
Wariston on the Word: Lessons on the Use and Abuse of Scripture from the Diary of a Covenanter

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Introduction

This article offers a practical perspective on the right reception of Scripture in the Christian life, through the eyes of a lesser-known member of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, the Scottish Covenanter Archibald Johnston of Wariston (1611–63). Wariston¹ is best known in Covenanting lore as the “The Lawyer of the Covenant”—a fiery zealot for the Presbyterian cause, who composed most of the Covenanters’ legal documents, the most important being the National Covenant of 1638. He remained at the top of the Covenanter political hierarchy during the turbulent decade of the British Civil Wars—including his time as a Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly—and surprisingly, collaborated with the Cromwellian regime in the 1650s. This fateful decision led to his being hanged for treason by a restored Charles II in 1663, though his scaffold recantation and recommitment to the Covenanted Reformation meant he would be remembered as one of the first Covenanter martyrs. But our interest is with what lay beneath his remarkable public career and fueled it: an intense spirituality marked by an exhausting regime of spiritual disciplines centering on the study of Scripture.

It can be a dubious exercise for historians to try and reconstruct the inner life of specific Puritans or Covenanters by “reading between the lines” of their published treatises on Scripture. But when we happen to have their own words in the form of a personal diary—or “self-writing”—we possess a very intimate portrait of these servants of God, and a unique window into their own devotional study of the Word—rich with lessons and warnings.² If their published treatises and sermons show us their *theology* of the Word, their personal diaries show us their *personal reception* of the Word. They reveal to what extent they practiced the doctrine of the Word that they preached. More often than not, there is a clear consistency between their doctrine of Scripture and their Christian practice, but in some cases, the congruity between doctrine and practice is rather ambiguous.

Happily, one of the most important spiritual diaries of the Puritan period is that of Wariston, who kept a meticulous record of his spiritual journey almost every day of his adult life.³ This diary will

¹ For an excellent overview of Wariston’s life see John Coffey, “Johnston, Sir Archibald, Lord Wariston (Bap. 1611, d. 1663),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Diaries were a very common element in Puritan practical divinity in the 17th century across the three British kingdoms. See Andrew Cambers, “Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing in England, circa 1580–1720,” *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 4 (2007): 796–825.

³ Wariston was heavily influenced by his pastor, the episcopalian minister of St. Giles, Edinburgh to begin keeping a written record of his sins, afflictions and blessings. See William Struther, *Christian Observations and Resolutions, or, the Daylie Practice of the Renewed Man, Turning All Occurrents to Spirituall Uses, and These Uses to His Union with God*, II Centuri (Edinburgh: Andrew Hart, 1629), 375–

be our primary source for this article. Wariston's diary sheds light on the theology of the Word held by one of our spiritual forefathers, but also demonstrates how a right theology of the Word does not necessarily guarantee a consistent application of that theology in practice. Wariston's diary (written in a thick Braid Scots dialect) has much to say on the use and abuse of the Word in a confessionally Reformed context, and as such, offers timely help and warning for Reformed Christians today.

Wariston on the Word-Centered Life

We live in an age of abundant cheap Bibles, a plethora of English translations and a burgeoning industry of study-Bibles to "let the reader understand." But this is not the way it has always been. It was the Protestant Reformation that first mass-produced and disseminated the Bible, bringing a surge of lay Bible-reading across northern Europe on a scale never before seen in history.⁴ In the Scottish Reformation in particular, great emphasis was placed on education, and the chief goal of a highly literate nation was a high rate of Biblical literacy.⁵ Accordingly, readers were encouraged to keep pocket journals called "common place" books, in which to write down favorite Bible verses with personal reflections, sermon notes, or quotable quotes from the best Christian authors.⁶ Wariston was no different. His diary reveals a truly Word-centered life, with multiple contexts in which the Word came to him as both a personal and community pursuit.

The Personal Pursuit of the Word

Like so many of his age, Wariston had learned his Bible study methods from a coterie of English Puritan spiritual manuals.⁷ One of his favorites (and arguably chief among the genre) was Lewis Bayly's famous work, *The Practice of Pietie* (1630), whose directions for personal Bible study describe Wariston's practice perfectly:

Before thou prayest in the morning, first, reade a Chapter in the Word of God, then meditate a while with thy selfe apply these things to thine own heart, and reade not these Chapters, as matters of *Historicall* discourse; but as if they were so many *Letters* or *Epistles* sent downe from God out of heaven unto thee One Chapter

394. Regrettably the diary for the 1640s is lost, but much of the diary for the 1630s and 1650-1663 has been published by the Scottish Historical Society. The unabridged first volume (1632-1639) is by far the fullest record, and thus this essay will focus on his theology of the Word during these formative years.

⁴ Until the 16th-17th centuries, Bible-reading had been the sole preserve of the clergy, educators and to some extent, the educated wealthy. See Jeremy Schildt, "In My Private Reading of the Scriptures: Protestant Bible-Reading in England, circa 1580-1720," in *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Jessica Martin and Alec Ryrie (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 189-210.

⁵ Schildt, "Protestant Bible-Reading", 192.

⁶ Schildt, "Protestant Bible-Reading", 195-201. See also Tom Webster, "Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality," *The Historical Journal* 39, no. 1 (1996): 33-56.

