

John Wesley's Assessment of Nascent Biblical Criticism

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Foreword

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation for the invitation to present this paper at Oxford. It brings me special joy, given that the paper focuses on John Wesley and Robert Lowth, each of whom studied and taught at Oxford.

Introduction

There is no shortage of interpretive approaches to the Bible: textual criticism, historical criticism, source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, sociological criticism, literary approaches, canonical criticism, theological approaches, and ideological criticisms. What would John Wesley make of this great diversity of approaches to the Bible today?

Initially, such a question seems anachronistic. People frequently associate the nineteenth century—not the eighteenth—with biblical criticism becoming popular in universities. Furthermore, nothing like postmodern or ideological criticisms existed in John Wesley's day. It seems that the best individuals can do is make conjectures about what Wesley would agree with if he were exposed to contemporary scholarship.

At times, previous scholars have asked what type of biblical scholar John Wesley would have been.¹ However, their answers tend to focus on John Wesley's appreciation for original languages and textual criticism. There is evidence that has been overlooked.

In Wesley's time and place, some early antecedents of biblical scholars did exist, and Wesley offers his thoughts on them. Particularly important is Robert Lowth's work *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, first published in 1753.² This work serves as the forerunner of literary approaches to the Bible, especially its poetry. Literary approaches became popular in academic circles in the 1980s, but their roots go back to Lowth's work in Wesley's day.

This paper begins by showing Wesley's appreciation for this work by Robert Lowth. It then situates Robert Lowth in terms of his impact on biblical studies today. Next, it provides a summary of points in Lowth's work of particular interest to Wesley and his followers. Near the end, this paper answers possible questions. In my conclusion, I point to the normative value of John Wesley's assessment of nascent biblical criticism, concluding that the types of literary approaches to the Bible begun by Lowth should have a particularly important place among Wesley's followers today.

¹ Robin Scroggs, "John Wesley as a Biblical Scholar," *The Journal of the Bible and Religion* 28 (1960): 415-423; Mark L. Weeter, *John Wesley's View and Use of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 227-232.

² Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1787; New York: Garland, 1971).

Wesleyan Appreciation for Robert Lowth

Three key pieces of evidence show John Wesley's appreciation for Robert Lowth's *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. The first is his journal entry on March 1, 1766. Here it is:

I read Bishop Lowth's ingenious Lectures [*On Hebrew Poetry*], far more satisfactory than any thing on that subject which I ever saw before. He shows clearly, that the noblest poetry may subsist without being beholden either to rhyme or fixed measures.³

Wesley here offers high praise. He not only calls Lowth's work "ingenious," but he says it is the best writing on the subject that he has ever seen. Wesley then summarizes one of Lowth's driving theses, namely that admirable poetry need not adhere to strict ideas of rhyme.

We find additional evidence of Wesley's appreciation for Lowth when examining the collection of books in the Kingswood School Archives. John Wesley founded this school to provide education for people of all ages, including aspiring preachers.⁴ In 1768, a group of Methodists were expelled from Oxford University, and Wesley decided that Kingswood School would educate them. Wesley worked to ensure that the library holdings there were adequate, purchasing and even donating books from his own personal library.⁵ A good number of these books have remained at Kingswood over the course of time, and Randy Maddox has usefully documented what these books are.⁶ Strikingly, Lowth's lectures are found among the surviving Kingswood books.⁷ The copy at Kingswood lacks Wesley's signature, and we can only speculate whether Wesley or one of his followers secured the copy there, but in any event the book is present among other books used to train Methodists for ministry. There thus is confirmation that Wesley's praise of Lowth in his journal can be taken as serious and authentic.

The third piece of evidence is the most indirect. It does not come to us from Wesley's lifetime but shortly thereafter. In an issue of *The Methodist Magazine* dated 1818, readers find high praise of Lowth, as well as great criticism of one of Lowth's intellectual opponents, William Warburton. This periodical talks of Lowth as "the well-known author of 'The Praelections on Hebrew Poetry,'" praising Lowth for his "Christian temper," "Biblical learning," and "great ability."⁸ What we see, then, is that about 25 years after Wesley's death, his followers continued to hold Lowth in high esteem, connecting him particularly with the work on Hebrew poetry that Wesley himself called "ingenious."

Lowth's Impact on Biblical Scholarship Today

³ John Wesley, March 1, 1766, in *Journals and Diaries*, 7 vols., eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976-), 22:32.

⁴ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 105-106.

⁵ Randy L. Maddox, "Kingswood School Library Holdings (ca. 1775)," *Methodist History* 41.1 (2002): 342-370, here 342; idem, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Kingswood School Archives," *Methodist History* 41.2 (2003), 49-67, here 49.

⁶ See both works in the previous footnote.

⁷ Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Kingswood School Archives," 62.

⁸ No author, "Warburton's Letters," *Methodist Magazine* 41 (1818): 35-38, here 37-38; no author, "Bishop Lowth on the 119th Psalm," *Methodist Magazine* 41 (1818): 116-117. Given Wesley's and Wesleyan praise of Lowth, it is somewhat ironic that Lowth's lectures appeared in English in 1767 in an anti-Wesleyan periodical, *The Christian's Magazine* (Leslie Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies: The Great Code of Art* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982], 10).

