

The Affordances of *bible* and the Agency of Material in Assemblage

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Abstract

This article employs a range of new materialist theories, especially Jane Bennett's work on the agency of assemblages, to understand the relationship between *bible* and a fourth-century gold glass medallion that features images of the miracle at Cana and the raising of Lazarus. Understanding both this glass and *bible* to be part of multiple assemblages, this article contemplates the agency of both human and nonhuman material in the category of *bible*. Encountering *bible* in assemblages with differing (non-textual) materialities underscores the presence of material in biblical assemblages, the agency of that material, and the ways humans encounter *bible* in assemblages.

Keywords: Jane Bennett, gold glass, assemblage, new materialism

Introduction

In this article I contemplate the thing we call *bible* as a part of diverse material assemblages. Using the work of Jane Bennett and others among the “new materialist” movement broadly, I understand *bible* as and in assemblage, embedded among myriad human and nonhuman materialities. Taking Bennett's claim that assemblages have and enact agency, I trace the kinds of agencies that emanate from a particular assemblage: a fourth-century gold glass, today held by the Vatican Museums, that depicts scenes of the raising of Lazarus and the miracle at Cana. Claiming that this is *bible* with different material affordances than other more familiar biblical assemblages, notably textual ones, I follow the interactions of different human interpreters with this gold glass and some of the assemblages of which it is a part. I do this as a case study of how humans and nonhumans collaborate and coexist in assemblage, and how *bible* appears differently as it moves through different configurations and relationships of matter.

Laura Nasrallah has argued for the potential of attention to material culture to produce and center different epistemologies in the study of antiquity and especially early Christianity and the New Testament, and to erode (albeit modestly) elite ways of knowing that have produced deeply raced, classed, and gendered kinds of knowledge in the fields (Nasrallah 2019). Arguably the most entrenched of these raced, classed, and gendered epistemologies are those that adhere to *bible* itself. *Bible* as we encounter it today is a product of centuries of theological construction and

ecclesiastical power—an altogether different assemblage than the kinds that might have prevailed in the fourth century CE. The perceived stability and boundedness of *Bible* funds many if not most of the mechanisms by which both the study of early Christianity and the popular uses of *bible* accumulate authority to white male subjects (Jennings 2021). Nasrallah sees in the study of material culture the possibility of more democratic arrangement. The study of material culture is not the same thing as new materialism, but Nasrallah’s argument and appeal for the former applies to the latter too, and may have more force when applied to new materialism. The inclusion of “nonhumans in the demos,” as Bennett has put it, has the potential to break up human-centered cartels of knowledge and experience, spotlighting the agencies that swarm with and through matter of all kinds (Bennett 2010, 30).

Glasses in Corridors

Along the left-hand side of a long, wide, and perpetually-crowded corridor of the Christian Museum at the Vatican in Rome, several galleries’ worth of display cases brim with gold glass. Nestled among other more ostentatious traces of the Christianities of the past—maps and metal implements, lamps and statuary, sarcophagi and mosaics—the cases of glass discs and fragments are easy to miss. But the visitor who sidles up to the sloping arrays of medallions is rewarded with dozens of intricate images embedded in pieces of glass that look sturdier than any seventeen-century-old fragile material has any right to be. These are gold glasses, and the Vatican Museums have a grand assortment of them, gleaned from the personal collections of curious laypersons and clergy, and from the church’s long residency in the city of Rome.

Gold glasses are so named because of their curious and seemingly unlikely construction; they are made by sandwiching a tissue-thin layer of gold leaf between two layers of clear glass. The effect is that of a shallow picture window or two-dimensional diorama, with the glass providing just a touch of depth into a flat image inside. The themes of these gold glasses vary widely. Some are classified as “pagan,” others “Jewish,” and still others “Christian” on the basis of the motifs formed by the gold leaf—a questionable and overconfident taxonomy, according to some scholars (Elsner 2003; Smith 2018, chap. 4). Considerable debate surrounds gold glasses’ histories of use, since their edges are usually broken off roughly, as if the final form of a medallion was an afterthought. The broken edges have raised questions about whether gold glasses as we know today were once cups or bowls, instead of being imagined from the beginning as medallions without any further structure.¹ It seems likely that gold glasses are, indeed, remnants of larger vessels, intentionally broken so that only a disc remains. If the gold glasses we know are fragments of cups or

¹ On the function of gold glasses, see the work of Rivka Ben-Sasson (2008), who in turn references Kisa (1908, 861-864), Garrucci (1864), and Engemann (1968-1969, 9-10), and Barag (1971, 607). See also Rutgers (1995, 84-85).

bowls, then we can reconstruct their origins as everyday objects with uses in familial, cultic, or commercial settings, that were later broken into discs.