⁷ These included the following: Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Pietie* (London: Robert Allen, 1630); Daniel Featley, *Ancilla Pietatis: Or The Hand-Maid to Private Devotion* (London: Nicholas Bourne, 1626); Henry Scudder, *The Christian's Daily Walk in Holy Security and Peace* (London: Lodowick Lloyd, 1674); John Dod, *A Briefe Dialogue Concerning Preparation for the Worthy Receiuing of the Lord's Supper* (London: I.B., 1614); Paul Baynes, *Holy Soliloquies or A Holy Helper in Gods Building* (London: F.K., 1618); William Struther, *Christian Observations and Resolutions, or, the Daylie Practice of the Renewed Man, Turning All Occurrents to Spirituall Uses, and These Uses to His Union with God*, II Centuri (Edinburgh; London: Andrew Hart, 1629); Nicholas Byfield, *The Marrow of the Oracles of God. Or, Divers Treatises, Containing Directions about Sixe of the Waightiest Things Can Concerne a Christian in This Life* (London: T.C., 1628).

thus read with *understanding*, and meditated with *application*, will better feed and comfort thy soule, than five read and runne over without marking their scope and sense, or making any use thereof to thine owne selfe.⁸

Wariston's closet study of the Word thus involved Bible study: He usually practiced the *lectio continua* approach, working consecutively through the books of the Bible.⁹ It also involved Bible annotation: He had a personal pocket Bible which he poured over every day, and made copious notes in the margins.¹⁰ This copious note-taking made Wariston's Bible meditation easier to practice; there are 116 references to meditation in the published Diary for 1632-39 alone. One of his first diary entries reads, "At night I meditated on the days sermon and resolved ever thairafter to meditat at night on the mornings sermon."¹¹ He kept his resolution, and this "chewing the cud of Scripture" was aided by the practice of Bible memorization.¹² Another of Wariston's mentors, the English Puritan Nicholas Byfield, urged him, "We must be further careful to ... commit them to memory, that we may be often thinking of them, and musing upon them. It will not serve the turne that we have them written in the Bible, or in our Note-bookes, but we must get them written in our hearts too."¹³ It was good to take notes; but it was even better to take mental notes, to make sure the Word is written on the heart.

The Communal Pursuit of the Word

Wariston also received the Word through corporate means, and this context dominates in his diary. Foremost among these corporate means was the preaching of the Word. Wariston was privileged to sit under some of the greatest preachers the English-speaking world has ever known: Dickson, Blair, Henderson, the Gillespies and Guthries, Baillie, Rutherford, Durham, Binning and

⁸ Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Pietie* (London: Robert Allen, 1630), 244-247; italics original.

⁹ Wariston spent literally hours each day in extended devotions, and as a chronic insomniac, often into the middle of the night. See e.g. *AJW Diary* I:280. He followed the most common method used by Scots Presbyterians, each day's portion being called an "ordinary", which the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* defines as follows: "Ordinar," "Belonging to the regular or usual order; according to the established rule; occurring in the fixed or customary sequence" ... "One of a series of sermons on the same text; the text of such a series of sermons." https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/ordinar_n_1 (accessed 8.16.21). Wariston wasn't a slave to this method; at other times, he would diverge from his consecutive daily reading practices, e.g. to prepare for a communion season.

¹⁰ "Upon Tuesday morning I read over my marques of Hosea and Joel ... then thy marques on Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micam, Nahum, Habbakuk." *AJW Diary* I:172, 174. One day on a trip out of town for a Sabbath sermon, he was sorely disappointed to discover it had gone missing: "Coming fra Cranston thy litle Byble, quhilk thou had marqued with great pains, was tint [lost]." *AJW Diary* I:185.

¹¹ *AJW Diary* I:154.

¹² See Schildt, "Protestant Bible-Reading," 204-205.

¹³ Byfield, *The Marrow of the Oracles of God. Or, Divers Treatises, Containing Directions about Sixe of the Waightiest Things Can Concerne a Christian in This Life* (London, 1633), 293-294.

Gray, Caryl and Owen.¹⁴ The Word also came to Wariston in family worship,¹⁵ as he faithfully taught his wife, children, and servants from the Word each day, praying and singing psalms.¹⁶ And psalmody was another significant means of Wariston's Word-intake. There is good evidence in his diary that he sang memorized metrical psalms, citing them as authoritative Scripture translations.¹⁷ One final communal aspect of receiving the Word found in Wariston's diary is godly conversation. From childhood, he treasured the company of seasoned believers, participating in conventicles—small group meetings for Bible study and prayer, where much valuable “iron-sharpening” took place.¹⁸

The Authority and Interpretation of the Word

Such a Word-saturated life does not happen where there is not an exalted view of the authority of Scripture. As with all Scotsmen, Wariston had been taught by the Scots Confession (1560) to “believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make the man of God perfect.”¹⁹

For Wariston, the Scriptures were authoritative and sufficient, and he learned to interpret according to sound rules of Reformed hermeneutics, under the personal tutelage of such eminent Reformed ministers as Robert Bruce and David Dickson, the writings of English Puritans like Edward Reynolds and Robert Bolton, and continental commentators like Calvin and Paraeus, who

¹⁴ Wariston made copious sermon notes in a separate notebook. In his diary, he also looked carefully for a concurrence between the Word he received in his personal devotions and the Word received in the public ordinance, which he considered especially worthy of note. For example, once when struggling with depression and a lack of assurance, in his devotions he found comfort in Psalm 89:25: “I will keep my covenant with you forever.” Then later, when he went to church, he records, “Oh saule, to Gods glory and thy comfort remember that ... befor thy going to the kirk in thy auine chalmer [i.e. personal devotions], thou went thereafter to the Greifr[i]ars church, and ... [by] ane special providence h[e]ard Mr. Andro [Ramsay] preach most comfortably upon [1Thes. 5:8-9],” which reads, “For God did not appoint us to wrath but to salvation” (AJW *Diary* I:33). God's Word came to him in both settings, and spoke the same comfort from different passages.

