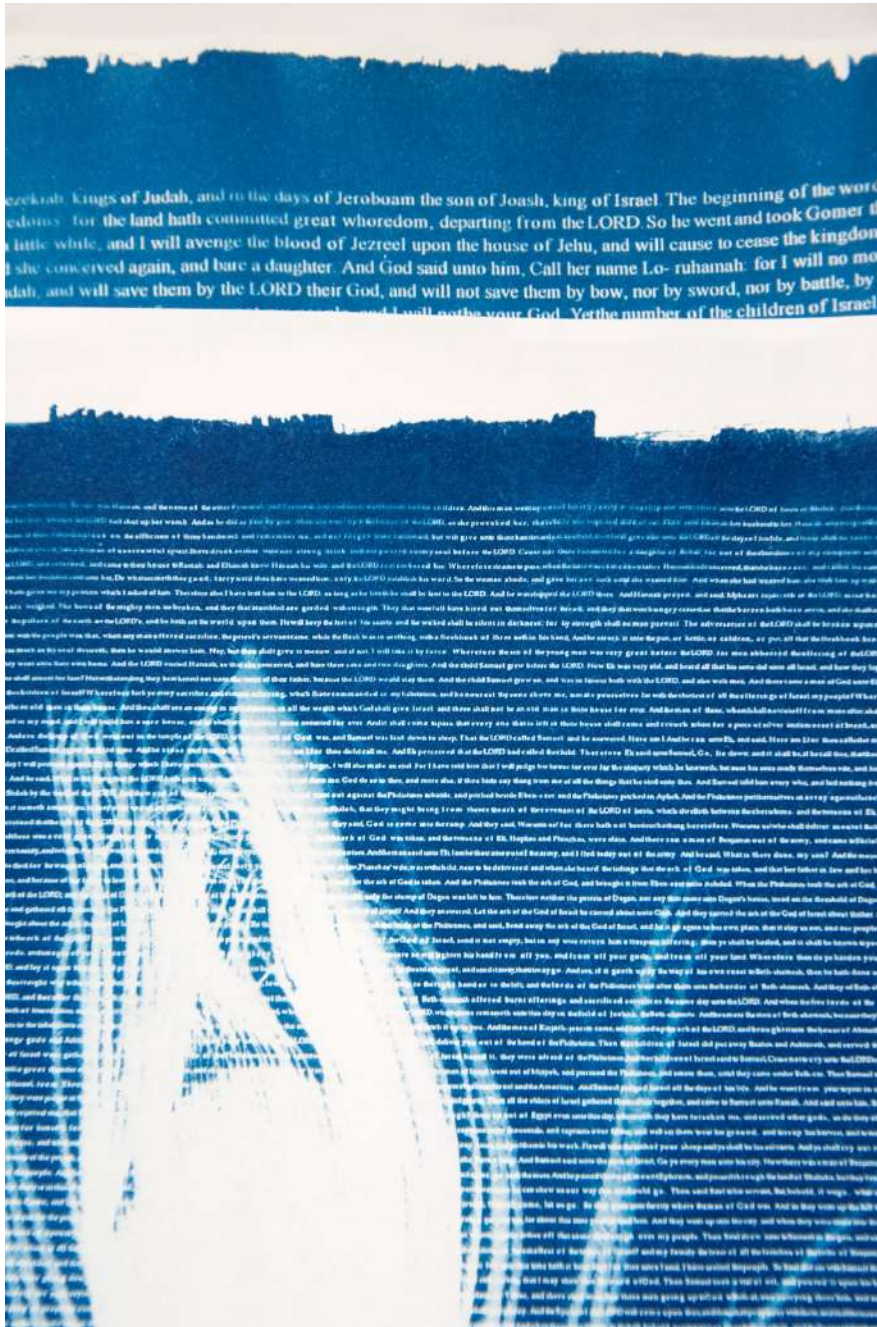


Figure 10: Sheona Beaumont, *Scriptorium*, 2018 (detail); featuring 1 Samuel and Hosea

Scriptorium consists of sixty-five pages of unbound biblical text, printed white on blue with the cyanotype process. Discovered in 1842 by Sir John Herschel, the cyanotype was another early photographic process concerned with facsimile reproduction: the images are made when, by a process of masking with the original print or object, iron compounds in the sensitised paper variously react to light, resulting in an inverted duotone image after developing. Each of *Scriptorium's* pages was created with two masks laid one on top of the other and exposed in the sunlight for a few minutes: these masks were an acetate sheet printed with the complete text of a biblical book, and a peacock feather. The cyanotype lends itself to close transcription through contact printing and clear tonal differentiation (whether with technical drawings – from which we get the term 'blueprint' – or with outlines and textures of natural forms, as in Anna Atkins' *Photographs of British Algae*, first appearing in 1843), and historically it mediates thus

between a document of literal tracing and a figuring or picturing much more evocative of realism in representation.

With the nomination 'scriptorium', the prints suggest that the processes and circumstances of copying or picturing the Bible are key to the theological discourses of its reading and interpretation. A scriptorium being the place where manuscripts were once copied by monks is representative of a place where the text is unbound, where the primal structure of 'Bible' as linear and fixed does not yet exist. Such a place conceptually frames the moment before the binding of its pages and, for public domain text, the moment when a computer's 'script' runs its programme for the display of content. Biblical books that notionally approximate to single documents (though this is, of course, far from the stable designation implied, as challenged by various documentary hypotheses in the Victorian era)²⁷ then become interchangeable, fluid elements (literally html 'elements') whose placing by the script could take any number of forms. Such a state of potentiality is figured anew each time *Scriptorium* is displayed. Each variation of order, overlay, facingness, three-dimensionality, or visibility of the books performs or enacts a loosening of their presumed fixity. Unframed, rolled, or folded, they remain inherently unstable.