At first glance, it might not seem particularly noteworthy that Wesley praised a writer of his day, that a copy of this writer's work exists in the Kingswood archives, and that even a generation after Wesley's death, his followers still spoke positively about this writer. However, Robert Lowth was not just any writer. He is widely credited as a biblical scholar of highest importance.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* calls Robert Lowth, "The most influential English-speaking OT scholar of his day."⁹ Historian Friedrich Meinecke writes, "Lowth's [work] was perhaps the most intellectually important product of the whole pre-Romantic movement in England."¹⁰ Meanwhile James Kugel writes about how Lowth's ideas "conquered the world."¹¹

What was it about Lowth that was so important? Some have emphasized that Lowth called interpreters to think about the biblical text in terms of its original context. As Stephen Prickett puts it, "To Lowth we owe the rediscovery of the Bible as a work of literature within the context of ancient Hebrew life. Hitherto, it had been understood almost exclusively in terms of its allegorical and typological meanings."¹²

While this focus on original context is important to Lowth (a point to which we shall return), Lowth's greatest contribution comes in fostering an appreciation for the literary artistry of the Hebrew Bible, especially its poetry. John Rogerson is one of the best historians of biblical scholarship, and here are some of the things he writes about Lowth:

Anyone who reads the Old Testament in a standard modern translation will be familiar with the fact that the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Lamentations, parts of Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, some of the material in the prophetic books and various other passages, such as Deuteronomy 32, are set out in poetic form. If this layout is compared with a traditional edition of the King James (Authorized) Version, a difference will be immediately apparent. In the traditional editions, the books are printed out using a left-hand justified margin for each verse, as opposed to the indentations of lines found in modern translations. One man is arguably responsible for this typographical revolution, Robert Lowth.¹³

Walter L. Reed, meanwhile, talks of Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* as "The prototype or precursor of all modern poetics of the Bible."¹⁴ In his *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, Luis Alonso Schökel makes a similar point:

⁹ R. R. Marrs, "Lowth, Robert (1710-87)," in John H. Hayes, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 2:89-90, here 89.

¹⁰ Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972), 206. Some have characterized Lowth as a humanist or secularist. However, Robert P. Gordon, "The Legacy of Lowth: Robert Lowth and the Book of Isaiah in Particular," eds. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg, *Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Texts: Essays in Memory of Michael P. Weitzman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 57-76, here 59, rightly points out that this view is mistaken.

¹¹ James L. Kugel, "Poets and Prophets: An Overview," *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1-25, here 24.

¹² Stephen Prickett, "Poetry and Prophecy," in *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 105-123, here 105.

¹³ J. W. Rogerson, "Lowth, Robert (1710-1787)," in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 679-682, here 679.

¹⁴ Walter L. Reed, "A Poetics of the Bible: Problems and Possibilities," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1 (1987): 154-166, here 156, see also 154, where he writes, "The idea of the Bible as literature received its

It is the Anglican bishop Robert Lowth . . . who inaugurates the systematic study of biblical poetry. Even though he wrote in Latin and used traditional categories, he showed great sensitivity in perceiving the poetic value of the Bible, pointed out and systematized certain poetic techniques such as parallelism, revealed the similarities and differences in respect of classical authors and analyzed individual poems.¹⁵

What was it about Lowth's approach to the Old Testament's poetry that proved so attractive? Among other things, he persuaded readers that one of Hebrew poetry's defining features is parallelism. To again quote John Rogerson: "[A]lthough he was not the first scholar to do so, Lowth nonetheless outlined a theory of parallelism in Hebrew poetry that, with some modifications, came to be universally accepted."¹⁶

Lowth appears on the opening page of Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, which goes on to say, "The discovery by Bishop Lowth in the mid-eighteenth century of the key poetic device of semantic parallelism was an important step toward seeing the original structures of the poems."¹⁷ James Kugel makes similar comments.¹⁸ So does R. S. Cripps, who writes, "Parallelism. This, the genius of ancient Hebrew poetry, will ever be associated with the name of Lowth."¹⁹

Although Robert Lowth was the bishop of London and the son of a highly respected clergyman, his influence was by no means confined to church circles. He greatly impacted academic scholarship. In fact, it was while he was a professor of poetry at Oxford that he first gave the lectures that became *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*.

John Jarick describes this work alongside Jean Astruc's *Conjectures on Genesis*, both of which were first published in 1753. Jarick writes, "Both of these works have had considerable repercussions in biblical study down to the present day. Indeed they may be said to have inaugurated modern critical approaches to the poetry and prose respectively of the Old

distinctive modern formulation in the middle of the eighteenth century in Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*."

¹⁵ Luis Alonso Schökel, *Manual of Hebrew Poetics, SubBi* 11 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000) 2-3.