¹⁵ Jane Dawson is surely right when she writes, “Private and family devotions were the powerhouse driving the intense affective piety that developed in the generations following the Scottish Reformation.” Dawson, “‘Hamely with God’: A Scottish View on Domestic Devotion”, in *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Jessica Martin and Alec Ryrie (New York: Routledge, 2016), 52.

¹⁶ Wariston was notorious for his long prayers. One of his acquaintances later recalled, “in prayer, he was the most ... swallowed up in the work of any man in his time. He heard or noticed nothing when praying. One day, in his family, his lady being indisposed, she fell into a swoon in the room [right] beside him, and continued some time in it; and the servants observing it, lifted her up and laid her in bed. All this was done beside him, and he kneu nothing of it till all was over, and the deuty ended.” Robert Wodrow, *Analecta* (Edinburgh: Maitland Club, 1842), 2:135.

¹⁷ AJW *Diary* I:44, 100, 124, and 151.

¹⁸ Some of these were attended by such greats as Robert Bruce, Elizabeth Melville and David Dickson. AJW *Diary* I:153. Such Godly conversation was an effective aid to personal devotions. “At night haiving discoursed with L O., I meditat[ed] on the sermon with many tears, and cheifly quhyle particularly I applied to my selth the story of the Schunamit[e], 2 Kings 4 c.” To these we might also add letter-writing—sharing helpful texts among the godly: “I had written yesternight to my Lady Argyle to remind her husband of first two and four last verses of Proverbs 29, which did me good.” AJW *Diary* II:156.

¹⁹ The Scots Confession, XIX: *The Authority of the Scriptures* in James T. Dennison, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 2:200. In Robert Rollock's words, the Bible is “the lively voice of God containing all articles or instructions concerning faith or manners.” Robert Rollock, *The Select Works of Robert Rollock* (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1844), 1:92.

all feature in the diary.²⁰ He was a member of the Westminster Assembly, which gave the Reformed churches arguably their definitive confessional standard on the doctrine of Scripture, tellingly, right from the very first chapter of the Confession.²¹ In other words, in all these contexts, Wariston drank in a Christ-centered, Reformed hermeneutic: rightly divide the Word of truth according to its redemptive-historical context.²²

Thus far, there has been nothing particularly revolutionary to report! Wariston led a Word-saturated life and sets the kind of example our spiritually lazy generation needs. Diligent Bible study is a lynchpin of experimental Christianity, and there are very few early modern sources that describe in such vivid detail the context and content of day-to-day intake of Scripture as Wariston's diary. But what about personal application of the Word to the life of the believer? What about the interface between this objective, infallible Word—rightly interpreted in its *sensus literalis*, and its grammatical, redemptive-historical context—and the subjective, daily experience of the believer? This is where Wariston's journal yields some uniquely fascinating insights—and warnings.

Wariston on the Reception of the Word

Wariston's diary abounds with examples of fastidious application of relevant Scriptures to a multitude of life events. We find him making careful application of the Word to his preparation for the Lord's Table,²³ battling depression,²⁴ struggling with sexual temptation,²⁵ choosing a wife,²⁶ facing bereavement,²⁷ considering a career change,²⁸ making business decisions,²⁹ writing the National Covenant,³⁰ losing a job,³¹ facing financial ruin, and suffering persecution.³² For Wariston, the Word was not merely an infallible historical text; it was God's mouthpiece into the daily life of the believer. He understood his Bible to be a living Word because it was the Word of a Living God who communicates personally through it to His people as an ordinary means of grace. Three facets of the reception of God's Word in the life of the believer were especially stressed by Wariston, and are worth examining closely.

²⁰ It is difficult to exaggerate the authority of Scripture and therefore the central place of daily Bible intake in the lives of the 17th century Puritans and Covenanters in general, and Wariston in particular. See Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 270-281. For Puritan hermeneutics, see Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 27-40.

²¹ See Whitney G. Gamble, "The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith in Its Context," in *The History of Scottish Theology, Volume 1: Celtic Origins to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. David Fergusson and Mark W. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 270-271.

²² We have plenty of examples in the diary of how this was modeled for him by the sermons of his theological mentors, and how he practices it himself. For example, he writes, "In going to curche I got great good by [comparing] the threatnings of Deutero[nomy] with the real judgements of Juges." *AJW Diary* I:153. Wariston understands the flow of redemptive history in his interpretation, but the diary is still heavily bent towards looking for personal applications.

²³ *AJW Diary* I:38, 89-90, 96-97.

²⁴ *AJW Diary* I:42, 49, 146-147.