The reason for breaking the sides off a vessel and transforming it into a medallion might lie down other corridors in Rome—or, rather, under Rome. Many gold glasses have surfaced on the antiquities market or in the aforementioned private collections, but others have been discovered in burial contexts, especially in catacombs. There, gold glasses, shorn of their sides, were sometimes included in burials, embedded into the mortar sealing graves (Rutgers 1995, 84–85). This was perhaps done to help differentiate among the similar-looking burials that lined the long halls of catacombs, the distinctive shimmer of gold and glass catching lamplight brought into the dark by mourners and grave attenders and drawing them to the appropriate spot. A person's prized cup or bowl might have been transformed from an object of use or beauty into a marker for a grave *loculus* dug into volcanic rock several stories underground, accompanying a person from life into death.

The decoration of gold glasses hardly seems accidental or coincidental, and if gold glasses were threads stretching through a person's life and into their grave, then the motifs they displayed are another strand wound around and through. Some gold glasses' decorations seem to be associated with eating, drinking, and feasting practices. The phrase "PIE ZESSES," or "drink and live," frequently appears, suggesting a functional life in festive or ritual contexts (Leon 1960, 218–19; Rutgers 1995, 83). Other gold glasses display ethnic or religious affiliations; a small collection of "Jewish" examples feature Torah shrines, *lulav* and *ethrog*, *shofar*, and perhaps even the temple façade (Elsner 2003, 115). Many have Christian themes; Peter and Paul are a frequent pairing, and depictions of biblical stories are not uncommon, as we will see below. Rutgers (following Engemann) wonders whether the same workshops might have supplied these glasses to various groups for diverse uses, across religious and ethnic boundaries (Rutgers 1995, 83). This scenario seems likely, and the presence of a workshop or workshops in the third or fourth centuries helps account for the concentration of gold glasses in the area of Rome during that period and the relative scarcity of them elsewhere. The details of production and use also deepen and texture the peculiarities of the particular gold glass with which this article is concerned—an example that is divided into two registers, each depicting a scene from the life of Jesus. Below, we will consider some of the material features of this specific gold glass, but first, we turn to a set of reflections on materiality itself, and the ways the materiality of this glass conditions human understandings of and encounters with it.

Assemblage and Material

Already in the above account of gold glasses, human and nonhuman materials and epistemologies jostle together.² I have described gold glasses' embeddedness in

² My terminology here follows that of Jane Bennett, my primary theoretical grounding and interlocutor. Bennett uses "nonhuman" rather than "more-than-human" or "non-human," and she

space (corridors in catacombs and the Vatican Museums), entanglement in human lives (among crowds of tourists, in ancient banqueting traditions, in practices of mourning), and situatedness in networks of production and commerce (workshops and antiquities markets). To the tourists shuffling by the display cases at the Vatican, gold glasses appear as whole and bounded objects to be perceived and understood, but at that point of perception and understanding they are already constellations of elements and minerals, labour, storytelling, practice, history, and piety, to name but parts of the totality. Gold glasses are already assemblages in the way imagined by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, arranged of myriad parts and associations that each have their own ontology and history (Nail 2017).³ These assemblages have their own gravity and their own power apart from that of their constituent members, drawing attention of various kinds and participating and intervening in the world in different ways. This is the sense in which Nail characterizes assemblages “events” rather than “essences”; assemblages describe a set of relations between and among themselves, their members, and the world at large (Nail 2017, 24). *As* assemblages and *within* assemblages with human and nonhuman matter, these gold glasses have a kind of agency. As Denise Kimber Buell has explored in the context of early Christianity, the notion of “human” itself is porous and composite, encompassing assemblages including what we might think of as nonhuman animal bodies, and early Christian theologies laboured to account for the presence and actions of invisible nonhuman (divine) actants (Buell 2009). Likewise, thinking with quantum field theory, Karen Barad has contemplated the implications of matter’s squirrely composition from yet smaller bits of matter interacting with-and-in space (Barad 2015, 398–402).

Jane Bennett’s work provides a framework for thinking about what she calls “distributive agency” among and across the diverse elements of assemblages (Bennett 2010, 23). Building on Guattari’s descriptions, Bennett zeroes in on the ways assemblages exert influence and produce effects, not as sums of parts, but *as assemblages*. This is a not-only-but-also theory of influence and action; at stake for Bennett is an understanding of how confederations of humans and nonhumans produce effects that pass beyond the efforts or influences of any one part, and are “distributed across an ontologically heterogenous field, rather than being a capacity located in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts” (Bennett 2010, 23). She is, in the early chapters of her book *Vibrant Matter*, especially

is more interested in a “distributive agency” that encompasses and accounts for the actions of nonhumans and humans in assemblages than she is in a close interrogation of nonhuman actancy (Bennett 2010, 21). Her discussion of “actant” and “operator” as “substitute words for what in a more subject-centered vocabulary are called agents” is belied by her continued use of “agency” in the book; she distributes that “subject-centered vocabulary” to assemblages, rather than insisting on “actants” and “operators” as some do, to underscore her point that agency itself is not the possession of humans (Bennett 2010, 9).