¹⁶ Rogerson, "Lowth," 680. Marrs, "Lowth," 89 mentions C. Schoettgen's essay "De exergasia sacra" (in *Horae hebraicae et talmudicae in universum Novum Testamentum* [2 vols., 1733]) as a forerunner of Lowth's work. See also James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 210, 266-267, 272-273; Patricia K. Tull, "What's New in Lowth?: Synchronic Reading in the Eighteenth and Twenty-first Centuries," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 136, no. 39 (Jan 2000): 183-217, here 190.

¹⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), 3, 204. Alter argues that contemporary scholarship has failed to refine Lowth's categories.

¹⁸ Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 12, writes:

Robert Lowth is the [person] generally credited with the discovery of biblical parallelism. His study *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum*... (1753, revised somewhat 1763) coined the phrase *parallelismus membrorum* ("the parallelism of the clauses") and established (the general lines of) the modern critical approach to parallelism in the Bible.

¹⁹ R. S. Cripps, "Two British Interpreters of the Old Testament: Robert Lowth (1710-1787) and S. Lee (1783-1852)," *BJRL* 35 (1952-1953): 385-404, here 388.

Testament.”²⁰ Stephen Prickett similarly talks of Lowth’s *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* as “the book that was to transform biblical studies in England and Germany alike.”²¹ Rogerson describes Lowth’s influence on German scholarship, saying:

The general approach to the prophetic literature in later eighteenth century German scholarship was deeply affected by Robert Lowth’s 1753 *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, a British work whose influence upon the German Old Testament scholarship of its day has probably never been equalled. Lowth illustrated the many poetic and rhetorical devices in Hebrew poetry with special reference to Greek and Latin authors. As a result of this, the prophets came to be regarded as literary artists. Further, if they had used literary devices in order to convey their message, it was likely that they were primarily addressing their contemporaries. To suppose that their poetry was employed merely to describe events that would not happen for many hundreds of years seemed absurd. Consequently, appreciation of the poetry of the prophetic material went hand in hand with the attempt to see it in its historical context.²²

One need not look far to verify Rogerson’s conclusions. Lowth’s influence on German scholarship can be seen, for example, in J. G. Herder’s classic *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782-83).²³ Scholars have also emphasized Lowth’s influence on Bernhard Duhm and Hermann Gunkel.²⁴

Given the immense impact of Lowth’s work, Wesley’s praise of Lowth is highly significant—a key indication of the type of modern biblical criticism that Wesley himself would favor today.

A Summary of Lowth’s Work

While the preceding discussion provides many glimpses of Lowth’s work on Hebrew poetry, it is worth summarizing Lowth’s work with a particular focus on what John Wesley would have found so attractive.

First, as indicated from both Wesley’s journal entry and the previously mentioned secondary sources, Lowth offered a compelling explanation of how Hebrew poetry works. Hebrew literature rarely rhymes, and it lacks a universally accepted scheme of meter. How, then, can one even be sure that the Hebrew Bible engages in poetic expression?

²⁰ John Jarick, “Preface,” in *Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc*, ed. John Jarick, LHBOTS 457 (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), vii-viii, here vii.

²¹ Prickett, “Poetry and Prophecy,” 105.

²² John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984), 22.

²³ Herder begins his two-volume masterpiece by writing, “The beautiful and justly celebrated work of Bp. Lowth, de sacra poesi Hebraeorum, is universally known, and might seem to preclude the necessity of the present undertaking” (J. G. Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, trans. James Marsh, 2 vols. [Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833], 1:13, obtained through Google Books). Cf. Cripps, “Two British Interpreters,” 398.

²⁴ Gary Stansell, “The Poet’s Prophet: Bishop Robert Lowth’s Eighteenth-Century Commentary on Isaiah,” in Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, eds., “*As Those Who Are Taught*”: *The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL*, SBLSymS 27 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 223-242, here 239; Rogerson, “Lowth,” 681.

It is also noteworthy that Wilhelm Gesenius appreciated Lowth’s work, especially his commentary on Isaiah. See Tull, “New in Lowth,” 202; Cripps, “Two British Interpreters,” 397.

To answer this question, Lowth accurately characterized the style of Hebrew poetry, calling it “sententious” (a term that describes the writings of Hosea and Amos in Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*).²⁵ In Lowth and Wesley’s day, “sententious” meant pithy, pious, full of wisdom and meaning.²⁶ Lowth describes how Hebrew poetry frequently expresses a sentiment with great concision, only to then repeat, vary, and amplify that idea.²⁷ Lowth elaborates this description by showing how Hebrew poetry often engages in parallelism.²⁸ Lowth focuses on three types of parallelism. First, with synthetic parallelism, readers find a repetition of similar ideas.²⁹ Second, with antithetical parallelism, some type of contrast takes place.³⁰ Third, with constructive parallelism, readers find some sort of repetition of ideas that do not fall as easily into the first two categories.³¹

These ideas about Hebrew poetry are what Lowth is best remembered for. Given Wesley’s journal entry, it is clear that Lowth was persuasive to Wesley on precisely these points. However, there are several other ideas present in Lowth’s work that would have been attractive to Wesley as well.