²⁵ *AJW Diary* I:2, 10, 17, 21, 28.

²⁶ *AJW Diary* I:197, 208, 234-235, 246.

²⁷ *AJW Diary* I:45-46.

²⁸ *AJW Diary* I:127, 134-136, 139, 147-148; NLS MS6254, 142-143.

²⁹ *AJW Diary* I:280.

³⁰ *AJW Diary* I:320-321, 326.

³¹ *AJW Diary* II:158.

³² *AJW Diary* I:152-153, 293.

1. *Providential Timing of the Word*

One of the most striking aspects of Wariston's reception of the Word is the frequency with which he records not only God speaking through His infallible Word, but in the providential timing of certain texts that corresponded precisely with the varied experiences of his life.³³ Consider the following quotations:

The 8 day of Julie, on Monday at six hours, my saule, being oppressed with greif and distracted with fears, happened by Gods providence to read the 12, 13, 14 verses of the 2 chap, of Joel...³⁴

After desner, to the praise of Gods providence and thy comfort, thair was read that sueat 8 chap, of the Romains.³⁵

By Gods providence thou read after prayer the 3 chapter of Jeremiahs Lamentations; how every lyne str[uc]k the[e] at the heart and maid thy eies to runne doune with rivers of waite.³⁶

In this last example, Wariston explains the dynamic of this experience in the following way: "Finding the Sp[i]rite of God in his word, and in thy heart the same Sp[i]rite, to coincid[e] in one and the same meditation."³⁷ In other words, it is the same Spirit who inspired the written Word that dwells in the believer's heart, and not only applies an appropriate portion of that Word to the believer's specific circumstances, but *schedules* an appropriate portion to the believer's specific moment of need. In the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5, here is an example of "the Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." Nor is this an uncommon experience for the believer. The infallible Word is unchanged, and unchanging; but our lives are constantly changing. Yet the Spirit "speaks a word in season" from the Scriptures to our hearts.

However, at this point we need to be careful. When God providentially "gives us a verse" like this (to speak colloquially), he doesn't give us a text hermetically sealed from its grammatico-historical context and given a fresh meaning by our subjective situations. In other words, when a "timely text" comes to us like this, we need to maintain the integrity of our hermeneutics.

This need for hermeneutically-faithful interpretations of Scripture is why it's important to stress that these "providential texts" were generally received by Wariston in the regular course of *lectio*

³³ It was a typical pattern in Puritan diaries to record Scriptures that had come with particular power into the providential circumstances of life. "If it was the duty of readers in reading to diligently observe and take note of those special passages that spoke directly to a particular need or occasion, it was their duty after reading to put God's Word to use in life by the practice of re-reading." Schildt, "Protestant Bible-Reading", 202.

³⁴ *AJW Diary* I:22. Another example: "O saule, remember to Gods glory and thy comfort on Sunday, 28 day of Julie, 1633, in thy auine chalmer, betuixt 4 and 6 heurs, hou wonderfully God poured out thy heart lyk waite befor him, ... at the reading and applying to thyself the parable of the prodigal sone ... Saule, remember thou thought that every particular word strook the[e] to the heart ; and that Chryst, as it wer forseing thy present estait, had taken from it this present parable so that thy estaite seimed to be the pat[tern] and it the exemplar only of thy estaite." *AJW Diary* I:75-9. Wariston is here expressing what Christians have often found: the text speaking as if it were written exclusively for them.

³⁵ *AJW Diary* I:72.

³⁶ *AJW Diary* I:25-26.

³⁷ *AJW Diary* I:23.

continua preaching or consecutive personal Bible reading.³⁸ There was nothing contrived in these examples: no flipping through Bibles at random or hunting for a “perfect text for the moment,” irrespective of its context.

2. *Personalizing the Word in Prayer*

Wariston’s reception of the Word also included a technique by which he would “personalize” the text of his daily reading by “praying through the text.” While he did this with all the literary genres of Scriptures, the Psalms were his favorite. A few examples will demonstrate this practice:

Thou turned the 119 psalm unto ane prayer in thy meditation³⁹ Thou turnedst al unto ane prayer, using Davids arguments in the 25 Psalme ... I turned the 32 Psalm unto ane prayer....”; [I] turned the 51 Ps. with many tears in[to] ane prayer unto God Thou meditated on, and applied to thy auine prayer, the 102 Psalm ... After this [34th] psalme, [thou] turned [it] unto ane prayer befor God.”⁴⁰

Such personalization of the Word of God is undoubtedly a helpful practice. The psalms are especially given for this, as Athanasius memorably wrote in one of his letters to Marcellinus, “Most of the Bible speaks *to* us; the psalms speak *for* us.” Nevertheless, Wariston progressed a step further in “personalizing the Scriptures”—a practice we shall call “self-interpolation.”

3. *Self-interpolation into the Word*

In his diary, Wariston would write out Scripture passages and actually insert his own name/pronouns into the text. This took the liberty of “personalizing the text” a step further, presumably giving the text a greater sense of immediacy. In the table below I have given an example of his self-interpolation of a portion of Psalm 107, when he was struggling with depression. The left column is the King James Version of the Psalm; the right column is Wariston’s self-interpolation from the diary, which are worth a close comparison:⁴¹

³⁸ It is worth noting that the Westminster Directory for Public Worship required sequential Bible reading for the Sabbath Day, and this became the pattern for private worship too. The Church of England’s Prayer Book lectionary had given English Puritans a different order of Bible reading that was less naturally sequential than the Scottish *lectio continua* pattern, though its ordering of the Book of Psalms into 60 consecutive portions was a practice even John Knox recommended. See Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 275.

