How politicians use the Bible

Scholar Hannah Strømmen provides a helpful guide for navigating our scripture-saturated political discourse.

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Century illustration

President Trump’s brief announcement in June that the United States had bombed Iran included what might be his most confused and confusing invocation of God to date: “I just want to thank everybody. And in particular, God. I just want to say, We

love you, God.”

One of the defining features of the Trump decade is the strange combination of conservative Christians’ fervent loyalty to the president and Trump’s obvious ignorance of Christianity. Playing to his base, Trump pretends to be an ardent follower of a faith he couldn’t care less about, resulting in farcical statements like “We love you, God” or “Two Corinthians 3:17, that’s the whole ball game.”

It’s not just Trump. Flat-footed and half-conceived references to God or Jesus or the Bible are staples of American politics. In the infamous Signalgate chat leaks, high-ranking government officials like Vice President J. D. Vance, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, and others invoked God to celebrate the US military’s flattening of an entire apartment building in Yemen in order to kill a single target: “Godspeed to our warriors,” “I will say a prayer for victory,” “God bless,” prayer emoji bicep emoji American flag emoji. In a recent interview with Tucker Carlson, Ted Cruz justified his uncritical support of the Israeli government by saying he was “taught from the Bible, those who bless Israel will be blessed and those who curse Israel will be cursed.” Pressed by Carlson to say where in the Bible that line came from and what it meant in context, Cruz spluttered and changed the subject.

It’s easy to brush off politicians’ clunky references to God and the Bible as cynical pandering to their religious base. Cruz was unable to say what he thought that line from Genesis means because he wasn’t interested in what it means; he was interested in how to use it. Genesis 12:3, for Cruz, was a tool to be wielded, a means to sidestep criticism for supporting a state engaged in what Amnesty International, a UN Special Committee, and the International Federation for Human Rights have called a genocide. We might wish we could explain to Cruz what Genesis 12:3 “really” means, or to Trump what 2 Corinthians 3:17 “really” means, but I don’t expect they would care. For them, the Bible is merely a thing to be used.

Actually, scratch that “merely.” We can complain all we want that people like Cruz and Trump are using the Bible more than reading it, but the fact is, they’re using it skillfully and to great effect. There’s no “merely” about it: whether we like it or not, their thoughtless bleating that the Bible says this or that has far more political effect today than any deep and reflective reading of the Bible ever could. To understand the role the Bible plays in our politics, we have to focus less on what biblical texts mean and more on how the Bible is used.

This is the basic argument of a fascinating new book in biblical studies, *Bibles of the Far Right* by Hannah Strømmen. The Scandinavian biblical scholar brings years of training to what most scholars would probably dismiss as unworthy of their attention: the superficial and fleeting references to the Bible in the speeches, online communications, and manifestos of the European extreme right. Strømmen connects the passing mentions of the Bible on the furthest edges of far-right politics to broader and deeper political currents, showing that we cannot afford to ignore them, no matter how unserious they seem. Though she focuses on the European far right, her call to heed what she calls "Bible-use" rather than Bible interpretation and "biblical assemblages" rather than "the Bible itself" is a helpful guide for navigating our own Bible-saturated political discourse.

With the concept of "Bible-use," Strømmen pushes us to ask not what a biblical text *means*, but how it is *used*. When Donald Trump poses with a Bible after violently suppressing a protest or answers a question about his favorite Bible verse with a vague "the whole Bible is incredible," nothing like biblical interpretation is happening. Yet the Bible is there, operating in some way. The aim of Strømmen's book, she writes, is to help us better understand "this vague 'some way.'" The Bible frequently shows up in our politics, it frequently *does* things, without anyone making any claims about what a specific biblical text means. Strømmen asks how such Bible-use has a political effect, asking, "What ideological forces and political effects are masked by the banality of a Bible?"

Strømmen's answer is the concept of "biblical assemblages." Nobody has encountered anything we might call "the Bible itself." Our encounters with the Bible are always at the same time encounters with cultural associations, familial relations, physical objects, histories of translation, and personal memories. Most people who claim to revere the Bible don't really read the Bible at all, instead encountering it as a verse on a T-shirt, a sign held up at a game, a family heirloom, an inspirational quote on an Instagram post. There is no "Bible itself." There are only messy assemblages of all manner of components, some of which we would think of as biblical and most of which we wouldn't.

The two biblical assemblages Strømmen devotes most of the book to are what she calls "the Civilization Bible" and "the War Bible." If Bibles are, as she writes, "contingent constructions that operate in concrete ways and under concrete conditions," these two constructions are some of the most politically potent. The Bible is frequently used to fashion an image of a "Judeo-Christian civilization"

besieged by Muslims, and to inculcate a violent warrior attitude towards perceived enemies. Strømmen's terrifying point is that while these biblical assemblages may once have been relegated to the online hinterlands of far-right message boards and "counterjihad" blogs, they are now squarely at the center of mainstream rightwing politics. Witness Hegseth, in his 2020 book *American Crusade*, warning that Muslims' "very high birth rates relative to native populations" are an existential threat to "our biblical values." He calls for a new "crusade" to "[push] back the Muslim hordes." Without ever mentioning a specific biblical text, Hegseth deploys "the Bible" as both a cornerstone of Western Civilization and a weapon wielded in its defense.

Bibles of the Far Right is a disturbing book. Reading Strømmen's analysis of the 1,500-page manifesto distributed by Norwegian mass killer Anders Breivik and then seeing the same language of "crusades" and "the Gates of Vienna" and "Deus vult" tattooed on the body of the second-in-command of the US military gave me a feeling like looking over the edge of a tall building. But the book offers a handrail.

If Bibles are made and used, then they can be unmade, remade, and used differently. The Bible can play a different role in our political life. Strømmen's book is geared towards her fellow biblical scholars, but for me, the most important takeaway is that a central site of political contestation today might be something as seemingly small and powerless as a group Bible study. As Trump, Cruz, and Hegseth show, much of American politics takes the form of a struggle over what "the Bible" is and what it says. By reading the Bible closely and in community, we might open up spaces where ossified biblical assemblages can be shaken loose and new ones knit together. Understanding that my Bible is not the same as your Bible—and therefore can't simply be *the* Bible—creates an opening where the Bible's familiar words can say something new and unexpected. After all, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.