A second such idea is that the Bible deserves high praise and admiration. Early on, Lowth argues that poetry is superior to philosophy and is a genre completely at home with religion.³² Thus, Lowth’s arguments about the Bible containing poetry are arguments about the Bible’s great value. As Lowth writes later:

[T]he Hebrews have obtained an unrivalled pre-eminence. As far as respects the dignity and importance of the subject, they not only surpass all other writers, but even exceed the confines of human genius and intellect. The greatness, the power, the justice, the immensity of God; the infinite wisdom of his works and of his dispensations, are the subjects in which the Hebrew Poetry is always conversant, and always excels.³³

On another occasion, Lowth remarks that he would “not hesitate to prefer the Hebrew writers to the Lyric poets of every other nation.”³⁴ Clearly such sentiments would have warmly resonated with the “man of one book” who writes, “At any price, give me the book of God!”³⁵

A third and related idea in Lowth’s writings that would have appealed to Wesley pertains to divine and human forces working together in the authorship of the Bible. Without depreciating scripture, Lowth argues that God and human beings cooperated to pen the Bible.

²⁵ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, 3 vols. (Bristol: William Pine, 1765; Salem, OH: Schmul, 1975), 3:2466 (introduction to Hosea), 2504 (introduction to Amos). As is commonly the case with this work, Wesley here relies on Matthew Poole’s *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*.

²⁶ Lowth, *Lectures*, 1:98; *OED Online*, s.v. “sententious.”

²⁷ Lowth, *Lectures*, 1:100. Some scholars have criticized Lowth for inadequate attention to how lines of poetry enhance or present variations on previous lines (see the discussion in Tull, “What’s New,” 208). However, Lowth’s remarks on *Lectures*, 1:100 show he was aware of this textual dynamic.

²⁸ Lowth, *Lectures*, 2:34-59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:35-45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:45-48.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:48-54.

³² *Ibid.*, 1:13, 36-37.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:348.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:200, 202-203, esp. 200.

³⁵ John Wesley, “Preface,” in *Sermons*, 4 vols., ed. Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 1:105 (§5).

Repeatedly, Lowth emphasizes that the Holy Spirit inspired biblical writers.³⁶ As he puts it in a concluding statement, “the prophetic office had a most strict connexion with poetic art. They had one common name, one common origin, one common author, the Holy Spirit.”³⁷ While stressing divine authorship in this quotation, Lowth also emphasizes God’s working in concert with human writers. Another observation from Lowth concerns Deuteronomy 32, where he says that Moses “by the command of God, embellishes the subject with all the elegance of verse, in a poem, which bears every mark of divine inspiration.”³⁸ Both at the beginning and end of this quotation, Lowth stresses divine inspiration, and yet he also talks of Moses using his talents as a poet to write scripture.

Later, Lowth navigates the divine-human interplay by writing:

I am indeed of the opinion, that the Divine Spirit by no means takes such a possession of the mind of the Prophet, as to subdue or extinguish the character and genius of the man: the natural powers of the mind are in general elevated and refined, they are neither eradicated nor totally obscured; and though the writings of Moses, of David, and of Isaiah, always bear the marks of a divine and celestial impulse, we may nevertheless plainly discover in them the particular characters of their respective authors.³⁹

Here, Lowth emphasizes God’s hand guiding the pens of human beings while—at the same time—maintaining that humans play a role in the construction of writing. Thus, different parts of scripture display variations in style, a point Lowth would later make when outlining the unique characteristics of each of the prophetic books.⁴⁰

Surely, Wesley would have appreciated this idea that God played a key role in the writing of the Bible without completely overriding any human contribution. Someone who could quote the Bible as frequently as Wesley would have noticed stylistic differences among various books.⁴¹ Lowth’s ideas of inspiration explained that human beings bore responsibility for those differences even while God continually stood as the one responsible for the Bible’s inspiration.

Furthermore, when Wesley describes how God works with humanity in conversion and sanctification, he emphasizes divine and human forces working cooperatively—just as Lowth does with the Bible.⁴² In fact, Wesley approximates the type of sentiment expressed by Lowth when writing, “[H]ow really soever [the apostles] were inspired, we need not suppose their inspiration was always so instantaneous and express, as to supersede any deliberation in their own minds, or any consultation with each other.”⁴³ Reflecting on this quotation, Wesleyan

³⁶ Lowth, *Lectures*, 1:44, 238-240. See also talk of the “Sacred Muse” on *ibid.*, 2:24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:324. See also *ibid.*, 1:275.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:347. See also *ibid.*, 2:11-12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, “Lecture XXI: The Peculiar Character of Each of the Prophets,” 2:84-120.

⁴¹ As Sangster puts it, “Some of [Wesley’s] pages are little more than a catena of [biblical] quotations. He seems to have lived in the Scriptures so long that Bible phrasing has become second nature to him, and he swims from one citation to another with effortless ease” (W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley’s Doctrine of Christian Perfection*, war ed. [New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943], 36). For more on how Wesley uses Scriptural phrasing to express his thoughts, see the discussion in Scott J. Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), 135-138.

⁴² See Randy L. Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice, and Hope: John Wesley on the Bible,” *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 1-35, here 12.