³⁹ “...Chiefly... v25, 28, 49, 57, 67, 71, 81, 92, 114, 116, 123, 132, 147”—here he writes out each verse as a personal prayer. *AJW Diary* I:54.

⁴⁰ *AJW Diary* I:26-27, 35, 57, 58, 81, respectively.

⁴¹ *AJW Diary* I: 39-40.

Table 1: Wariston’s self-interpolation of Psalm 107:22-31	
Psalm 107:22-31 (KJV, 1611)	AJW Diary I:39
<p>²³ They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; ²⁴ These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep. ²⁵ For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. ²⁶ They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble.</p> <p>²⁷ They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. ²⁸ Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses.</p> <p>²⁹ He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. ³⁰ Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven. ³¹ Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! ³² Let them exalt him also in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.</p>	<p>‘Lord, my saule is in the sea of afflictions, thou hes raised the waves therof by ane stormy wind, quhiles mounting me up unto the heavens, quhiles casting me doune unto the de[e]ps; my saule is melted within me becaus of trouble.</p> <p>I reel to and fro and staggers lyk ane drunken man, and am at my wits end; I cry unto the Lord in my trouble; mak me add the rest: And thou brought me out of my distresses;</p> <p>thou maidst the storme a calme, and brought me unto the desyred heaven, then schal my saule praise God for his goodnes and praise his wonderful works unto the[e].’</p>

This self-interpolation Wariston calls an “allegorical” reading of the text. The example is particularly interesting because his diary combines both a “literal sense” of applying this text to a sea journey to France in university days, with hopes for an “allegorical” application in his future: “Yea, O saule, seing thou fand b[y] experience, in thy going to France, *the literal sense* of this trouble and ane real delyvrie, evin blisse thou nou the Lord for his bygon goodnes, trusting in that same God for *the allegorical* delyvrie also, and then promise to exalt him in the congregation of his people and to praise him in the assembly of the elders.”⁴² Wariston applied this text to himself literally (deliverance in a dangerous sea journey), and also spiritually (deliverance from the “storm” of depression he was then experiencing). This was not an unusual hermeneutic to employ among Covenanter and Puritan preachers of the day, and is probably a common enough practice in today’s Evangelical and Reformed churches too. Perhaps readers have personalized something like the 23rd Psalm in a similar way: “The LORD is *David Whitla’s* shepherd; *David Whitla* shall not want; He makes *David Whitla* lie down in green pastures...” But this practice is one that is rarely documented, and Wariston’s diary provides a treasure trove of examples, because much of it is written as a *soliloquy*, the diarist addressing himself in the second person singular.⁴³ This begs the question: How appropriate is it for the believer to

⁴² AJW Diary I:39; italics mine.

⁴³ The psalms have of course been given to the church to give voice to her own praises. But Wariston carried the practice of self-interpolation to other genres too. For example, when preparing himself and his family for a communion service, we have a lengthy self-interpolation based on opening chapters of Hosea: “I turned unto meditation and prayer the 1 and 2 ch. of Hosea, quhilk ...I turned both unto my privat and publik prayer in my family: 6 v., ‘Lord,’ cried I, ‘let not my naime be Loruhamah or, ‘on quhom thou wilt

interpolate him or herself into the Scriptures? While certainly it can be a very helpful way to remind the devotional reader that God speaks directly to him or her by the written Word, Wariston's case study also stands as a warning that such practices can lead imperceptibly to a subjectivizing of Scripture that might lead the reader away from its objective truth. Specifically, two cautions arise from Wariston's practice of self-interpolation.

Caution #1: Beware of drifting from self-interpolation to self-interpretation

While it may be a useful devotional exercise to lace our prayers with Scripture, and to some extent even self-interpolate, Wariston is a caution against what we might call "*self-interpretation*." This we define as the erroneous interpretation of Scripture to suit our personal life context. Such an approach to Bible study suspends the basic rules of Reformed hermeneutics; it subjectivizes and allegorizes the definitive meaning of the text, turning the Bible into a nose of wax that can be creatively molded according to our shifting individual circumstances.

Several examples of Wariston's straying from *self-interpolation* into *self-interpretation* could be cited, but the following example will suffice to illustrate. It's an entry about a struggle with sexual temptation, and how he found help from a rather unlikely text—Mark 6:14-29, where Herod offers half his kingdom to Salome, who then asks for John the Baptist's head on a platter. Wariston writes, "O Lord, I remember the year befor my mariage when Mr. Alexander Thomson was preaching on that text, being oppressed by the sp[i]rite of bondage, having thy promise not limited unto the half of thy kingdome ... I asked of the[e] the head of my lust in ane [platter], and my delyverie from the tyrannie of it by thy blissing me in ... mariage."⁴⁴ Observe that Wariston had allegorized and personalized the text such that Herod's offer of half his kingdom to Salome became God's blank check offer to Wariston. And in reply, Wariston requested deliverance from his own mental Salomes! This is certainly a unique interpretation that is unlikely to be found in any published commentaries! Yet it is exceedingly probable that this kind of allegorization of the Word is more common than we would like to admit, even among Reformed believers who claim to hold a high view of Scripture.