The text itself is treated as a <body> element without verse or line breaks, with simple tagging for either right-aligned text (Old Testament) or left-aligned text (New Testament), and a footer section with abbreviated title. Within the decided format and limit of page size (folio), some text is severely reduced in size with longer books such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. The constraint has a blocking effect and emphasises the surface as a visual field, compounded too by the shaping whiteness of the feather outline. At the eye of the peacock feather in particular, the whiteness bleaches out the text, and the taxonomic shaping of the different outlines across the sixty-five pages invites their pictorial comparison. Their register is of something intuited, symbolically and aesthetically suggestable in the moment of the text's blanking.²⁸ They flicker, or flow, like the evidence of hand or spirit in the shaping of something made without a camera but with light's revelation and shadow's inversion. In computer technology, the blue screen has the negative connotation of a fatal system error, from which a resurrection has to emerge between black (being switched off) and white (with the text's instruction).

The Bible, as I picture it here, is an attempt to situate its texts in the photographic instant of illumination. As documents from the eyes and hands of witnesses, the texts were, in the past, codified by the processes of writing and their consequential understanding in verbal language materially, and linearly, inherited. But seen as untied documents of literal illumination, a view on something conceptually less static may be offered through visual and digital processes of materialisation. A visual theology of the open text, this invites the reader-viewer to look discursively and self-reflexively with, or alongside, photography, rather than through it. It avoids

²⁷ Slightly aside from the question of origin here, I take biblical document to mean the rendering of the designated author's intent to document something as writing (related to the biblical emphasis on witnessing rather than imagining). Most resistant to this document-as-writing is the book of Psalms, in which it seemed to me that the written form suppresses the different authorial intent of song or prayer. To that end, the Psalms are omitted from *Scriptorium*.

²⁸ Another example of biblical 'blinking' is found in Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *Holy Bible* (London: MACK, 2013), in which they superimpose a printing of the KJV text with photographs from the Archive of Modern Conflict. In the final pages of Revelation, a burnt-out film strip exposes whiteness across the text which I have discussed elsewhere as a de-centred and deconstructive theology of God beyond words, God as rupture. See Sheona Beaumont, 'Engaging with the Bible in Visual Culture: Hermeneutics Between Word and Image, with Broomberg and Chanarin's *Holy Bible*', *Religion and the Arts* 23:4 (2019), pp.411– 433; and Sheona Beaumont, *Scaping Sin: Leviticus 15–18*, *The Visual Commentary on Scripture*, 2019, online at www.thevcs.org, accessed February 2021.

the photograph as either the topographic or aesthetic affinity of image to word, nor does it stop at (or project into) one-to-one symbolism for the heritage of Christianity in the visual arts. Instead, theological realism is found in a spatio-temporal locus of display itself. To practice visual theology in this way is, I think, to court the same kind of readerly openness that the Bible does – a book whose real world connections open onto and into fluid and relational encounter, rather than monologic iteration or monolithic representation.

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<https://visionaireworld.com/collections/all>
<https://www.vfiles.com/vfiles/736>

Images

Figure 1: *The Holy Bible*, containing the Old and New Testaments, illustrated with photographs by Francis Frith. L: London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1861; book size 23 x 28cm; private collection. R: Volume 1 of the 'Queen's Bible' edition, Glasgow: William Mackenzie, 1862; book size 25 x 33cm; Bodleian Library. © Sheona Beaumont.

Figure 2: Francis Frith, 'The Court of Shishak Shalmanazar. Thebes.' Albumen print in *The Holy Bible*, 1861; inserted at 2 Kings 17. © Sheona Beaumont.

Figure 3: Francis Frith, 'Mount Serbal, The Sinai of the Early Christian Church.' Albumen print in *The Holy Bible*, 1861; inserted at Exodus 16. © Sheona Beaumont.

Figure 4: Francis Frith, 'Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives.' Albumen print in *The Holy Bible*, 1861; inserted at Luke 22. © Sheona Beaumont.

Figure 5: Spread from *The Illustrated Bible Retold and Explained* (Dorling Kindersley, 2012), pp.362-363. Hardback, book size 26 x 30cm. © Sheona Beaumont, reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

Figure 6: Andres Serrano, 'Salome and John the Baptist', in *Visionaire's 'Bible'*, 1999, np. Press printed board book, book size 21 x 30cm; Victoria and Albert Museum, National Art Library. © Sheona Beaumont, used with permission of Visionaireworld.com.

Figure 7: Philippe Starck, exterior casing and front cover of *Visionaire's 'Bible'*, 1999; moulded plastic and board book; Victoria and Albert Museum, National Art Library. © Sheona Beaumont, used with permission of Visionaireworld.com.

Figure 8: Steven Meisel, 'The Apocalypse (Revelation 7:1)' in *Visionaire's 'Bible'* (1999), np; Victoria and Albert Museum, National Art Library. © Sheona Beaumont, used with permission of Visionaireworld.com.

Figure 9: Sheona Beaumont, *Scriptorium*, 2018; cyanotype prints; seen here at St. Cyriac's Church, Lacock, 2019. © Sheona Beaumont.

Figure 10: Sheona Beaumont, *Scriptorium*, 2018 (detail); featuring 1 Samuel and Hosea. © Sheona Beaumont.