⁴³ John Wesley, *Wesley’s Notes on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1987), 484 (note on Acts 15:7).

scholar Mark Weeter accurately concludes, Wesley “did not believe in mechanical dictation.”⁴⁴ The same is clearly true of Lowth as well. Without adhering to theories of mechanical dictation, both Wesley and Lowth emphasized that God worked with humanity to create the Bible we have today.

A fourth feature of Lowth’s writings that would have appealed to Wesley is his belief that the Bible should be interpreted on its own terms. When Wesley relies on the Old Testament, he tends to favor a literal interpretation that makes use of each passage’s surrounding context (though exceptions can be found). Wesley writes, “But it is a stated rule in interpreting Scripture, never to depart from the plain, literal sense, unless it implies an absurdity.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Wesley emphasizes the importance of focusing on what texts originally meant when he writes:

I apply no Scripture phrase either to myself or any other, without carefully considering both the *original* meaning, and the *secondary* sense, wherein (allowing for different times and circumstances) it may be applied to ordinary Christians.⁴⁶

Lowth similarly advocates interpreting the Bible in a plain and literal sense with particular attention to original meaning. He writes, “we must endeavor as much as possible to read Hebrew as the Hebrews would have read it.”⁴⁷ Interestingly, the Song of Solomon is a case where both Wesley and Lowth diverge from their normal pattern of taking texts at face value, preferring instead a more allegorical approach. Wesley favors an allegorical approach here because a literal approach would be “absurd and monstrous.” Meanwhile, Lowth favors an allegorical approach because of biblical precedent: other parts of the Bible like Hosea draw a parallel between a married couple on the one hand and God and God’s people on the other.⁴⁸

A final feature of Lowth’s writing that would have appealed to Wesley is the high value Lowth attaches to expressions of emotion. Although René Descartes had set the stage for rationalism to flourish in 18th-century England, neither Lowth nor Wesley were willing to surrender emotion and praise reason alone as the true source of existence. When Lowth

⁴⁴ Weeter, *John Wesley’s View*, 166.

⁴⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 74, “Of the Church,” in *Sermons*, 4 vols., ed. Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 3:50 (§I.12); see also John Wesley, Sermon 21, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the First,” in *Sermons*, 4 vols., ed. Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 1:473 (§6), n.22.

For more on Wesley’s literal approach and attention to context, see Robert Michael Casto, “Exegetical Method in John Wesley’s *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*,” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1977), 106-111, 175, 177-180, 222; Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 198-199; Shelton, “John Wesley’s Approach,” 41-42; John N. Oswalt, “Wesley’s Use of the Old Testament in His Doctrinal Teachings,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 12 (1977): 39-53, here 44-50. One of the key points made by many of these authors is that what Wesley understands to be a literal approach differs from many more strict understandings today. For more on the ways that Wesley uses Scripture, see especially Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 129-138, 188-214; Oswalt, “Wesley’s Use of the Old Testament in His Doctrinal Teachings,” 42-44.

⁴⁶ John Wesley, “5 An Answer to the Rev. Mr. Church’s Remarks,” in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 9:116 (§III.5).

⁴⁷ Lowth, *Lectures*, 1:113. See also *ibid.*, 1:114, 116. Note also Prickett, “Poetry and Prophecy,” 105.

⁴⁸ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, 3:1926 (Introduction to Song of Solomon). Wesley again relies on Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*. Lowth, *Lectures*, 2:309-322. Lowth’s approach of relying on scripture to interpret scripture is favored by Wesley as well (Weeter, *John Wesley’s View*, 201-205; Jones, *John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture*, 199-205).

compares philosophy and poetry, he argues that philosophy concerns reason alone. Poetry, on the other hand, concerns reason and emotions—which makes it vastly superior in Lowth’s mind.⁴⁹ Clearly influenced by Aristotle, Lowth understood that emotions have a key role to play in the life of virtue. For Lowth, poetry is an instrument by which these emotions can be shaped for good. As he puts it:

How much the sacred poetry of the Hebrews excels in exciting the passions, and in directing them to their noblest end and aim; how it exercises them upon their proper objects; how it strikes and fires the admiration by the contemplation of the Divine Majesty; and, forcing the affections of love, hope, and joy, from unworthy and terrestrial objects, elevates them to the pursuit of the supreme good; ... it also stimulates those of grief, hatred, and fear, which are usually employed upon the trifling miseries of this life to the abhorrence of the supreme evil.⁵⁰

Rather than disdain emotion, Lowth saw them as essential to the virtuous life.

Wesley, similarly, understood emotions to have a key role to play in godliness.⁵¹ As Theodore Runyon explains, Wesley was concerned not only with orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right action), but also orthopathy (right affections).⁵² Similarly, Randy Maddox describes Wesleyan sanctification in terms of one’s tempers and affections being purified, strengthened, and empowered by God’s grace.⁵³ Maddox even goes so far as to argue that the goal of Wesley’s “heart religion” is the change of affections, moving away from affections like lust and passion while moving toward meekness and love.⁵⁴ Gregory Clapper would agree. He writes, “Wesley believed being a Christian consists, to a large extent, of having certain religious affections.”⁵⁵ Such a claim is easily verified by even a cursory examination of Wesley’s works. For example, in Sermon 1, which Wesley preached at Oxford, he defines the Christian faith as “not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart.”⁵⁶ Meanwhile, when preaching on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley talks of how Jesus...