At the risk of sounding anachronistic, Wariston's method is not far removed from the modern neo-orthodox hermeneutic of Karl Barth. For Barth, a Scripture text *becomes* the Word of God in an immediate revelation-event to the reader in the present, regardless of whether the grammatical-historical meaning of that text bears any relation to the reader's circumstances, or

not schau mercy; nor Loammi, 9 v., or, 'on quho is not of thy people and quhos God thou wilt not be.' Lord, I confesse, 2 ch. 2 v., I haive played the harlot and thou hes striped me naked of al wordlie contentments, and hes set me as a dry land, and hes maid me as a wildernes, and nou slayeth me with thrist; 6 v., and indeed, O Lord, justly hes thou nou hedged in mv way with thornes, and maid ane wall, that I cannot find my pathes ... Therfor nou, O Lord, I wil goe and returne to the[e] my first husband, yea unto my first wyfe, for then was it better with me [than] nou, ... nou, Lord, according to thy promise; 14 v., allure me and bring me unto the wildernes, and speak comfortably unto my wearied saule, and give me thy blissings from thence, ... yea this comunion of Kirka[l]dy, for ane doore of hoope; and I schal sing unto the[e] as in the dayes of my youth, and as in the day quhen I cam up out of the land of Ægypt." This is an interesting example because Wariston not only interpolated himself into the text; *he took others with him*—praying this text at family worship as well as into his personal diary. David G. Whitla, "Archibald Johnston of Wariston: The Formation of a British Puritan, 1611-38" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Queens University Belfast, 2019), 111. For other examples of self-interpolation from both Testaments, see Wariston's reception of Joel 2:12-14, Lamentations 3, James 5:16, Luke 15:11ff (the parable of the prodigal son), and Psalm 42. *AJW Diary* I:22, 25-26, 26, 75, and 81-83, respectively.

⁴⁴ *AJW Diary* I:49.

whether the historical event recorded in Scripture even happened.⁴⁵ The Barthian error demotes the objective infallibility of the Scriptures and elevates the subjective “experience” of the reader.⁴⁶

To be clear, Wariston never abandoned his confessional position on the infallibility of the Scripture. However, surely an uncomfortable ambiguity in these circumstance-driven self-interpretations is seen, usually prompted by a strong feeling that God was speaking to him some truth in that moment clearly not contained in that text. And while that may not be a step towards neo-orthodoxy (which would be an anachronistic interpretation), then it is certainly a step in the direction of mysticism.

Caution #2: Beware of drifting from self-interpolation to mysticism

Wariston’s practice of writing himself into the text of Scripture began as an aid to his devotions: a memorable way to apply Scripture to the nuts and bolts of daily life. However, as time went on, we see a concerning development in this practice as Wariston rose to prominence in public affairs at the dawn of the Scottish Revolution in 1637.⁴⁷ As Wariston wrestled with vocational decisions, we begin to see how this pattern of self-interpolation unconsciously became a way of inflating his sense of self-importance. Believing himself to have been uniquely appointed by God to play a key role in the Scottish Second Reformation, his practice of self-interpolation became a ready way to confirm to himself a special role as God’s “man of the hour” for Scotland. This belief is demonstrated by Wariston’s self-interpolation of the call of the prophet Jeremiah, shown in the table below:

⁴⁵ This has led some contemporary historians to anachronistically offer a neo-orthodox interpretation of how Covenanters like Wariston received and applied the Word, arguing they are examples of “how the Bible *became true for them* in an existential encounter.” David George Mullan, *Narratives of the Religious Self in Early Modern Scotland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 270; italics mine.

⁴⁶ Thus Barth can say, “Every verse in the Bible is virtually a concrete faith-event in my own life ... Have I anything to testify about myself which I cannot testify infinitely better if I make my own the simplest ingredient of the Old and New Testaments?” Cited in Mullan, *Narratives of the Religious Self*, 269. This sounds pious, but it subjectivizes Scripture to the point of redundancy—the reader can make the Scriptures say anything they want to fit their changing circumstances. Mullan vainly attempts to portray Barth’s neo-orthodox reduction as a continuation of the tradition of Scottish reading of Scripture. It is more accurate to say that while both Barth and Wariston may have fallen into similar errors by subjectivizing Scripture on this point, the former also fell away from an orthodox doctrine of scriptural authority, whereas Wariston (whatever his inconsistencies in practice), retained it. According to Barth, this revelation event happens not due to any objective perfection in the Bible, but wholly a subjective activity of God in the reader. But, as G.I. Williamson reminds us, “To call one’s inward reaction to the Word of God the Word of God is to reject the Word of God and enthrone the word of man.” G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, Second Ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 12.

⁴⁷ See Whitla, “Archibald Johnston of Wariston,” chapters 5-7.

