

Scripture and Word in Ellul's Writings¹

3000 words

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Jacques Ellul is best known for his deep and powerful analysis of our technological civilization. There have been times when I have run into sociologists and technology critics who were almost completely unaware of Ellul's theological counter-point to this sociology of technology. Of course, I have also seen the converse, theologians who knew next to nothing about Ellul's sociological critique of technology. But I don't think it is possible to adequately understand and appreciate Ellul without exploring both sides of Ellul's dialectical work, whether you are primarily a theologian or a sociologist.

At the beginning of *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians*, Ellul says

The criterion of my thought is the biblical revelation, the content of my thought is the biblical revelation, the point of departure is supplied by the biblical revelation, the method is the dialectic in accordance with which the biblical revelation is given to us, and the purpose is a search for the significance of the biblical revelation concerning ethics.²

What he says here for his work on ethics is equally true for his studies of violence, the city, politics, and communications. Ellul examines these and other phenomena sociologically as they *have been and are* impacted and transformed by technique—and theologically as they *could be* transformed by the Word of a Wholly Other God, revealed in the Bible.

Fundamental to this commitment to Scripture was Ellul's own experience. In 1970 he wrote that "around twenty-two years of age, I was . . . reading the Bible, and it happened that I was converted—with a certain 'brutality'."³ Not a sermon in a church, not the celebration of the sacraments, not a mystical vision, but the private reading of the Bible was decisive in Ellul's decision to become a Christian. To be sure, some of his occasional comments on his conversion describe an overwhelming presence to which he responded by getting on his bicycle and riding furiously for a long distance. But the grounding of his conversion was in reading Scripture. It is not surprising that even in predominantly Catholic France, Ellul would be drawn to the Reformed church and to the theology of Karl Barth.

¹This essay repeats to a limited extent some of the ideas and language from my earlier publication "Jacques Ellul's View of Scripture," *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 25.4 (Dec 1982): 467-478.

² Jacques Ellul, *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969),

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³ "From Jacques Ellul," in James Y. Holloway, ed., *Introducing Jacques Ellul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 5.

Ellul's commitment to the importance of the Bible comes through in all of his theological and ethical writings. This is true of his multi-volume studies of Christian ethics—not just *To Will and To Do*, but *The Ethics of Freedom*, and the forthcoming-some-day *Ethics of Holiness*—of the virtues *Living Faith* and *Hope in Time of Abandonment*—and of topics that run through the canon of Scripture like *Money and Power, Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, and *The Meaning of the City*. In addition to these topical studies that range across the whole of the biblical canon, Ellul loved to study individual biblical books such as *The Judgment of Jonah*, *The Politics of God & the Politics of Man* (II Kings), *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, and *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*. In many essays Ellul explored particular passages in Scripture such as “La Technique et les premiers chapitres de la Genese.”⁴

Ellul's academic training was in history, especially social and intellectual history and the history of institutions. He was for over thirty years professor of the history and sociology of institutions on the Faculty of Law and Economic Science at the University of Bordeaux. He also held a chair at the Institute for Political Studies at the university. What is less well known is that when Ellul was fired from his academic post during the four-year Nazi occupation of France he not only assisted the French Resistance but managed to study theology with the Strasbourg theology faculty, themselves displaced to southwestern France. This was the leading Protestant theological faculty in France. The Nazis and their French collaborators were unknowingly enabling the education of a radical. Ellul completed all the required studies for the theological degree except for the final paper because the war ended and there was urgent work to be done back in liberated Bordeaux.

So, first of all, Ellul's biblical studies grow out of a deep, lifelong, personal engagement. Second, they represent the work of a serious and well-trained biblical scholar, and, third, they are always so much more than academic, ivory-tower research. They are offered as an essential quest to bring truth to our reality. You can see that constant passion to bring Scripture to bear on life in his writings but also in his life and activities. Not the least of these activities were the regular Bible studies Ellul led at the little Reformed Church next to his home. I was lucky enough to attend several of his studies on Ecclesiastes during my 1984-85 sabbatical in Bordeaux. Ellul's physician Dr. Franck Brugerolle made some 250 tape recordings of these Bible studies and made copies of them for me to give to the Wheaton College Ellul Collection which Lisa Richmond now oversees. I think Regent College may also have copies of these recordings. Some of these recordings—Ellul's studies of Amos, James, and parts of Genesis, Job, and Matthew have been translated directly to English by Bill Vanderburg and published by the University of Toronto Press.⁵

⁴ Jacques Ellul, “La Technique et les premiers chapitres de la Genese,” *Foi et Vie* 59, no. 2 (1960): 97-113.

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *On Freedom, Love, and Power* (University of Toronto, 2010), and *On Being Rich and Poor* (University of Toronto, 2014), both volumes compiled, edited, and translated by Willem H. Vanderburg. Make no mistake, these two volumes are a valuable resource as they stand but it is regrettable that they were not preceded by publication of a French transcription to which these

The point is that Ellul did not just address other scholars and pastors, he taught and interacted with the people.