⁴⁹ Lowth, *Lectures*, 1:8; see also 1:80.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:375-376. Similar statements linking emotions to virtue can be found on 1:45, 80, 366, 369. For other ideas Lowth has about emotions and poetry, see 2:121, 202, 248-250, 395, 424, 428.

⁵¹ In addition to the works cited below, see Robin W. Lovin, “The Physics of True Virtue,” *Wesleyan Theology Today*, ed. Theodore H. Runyon (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1985), 264-272.

⁵² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), chapter 5, esp. 147-149.

⁵³ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 132, esp. 201.

⁵⁴ Randy L. Maddox, “A Change of Affections: The Development, Dynamics, and Dethronement of John Wesley’s Heart Religion,” in *“Heart Religion” in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies* 12 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001), 3-31, here 17. See also John Wesley, “A Short Address to the Inhabitants of Ireland Occasioned by Some Late Occurrences,” *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 9:284 (§9).

⁵⁵ Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 3. A comma was removed from this quotation for the sake of readability.

⁵⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 1, “Salvation by Faith,” in *Sermons*, 4 vols., ed. Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 1:120 (§I.4).

...has described inward religion in its various branches. He has laid before us those dispositions of soul which constitute real Christianity; the inward tempers contained in that ‘holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord;’ the affections which, when flowing from their proper fountain, from a living faith in God through Christ Jesus, are intrinsically and essentially good, and acceptable to God.⁵⁷

For Wesley, “heart religion” is not a happenstance term but an authentic description of what the life of faith entails.⁵⁸

The place where Lowth and Wesley most differ is on how emotions can best be shaped toward godly living. For Lowth, the answer is poetry.⁵⁹ For Wesley, the answer is the means of grace.⁶⁰ However, the differences between their two answers are not as significant as might first appear. Wesley believes that studying scripture is a means of grace, and that would obviously involve studying the Bible’s poetry.

To summarize, there are many reasons that Wesley and his followers appreciated Lowth’s *Lectures*. Lowth found keys to identifying, understanding, and appreciating biblical poetry. Both Lowth and Wesley revered the Bible as God’s word. At the same time, they believed God worked cooperatively with human beings in the construction of scripture. Lowth and Wesley sought to understand the Bible on its own terms and in its original context whenever possible. And lastly, they believed that emotions were integral elements of the life of faith. In light of these dynamics, Wesley’s praise of Lowth makes perfect sense.

Questions Answered

Nevertheless, several questions about the preceding discussion are worth examining. First, did Wesley praise Lowth’s work simply because Lowth was a well-known bishop? In other words, can we trust Wesley’s words as authentic judgments, or might Wesley have given a positive assessment merely to court favor with a high ranking ecclesial authority?

Those sympathetic to John Wesley would be reluctant to question his honesty. Yet, the question is worth considering and can be adequately answered. When we look at Wesley’s writings, it is obvious that he had no problem criticizing bishops. In fact, he did so on several occasions with Bishop William Warburton, the Bishop of Gloucester.⁶¹ In Sermon 107, “On

Clapper, *John Wesley*, chapter 5 shows how consistent Wesley was on this topic throughout different periods of his life. For more on how both John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards believed that saving faith entailed experiencing “gracious affections,” see Richard B. Steele, “*Gracious Affections*” and “*True Virtue*” according to *Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994), passim, esp. xi.

⁵⁷ John Wesley, Sermon 26, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, Discourse the Sixth,” in *Sermons*, 4 vols., ed. Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 1:572-573 (§1).

⁵⁸ Maddox, “A Change of Affections,” 4.

⁵⁹ See the discussion above.

⁶⁰ Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence Of God In The Christian Life: John Wesley And The Means Of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992), passim. See also Maddox, “Change of Affections,” 19; Henry H. Knight, III, “The Role of Faith and the Means of Grace in the Heart Religion of John Wesley,” *Heart Religion* in the *Methodist Tradition and Related Movements*, ed. Richard B. Steele, *Pietist and Wesleyan Studies* 12 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 273-290.

⁶¹ Warburton and Lowth disagreed quite significantly on the interpretation of the book of Job (Scott Mandelbrote, “Biblical Scholarship at Oxford in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: Local Contexts for Robert Lowth’s

God's Vineyard," Wesley refutes Bishop Warburton as "mistake[n]."⁶² In a 1762 letter to his brother, John writes, "I was a little surprised to find Bishop Warburton so entirely unacquainted with the New Testament: And, notwithstanding all his parade of learning, I believe he is no critic in Greek."⁶³ In 1766, Wesley casts Bishop Warburton among those whose works he has—via argumentation—"dash[ed]...to pieces."⁶⁴

In fact, in a later letter to his brother, John does in fact criticize Lowth, writing, "What I mean is, Bishop Lowth is sometimes hyper-critical, and finds fault where there is none."⁶⁵ Wesley even goes so far as to speak negatively to Bishop Lowth himself in 1780 when Lowth was the Bishop of London. Wesley criticizes Lowth for failing to ordain a certain "Mr. Hoskins" while ordaining "other persons, who knew something of Greek and Latin; but who knew no more of saving souls, than of catching whales."⁶⁶ Given that Wesley would criticize bishops and even criticized Bishop Lowth directly, his praise of Lowth's *Lectures on Hebrew Poetry* appears completely authentic.