Table 2: Self-interpolation of Jeremiah 1:4-5, 7, and 10	
Jeremiah 1:4-5, 7, 10 (KJV, 1611)	AJW <i>Diary</i> I:300 (Underlined text highlights Wariston’s insertions)
<p>4 Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,</p> <p>5 Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee,</p> <p>and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations ... 7 thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.</p> <p>10 See, I have this day set thee ... to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.</p>	<p><u>Nou, since in the motions of thy Sprit within my heart thou assures me that</u></p> <p>befor I was formed in the belly thou kneuest me; and befor I came forth of the womb thou sanctifiedst me (<u>both by thy apoyntment and my mothers vou eraysed [engraved] in hir heart by thy Sp[i]rit</u>),</p> <p>and ordeaned me <u>ane advocat to pleade, speak, wryte in thy cause</u> quhatsoever thou comandest me in the <u>planting, building, or mainteaning of thy house, worschip, and sanctuary in this land,</u></p> <p>and in the rooting up or pulling doune or opposing <u>the rebuilders of Babylon in this land.</u></p>

This remarkable account was written in the dead of night, during what he calls in a marginal note “ane exstasie”. In the heat of his emotional fervor, Wariston took on the mantle of a Scottish Jeremiah—personally called by God to tear down the apocalyptic Babylon and build up the Reformed Church in his Scottish Israel. Like Jeremiah, he pledged to “plead, speak, write” whatever God told him.

This is clearly taking the hermeneutical self-interpolation a step too far, and begs another question: On what possible grounds could Wariston justify this approach? In short, his self-vindication for handling Scripture this way rested on two extra-Biblical grounds: personal feelings and private prophecy.

Throughout this entire entry, he appeals to the experience of “motions of the Spirit within my heart”—subjective feelings of ecstasy which he took as divine confirmations that the prophetic call of Jeremiah in Scripture applied to him in a unique way.⁴⁸ That is how “the motions of the Spirit” (his inner feelings) could be put by him on the same level with “the *Word* that thou hast spoken” (Jer. 1:4).

⁴⁸ Wariston’s nephew, the historian and bishop Gilbert Burnet wrote, “He went into very high notions of lengthened devotions, in which he continued many hours a-day: he would often pray in his family at a time, and had an unexhausted copiousness that way. *What thought soever struck his fancy during these effusions, he looked on it as an answer to prayer, and was wholly determined by it.*” Cited in Robert Chambers, *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*, ed. Thomas Thomson (Edinburgh: Blackie & Sons, 1875), 3:263; italics mine.

The other ground Wariston appeals to is a private prophecy. He mentions a “vou” made by his mother at his birth (also mentioned by at least one contemporary),⁴⁹ consecrating him to the Lord as Hannah had done with Samuel (c.f. 1 Sam. 1:11, 21-28). This he takes to have been prophetic: uttered at the instigation of the Spirit, “my mothers vou eraysed [engraved] in hir heart by thy Sp[i]rit”. Once this kind of inventive hermeneutic has begun, the believer can be led into all manner of fleets of fancy. In the same diary entry, Wariston even goes so far as to insert himself into the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7:1-14—wrenching it from its redemptive-historical context and making it fit his personal calling as a 17th century Christian statesman.⁵⁰

Again, Wariston never formally abandoned confessional orthodoxy on Scripture, and the vast majority of his diary reveals his continued devotion to much more orthodox applications of Scripture to daily life. Nevertheless, these occasional practices represent a “slippery slope.” It is no surprise that within the year, the diary begins to show even more clear-cut examples of mysticism, to the extent of making his own predictions⁵¹ (which he declined to call prophecies but “forassurances”), and listening eagerly to the words of Scottish “prophetess” Margaret Mitchelson, as she predicted the success of the Covenanting enterprise to amazed onlookers.⁵²

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from Wariston’s reading of Scripture? He surely stands as a case study of how an orthodox, Reformed understanding of Scripture and its application to the believer can sometimes drift from its confessional moorings in practice. Put another way, our inventive *use* of Scripture can subtly become an *abuse* of Scripture.

1. *Lessons on the Use of Scripture*

First, Wariston’s diary reminds us that Scripture is a living Word to God’s people. Lewis Bayly’s advice to Wariston—“read, meditate, apply”—is still sound today. The Puritan diarists show us what Word-saturated lives look like, and remind us how a loving Heavenly Father providentially sends timely Scriptures to support his children in day-to-day events. We do not deny for a moment the experiential nature of Christian Bible study as the Holy Spirit illuminates the Word as “a light to our feet and a guide to our path” (Ps. 119:105).

Second, we are reminded that Scripture provides a powerful script for personal prayer. We ought to imitate Wariston’s reception of the Word by saturating our prayers with Scriptural language, which gives them a power and a confidence our own feeble words often lack. Romans 8:26

⁴⁹ Cf. John Lamont, *The Diary of John Lamont of Newton, 1649-1671* (Edinburgh: James Clarke & Company, 1830), 163-164.

⁵⁰ *AJW Diary* 1:300-301. Did Wariston believe that the Spirit was sending direct revelations? The evidence suggests that he probably persuaded himself that he was being consistent with Reformed cessationism; after all, he carefully refrained from using tendentious terms like ‘prophecy’ or ‘revelation’, and the basis of his experience is undeniably rooted in canonical Scripture and its application by the Spirit, however dramatic the context. Garnet Milne’s conclusion might still be applied: “In spite of the highly charged and experimental nature of his Christianity, Johnston still requires the conjunction of the Word and Spirit before he will acknowledge any prediction as authentically God-given.” Garnet Howard Milne, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Cessation of Special Revelation* (Milton Keynes, 2007), 226.