Biblical Text and Word of God

Like Karl Barth, Ellul differentiates the written text from the living Word of God—though, in practice, they are virtually equivalent.

What one ordains and the other requires are therefore practically inseparable. . . . It is clear that every living word of God cannot be different from that which is attested precisely in the Bible. . . . It turns out that the God who spoke to people in the Bible is also our God, and directly ours, thanks to their witness.⁶

In other language, Ellul writes that in Jesus Christ, the law (objective, universal) becomes commandment (personal, individual, concrete address):

The summons of the commandment is contained in its entirety in the Bible. But it does not cease to be a word for being “written” (hence objectified). It does not become letter, nor does the commandment become law. The word inscribed in the Bible is always living, and is continually *spoken* to the person who *reads*.⁷

The word read in the Bible cannot be heard as a personal commandment except by faith.⁸

With faith, we can “know the constant surprise of the transition from Scripture to the living word.”⁹

While God can speak wherever, whenever, and however he wishes, the Bible occupies a unique position: all “self-styled revelation of the current day” is always “subject to verification by the word revealed in the Bible.”¹⁰ In the famous story of the Fall in Genesis 3, the serpent first questions the word of God—“Did God say . . .?—and then flatly contradicts it: “you will not die!” For Ellul, this is the boundary we must not transgress. It’s well and good to ask “Did Moses or Isaiah personally say this or that?”—but whoever the human author and whatever the process of composition, we must come to Scripture asking “what does God wish to say to us through these texts?”

translations could be compared. Vanderburg himself writes “I wish to make it very clear that this text does not represent a literal translation of the recorded presentations” (*On Freedom, Love, and Power*, xx.). Philippe Louiset’s life was tragically cut short before he could complete this painstaking transcription process in Bordeaux.

⁶ *To Will and To Do*, 274n.

⁷ Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury, 1970), 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁹ Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 125.

¹⁰ *To Will and To Do*, 264.

Of course, Ellul recognizes Scripture having human authorship in the ordinary historical modes and forms of the day. The Bible was no product of God's direct dictation to a single individual, as is claimed for the Book of Mormon or the Koran. The Bible illustrates God's typical action in history: first he *appropriates* a given human work or cultural linguistic form. Then there is *contradiction* in the sense that God's message is holy, new, and other. Finally there is *expropriation*; God seizes this into his service and fills it with new significance. Thus historical narrative, myth, symbolism, prophecy, poetry, apocalyptic and other literary genres are all used by God to convey his message. God also uses the redactors, editors, and compilers of the Bible every bit as much as the original authors. But in the end, God is the single reality and author unifying the collection.

The Parts, the Whole, and the Center

A major emphasis in Ellul's biblical studies is that the parts must be understood in relation to their contexts—not just the original contexts of the parts but that of the eventual whole. Modern scholarship has often tended to chop up the text into bits and pieces and focus on their origins and particularities. But the meaning of the parts and passages has to be understood in relation to their literary genre (is this part of the Gospels? The prophets? The pastoral letters?). Each of the sixty-six books of the Bible is itself a whole. And the Bible constitutes a whole.

The great rule is that no text, no verse, and no declaration can stand by itself. To separate a text from the totality of God's revelation will inevitably cause us to distort it. There is in fact a double separation that we must avoid: first of all . . . the separation of a verse or a sentence from its text, from its context. . . . The second separation is even more serious, however: it is to separate a text—which always refers to God or to the action of God—from the revelation of God or about God as a whole, as it is given in the *whole Bible*.¹¹

Thus, in *The Judgment of Jonah* (1946), Ellul argues that the insertion of the (probably later) "Song of Jonah" was fully intentional, not some crude patchwork, and its value becomes clear when viewing the whole book in its unity. Furthermore, Jonah is part of the prophetic "Book of the Twelve," not the historical section of the canon, and must be interpreted as such. Jonah is a prophetic word both to Israel and an intimation of the Messiah to come (as Jesus shows by his own references to the (double) "sign of Jonah.")

Ellul disparages any imposition of "secret keys" or interpretive traditions on the biblical texts:

We are to interpret them solely by the Bible itself. The consensus of the records of the ongoing thought which is revelation allows us to seize on what may be symbolic elements in it, but always

¹¹ Ellul, *If You Are the Son of God: The Suffering and Temptations of Jesus* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 68.

with the realization that we must keep as much as possible to facts as facts, since revelation has always to be incarnated. Hence, there can be no single method of interpretation. As the different books fall into different categories, so there must be different categories of interpretation, though always related to the unvarying central line: Jesus Christ.¹²

Similarly, with his commentary on *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (the original French title was much more interesting: “Apocalypse: Architecture in Movement”), Ellul argues that it must be read as a species of apocalyptic literature and readers must pay attention to it as a whole. We need a “comprehension of the structure.”¹³ The Apocalypse has a specific form and an internal movement. Anyone who encounters Ellul’s unique approach has to be inspired and challenged, as he finds a pattern that starts in the middle and works out from there. Personally, I never liked reading the book of Revelation before I read Ellul’s book on it. While I don’t agree with everything he sees there, I agree with a lot and, more importantly, I have been driven back to the text on my own and found it dazzlingly interesting.