A second question: did Wesley include Lowth's work in the 50 volume *Christian Library* that he published? Obviously, Lowth's inclusion there would signal additional praise of Lowth. However, Lowth's inclusion in this library would be impossible, given that the library was published in 1750, and Lowth's lectures were first published (in Latin) in 1753.

Third, what do we know about other eighteenth century precursors to biblical studies and Wesley's reaction thereto? Textual criticism had already become a mainstay of biblical interpretation, and Wesley concerned himself with this topic, especially regarding the New Testament text.⁶⁷ He relied on the standard scholarly tools of his time.⁶⁸ With the Old Testament, a key issue in his day was the trustworthiness of the Masoretic pointing of the Hebrew text. John Hutchinson (1674-1737) proposed doing away with diacritical markings, taking Hebrew letters as symbolic, and finding therein evidence of even the Trinity in the Old Testament. According to one scholar, "Hutchinson's followers... were prominent...in mid-

De Sacra poesi Hebraeorum," *Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc*, ed. John Jarick [New York: T&T Clark, 2007], 3-24, here 15), which would have been of great interest to Wesley, given that he worked on his father's commentary on the book. Wesley agrees with Lowth over Warburton precisely on this matter when he writes in his journal, "I read Bishop Lowth's 'Answer' to Bishop W. If any thing human could be a cure for pride, surely such a medicine as this would!" (John Wesley, January 9, 1766, in *Journals and Diaries*, 7 vols., eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. [Nashville: Abingdon, 1976-], 22:28). Lowth's "Answer" is [Robert Lowth,] *A Letter to the Right Reverend Author of The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (Oxford, 1765) and 2nd ed. (London, 1766). On page 126 of *ibid.*, Lowth writes, "the Allegorical Interpretation of Job is entirely groundless, or, if you please, false."

⁶² John Wesley, Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," in *Sermons*, 4 vols., ed. Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 3:505 (§1.3).

⁶³ John Wesley, "To the Rev. Charles Wesley [January 5, 1763]," in *Letters*, 7 vols., eds. Frank Baker and Ted A. Campbell, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 27:315 (lines 6-8).

⁶⁴ John Wesley, "Some Remarks on 'A Defence of the Preface to the Edinburgh Edition of Aspasio Vindicated,'" *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 10:353 (§9). See also the letter Wesley postscripted to these remarks.

⁶⁵ John Wesley, "Letter LXXVI [to His Brother Charles, dated February 12, 1767]," *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 12:132.

⁶⁶ John Wesley, "Letter DCCCLXXXVIII—To Bishop Lowth [dated August 10, 1780]," *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 13:143. For an interpretation of this letter, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 275.

⁶⁷ Weeter, *John Wesley's View*, 228; Scroggs, "John Wesley as Biblical Scholar," 415-419.

⁶⁸ Maddox, "The Rule of Christian Faith," 6-7.

eighteenth-century Oxford.”⁶⁹ Wesley, however, was wisely skeptical of Hutchinsonian thinking, even though it supported some of Wesley’s trinitarian leanings.⁷⁰ Later scholarship would vindicate Wesley’s judgments.

If text criticism is lower criticism, what about higher criticism? Obviously, source criticism had not yet become a mainstay of biblical criticism in the 18th century. In the late 17th century and early 18th, John Toland sought to demythologize the Bible, for example, by giving naturalistic causes for so-called miracles.⁷¹ Wesley does not give Toland much attention.⁷² Jean Astruc moved things in a source critical direction in 1753 by arguing that Moses used multiple sources in writing Genesis.⁷³ However, his work was written in French, and I have found no evidence that Wesley was familiar with it.⁷⁴ In Germany, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn began to make a critical splash during the last decade of Wesley’s life, but again, I have found no evidence that Wesley was familiar with his work.⁷⁵ Both John Locke and Thomas Hobbes made some critical moves in their works, but Wesley is more interested in engaging their thought philosophically and politically than hermeneutically.⁷⁶ In the 18th century, Matthew Tindal’s *Christianity as Old as Creation* won great praise from Deists. In this work, Tindal asks the sorts of questions that would later concern Wilhelm de Wette in his foundational source critical work on the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁷ However, Wesley does not zero in on those matters when interacting with Tindal’s approach to the Bible.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Mandelbrote, “Biblical Scholarship at Oxford,” 16.

⁷⁰ See John Wesley, December 20, 1746; January 17, 1756; October 26, 1756; November 22, 1756; April 26 [i.e., 27], 1758; July 31, 1758; February 13, 1770; August 31, 1770, in *Journals and Diaries*, 7 vols., eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976-), 20:151; 21:40, 80-82, 143-144, 159; 22:215-216, 246-247. See also John Wesley, “Letter DXLV—To the Rev. Dean D----- [no date],” *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 12:464-465.