⁵¹ He even went so far as to predict by the Spirit the death of a brother-in-law. *AJW Diary* I:288-289.

⁵² *AJW Diary* I:385, 393, 406-407. See also Louise Yeoman, “A Godly Possession? Margaret Mitchelson and the Performance of Covenanted Identity,” in *The National Covenant in Scotland, 1638-1689*, ed. Chris R. Langley (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 105-124.

reminds us that “the Spirit intercedes with our groans,” yes. But when we cannot articulate our prayers, the Spirit has also surely given us a script for prayer in His Word—psalms, promises, doctrines—that we can apply to our prayer needs with powerful effect.

Finally, we are reminded that Scriptural encounters are worth remembering. It is a good practice to keep a diary or “commonplace book” to treasure the passages of Scripture God has used to particularly minister to the soul; it could even be as simple as underlining texts in our Bibles.

2. *Lessons on the Abuse of Scripture*

Wariston also stands as a warning against subtly abusing the Scriptures by creatively assigning to ourselves a unique personalized application that necessitates a forced reinterpretation of God’s Word. We may not mean to; we may not realize we’re doing it in the moment; we may even feel that we are being very spiritual. But any subjective personalization of a text that strays from its hermeneutical integrity is leading us in a potentially hazardous direction, even if we don’t end up as thoroughgoing mystics or Barthians!

We must not confuse illumination with inspiration; we must rightly divide the Word of Truth. We do not deny the very real inward work of the Spirit in the hearts of God’s people when they open their Bibles—indeed, we depend on it. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms “the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness in and with the Word in our hearts” (WCF 1.5), and in the very next breath acknowledges that “the inward illumination of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word” (WCF 1.6). Wariston may have persuaded himself that he was within the bounds of hermeneutical orthodoxy, but he stands as a caution against ambiguity in this area. This can be a tightrope in moments of crisis, or heightened states of religious excitement, when it is all too easy to confuse illumination with inspiration, and forget that the Spirit only testifies to “such things as are revealed in the Word,” not that which we have read *into* the Word from our own subjective experience! As A. A. Hodge helpfully reminds us, “Spiritual illumination differs from inspiration ... in that it conveys no new truths to the understanding, but simply opens the mind and heart of the subject to the spiritual discernment and appreciation of the truth already objectively presented in the Scriptures.”⁵³

We must receive the Word with care. Our reception of the Word must come with more than a conviction of its infallibility. It must also retain hermeneutical integrity. Wariston’s tendency was to place too much confidence on his feelings as “motions of the Spirit.” He may have lived a Word-saturated life, but that did not prevent him—especially in crisis moments—from occasionally treating the Word like a kind of personal oracle. Our version of this error may come in the equally pious language of, “God gave me a verse,” or “God gave me a burden from this Scripture.” But receiving a text that is appropriately applicable to our lives is not the same thing as receiving a portent!⁵⁴

We must receive the Word accountably. It is important to remember that Wariston’s pursuit of God’s Word had both personal and communal dimensions. The dangers of self-interpretation and

⁵³ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 39.

⁵⁴ Such an approach to Scripture often sets the believer up for disappointment and disillusionment. If God “gives” them a Scripture that *they* decide (against all sound judgment) assures a happy outcome to their wishes in prayer, then what happens when in Providence, that just isn’t how things pan out? The confused believer may call into question the integrity of the Scripture—when in reality it is just the integrity of *their hermeneutic* that is flawed. For a helpful contemporary discussion, see Peter Bloomfield, *What the Bible Teaches about Guidance* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006), 78-81.

mysticism are far greater when we fail to maintain a healthy balance between the private and the communal reception of the Word—most typically, when we elevate our private study and interpretation of the Word over the corporate means of grace. Those who think themselves too spiritual to need the ordinances of the Church are usually those who succumb most to their own hermeneutical fancies. In fact, the diary shows us that Wariston’s faithful attendance to the communal reception of the Word—to preaching, group Bible study, godly conversation about his devotions, good books—provided a hermeneutical firewall of sorts: vital accountability measures against the wildest of personal interpretations and allegorizations, so that he was ultimately kept from drifting too far from his confessional moorings.⁵⁵ This is why today Wariston is best remembered by the Church as a Covenanter, and not as a crank! And this kind of accountability will do the same for us. It will inoculate us against the pandemic of hermeneutical subjectivism.⁵⁶ The application of this study is not to diminish the crucial place of personal Bible study, but to do it better!

Finally, let us thank God if we sit under a faithful ministry. Let us surround ourselves with sound expositors who model a sound hermeneutic, and rightly divide the Word of truth. Let us read the soundest of Christian commentaries. And let us study our Bibles in conversation with mature Christians, so that we will not only be well fed, but see modeled before us—and so practice ourselves—the right reception of the Word of God.

⁵⁵ See Jane Dawson, “Hamely with God”, 33–52, and David Stevenson, “Conventicles in the Kirk, 1619–37: The Emergence of a Radical Party,” *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 18 (1972), 99–114.

⁵⁶ For a most helpful treatment of this subject, see the profound wisdom of the Baptist Andrew Fuller in one of his letters to a parishioner in Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The Armies of the Lamb: The Spirituality of Andrew Fuller* (Dundas: Joshua Press, 2002), 115–124.