Ellul insists that the Bible should be read with Jesus at the center. “It is impossible to ignore the unity of revelation and its movement. Everything leads to Jesus Christ, just as everything comes from him.”¹⁴ Ellul also emphasizes the eschatological movement of Scripture: “That seems to me the starting point for understanding the rest of revelation. . . This has been the focal point of all my biblical and theological interpretations.”¹⁵

Beating Back the Naysayers

Ellul takes biblical scholarship including the historical criticism of the text seriously but is feisty in challenging its excesses;

I fail to see the justification for accepting as legitimate all the questions about the revelation . . . while at the same time refusing to question those systems, methods, and conclusions from the point of view of the revelation.¹⁶

This comment is similar to Ellul’s observation that for all the questions the disciples ask Jesus in the Gospels, the more important ones are those that Jesus asks of them!

Again, Ellul:

¹² *Jonah*, 46.

¹³ Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 257.

¹⁴ Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 9.

¹⁵ Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury), 172.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

No one has demonstrated that those values which one rejects—those ethical instructions, that social view, that anthropology—were *only* assumptions of a bygone civilization. After all, even if they are *also* to be credited to a form of traditional civilization, it is quite possible that they were *nevertheless* willed for people in the order of the fall, or in obedience to his will.¹⁷

This is one of Ellul's most powerful points about the Bible: *let it put us in question* rather than for us to constantly put it in question.

Ellul's sociological studies of technique and our technological society, its politics and propaganda, its invasive and totalitarian conquest of the globe and of every inch of our life, leave little room for optimism and hope. We seem to be enclosed in a tightening web leading to some kind of civilizational death. His biblical theological studies provide a distinctive counterpoint, an antithesis to the technological thesis. At first they too are pretty grim in their analysis of the city and other aspects of our lives. But as Ellul develops these biblical messages we begin to see that this critique is coming from outside our technological web, from a Wholly Other God. While the analysis of Babylon is grim, it is a voice from outside. There is a leverage point that could actually move things. And there are hints of a New Jerusalem, not just at the end or outside our world but entering into it in our own time and place.

The Takeaways

Ellul has referred to a rabbinic saying that every text has “seventy layers of meaning.” He has insisted on three aspects of freedom in our biblical study: freedom of interpretation, freedom of deviation, and freedom of research.¹⁸ I think his contribution to our understanding and appreciation really is a liberating and life-giving gift.

First, he rehabilitates *all the parts of the Bible* as potential vehicles of a rich message from God. Who would have thought about political insight from II Kings? Who is teaching from Ecclesiastes in an insightful way? Who would have thought that Revelation would provide a relevant perspective on what's happening now? Ellul's work fulfills the statement to Timothy that “*All Scripture* is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16).

Second, Ellul provides a way of seeing *the Bible as a whole*. He sees its grand themes, unified in Jesus as the central figure and as the guide to a hopeful future. In his sociological studies Ellul called for more attention to the maincurrents under the surface and less distraction by the surface chaos. So too in the Bible he focuses on main themes that cut across the whole canon rather than getting caught up in debates about individual texts.

¹⁷ Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 56.

¹⁸ Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 162-184.

Third, reading Ellul's biblical studies not only adds to our knowledge what he passes onto us, it liberates us and stimulates us to think for ourselves, to read the Scriptures for ourselves, to see the pattern of the message freshly and anew, to sit before that text and let God put our lives in question.

No one will agree with all of Ellul's opinions on things biblical. For all the things I gratefully learned from him—and that list is huge—I still disagreed on several. I actually sat in his living room in 1984-85 and (respectfully) argued with him about his attempt to distinguish Satan from the Devil, ethics from morality, and the kingdom of God from the Kingdom of heaven. I questioned his negative theology of work drawn from the creation stories in Genesis and his view of a universal salvation imposed on humanity, like it or not. He loved it! As he said and wrote more than once, he wasn't looking to make disciples but to provide people with the resources to think out for themselves the meaning of their lives.

Our small but far flung community of Ellul scholars and readers continually reminds me of what a wonderful adventure this is. We come from all perspectives, vocations, religious and philosophical traditions, age groups, and nationalities—but we always find an immense joy in gathering together for our mutual reflection on life. We don't need to agree with each other on everything. The intellectual and spiritual children of Jacques Ellul are an incredibly blessed family and it's great to be together again here in Vancouver.