⁷¹ See Rogerson’s concise overview of Toland in his *Old Testament Criticism*, 151-152.

⁷² In his journal dated July 6, 1781, Wesley makes a passing reference to Toland’s *Nazarenus* being “disingenuous” (John Wesley, July 6, 1781, in *Journals and Diaries*, 7 vols., eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, 34 vols. [Nashville: Abingdon, 1976-], 23:214). On the significance of this work of Toland’s from 1718, see F. Stanley Jones, “The Genesis, Purpose, and Significance of John Toland’s *Nazarenus*,” in F. Stanley Jones, ed., *The Rediscovery of Jewish Christianity: From Toland to Baur* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 91-101. Toland’s work in attempting to demythologize features of the Bible came in *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) and *Hodegus* (1720) (so Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 151-152).

⁷³ Jean Astruc, *Conjectures sur les memoires originaux dont il paroît que Moyse s’est servi pour composer le Livre de la Genese, Avec des remarques, qui appuient ou qui éclaircissent ces conjectures* (Brussels: Chez Fricx, 1753).

⁷⁴ As Weeter, *John Wesley’s View*, 228, puts it, Astruc’s “writings seem to have little effect on Wesley’s generation.” Additional confirmation is offered by the fact that Astruc’s work is not mentioned in Maddox, “Kingswood School;” idem, “John Wesley’s Reading: Evidence in the Kingswood School Archives;” idem, “Remnants of John Wesley’s Personal Library,” *Methodist History* 41.2 (2003): 122-128; idem, “John Wesley’s Reading: Evidence in the Book Collection at Wesley’s House, London,” *Methodist History* 41.3 (2003): 118-133.

⁷⁵ It is not mentioned in bibliographies compiled by Maddox in the previous footnote. According to J. Sandys-Wunsch, Eichhorn’s influence on the English-speaking world was limited, in part because of how long it took for his work to be translated into English (J. Sandys-Wunsch, “Eichhorn, J[ohann] G[ottfried] [1752-1827],” in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007], 400-404, here 403).

⁷⁶ On Hobbes and Locke’s role in biblical criticism, see Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 147-151.

⁷⁷ Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation: Or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London: n.p., 1732), 240-241. Cf. J. W. Rogerson, “De Wette, Wilhelm Martin Leberecht (1780-1849),” in

While there wasn't much interest in source critical matters in Wesley's day, there was interest in biblical history, culture, and archaeology. Wesley thought that such historical study was good and very appropriate for Methodists, and the Kingswood School contained different historical works and accounts of antiquities from the ancient Near East.⁷⁹

Thus, we can say with confidence that Wesley had sympathies for text critical and literary approaches to the Bible. He even concerned himself with the cultural and historical world of the Bible. What Wesley would have made of source or redaction criticism, on the other hand, is much more subject to guesswork and speculation.

Implications and Conclusions

There is some difficulty in knowing what Wesley would have made of each methodology within modern biblical scholarship. However, one point is clear: given Wesley's appreciation of Robert Lowth, he surely would appreciate the works of subsequent biblical scholars who have focused on aesthetics, rhetoric, literary art, and poetics.

To return to the question asked at the outset of this paper: most first-year seminary students feel overwhelmed by the technicality and variety of critical approaches to the Bible. They move from reading the Bible devotionally to feeling overwhelmed by their own inadequacies in the face of the challenges presented by the Old Testament and scholarly criticism thereof. It is difficult to give students mastery of many critical methods. Source criticism, for example, is an area under wide dispute even among experts.

However, if we look to Wesley, the great mastermind of renewal, we can rediscover wisdom in his appreciation of Robert Lowth. Approaching the Bible with a focus on aesthetics allows readers to understand the rhetoric and content of texts so that biblical messages can be made plain amid modern contexts. Most people today do not come to church to learn about source criticism, to take sides in denominational battles, to get lost in administrative structures, or to be entertained. They come to church because they want to communicate with God. Lowth's approach to the Bible enables readers to understand the mechanisms by which God communicates with people through scripture. Little wonder Wesley appreciated it.

Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007], 355–358.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of how Wesley reacted to the sorts of ideas found in Tindal's writing, see Matthew R. Schlimm, "Defending the Old Testament's Worth: John Wesley's Reaction to the Rebirth of Marcionism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 42.2 (2007): 28-51, esp. 36-37, 40, 43-45, 50-51.

⁷⁹ Laurence Clarke's *Complete History of the Holy Bible*, *The Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus*, Frederick Louis Norden's *Travels into Egypt and Nubia*, John Potter's *The Antiquities of Greece*, Charles Rollin's 13-volume *The Ancient History of the Egyptians, Carthaginians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, Macedonians and Grecians*, and Abednigo Seller's *The Antiquities of Palmyra* are mentioned on Maddox, "Kingswood School Library Holdings," 350, 357, 360, 362, 363, 364 respectively. A volume of Herodotus's history is mentioned on Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Kingswood School Archives," 65. See also the book by Francis Dobbs on Persian history in Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Book Collection at Wesley's House, London," 122.