³ Thomas Nail provides a helpful synthesis of the ways Guattari and Deleuze theorize and use assemblage, an etymological challenge to the English translation “assemblage” itself, and a useful corrective to some of the more facile understandings of the term.

concerned with the category of agency and the attribution of purpose and intent in descriptions of events. Bennett's work arises out of a political science context broadly construed, and she intends her work on the agency of assemblages to inform the way we think about a broad range of everyday life and the lived experiences of humans. Her sustained example is a 2003 rolling blackout that cut power to millions of people (Bennett 2010, 24–28).⁴

In her review of reporting about the blackout, Bennett notes the tension between trying to understand the event(s) and material conditions of the blackout in terms of agency—to know what happened and why—and the uncomfortable truth that agency in the blackout seems to have been distributed among many points, some human and others nonhuman, none very centralized. A tendency to “anthropomorphize” the power grid belies “the inadequacy of understanding the grid simply as a machine or tool” that remains completely under human control (Bennett 2010, 25). Human perception is both hyper-agential and anthropocentric, and the biases of American newspapers skew modernist and deterministic, so humans cast about for language to understand agency without an obvious human agent—we try to link effects with causes. Bennett quotes one newspaper to say that “the grid’s heart fluttered,” and another that it “lives and dies by its own rules” (Bennett 2010, 25). This is an amusing quirk of human language, but unsatisfying as an epistemology or account of actancy.

Bennett’s “agency of assemblages” attempts to provide more satisfying and explanatory epistemologies and actancies. It describes agency without agents (or efficacy, in the Aristotelian sense), in which the vitality of “each member and proto-member” of the assemblage contribute to the assemblage’s own agency (Bennett 2010, 24). This is not a pooling of agency so much as *an other* thing that emerges from aggregated vitalities; the power grid has agency *as* an assemblage, apart from and transcendent of any human or nonhuman agencies that may be embedded in it. Bennett uses the words “emergent” and “fractal” to describe the kind of causality enacted by assemblages; assemblages produce agencies that appear chaotic and inscrutable to human sense, but that nevertheless act in the world. Rebekah Sheldon characterizes Bennett’s model as “life in the interstices, an inorganic life that moves as vigorously through the biological as through the machinic and the ideational” (Sheldon 2015, 209). I am not sure that “life” is the right word to use here, but as Sheldon remarks, our language is inadequate for talking about the vitalities of nonhuman material.

⁴ Curiously, while I was working on this article another blackout disrupted the lives of millions of Texans and consumed the attention of the rest of the United States. A powerful winter storm brought the power grid maintained by ERCOT (Electric Reliability Council of Texas) to a standstill, producing rolling blackouts that lasted days at a time. The discourse around these events has served to underscore Bennett’s discussion of the 2003 blackout; the same oblique agency that Bennett described for non-human actors in that event has been attributed to the Texas power grid, the mysterious wholesale billing of electrical power, the inhuman but personified will of “the market,” and a planet angered by climate neglect and abuse, among other non-human actors. The 2021 ERCOT blackout might be evidence for Bennett’s arguments on par with her 2003 example.

In the introduction to her book *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sifts through prepositions in an attempt to settle on one best suited to describing affect and performativity. Discarding several, she chooses *beside* as a way to preserve “a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking,” including “cause versus effect, subject versus object” (Sedgwick 2003, 8). This *beside*-ness is amenable to Bennett’s model of agency in assemblage. Agency is neither linear nor deterministic, but relational and spatial, taking account of the “fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies” (Bennett 2010, ix). It is also performative, arising from expressions and performances in space, manufacturing ontology from collaboration and juxtaposition. Assemblage is a profligate *beside*-ness in ongoing performance. Humans usually centre themselves in these performances, but Bennett’s “distributive agency” makes better sense. To see what this means, let us turn to our case study.

Lazarus and Cana

The gold glass that is the subject of this article was made by a human or humans. In that sense it is an object that is in a certain kind of relationship to humans and human agency. Furthermore, the gold glass is plaited deep in other patterns of human agency, having been used and manipulated by humans for practical, aesthetic, symbolic, and perhaps ritual purposes.⁵ Nevertheless, it exerts its own kind of power, vitality, and agency, both in and as assemblage. This is the dynamism I want to interrogate: where and how this gold glass sits within broader assemblages of human and nonhuman entities. I am especially interested in this gold glass’s relationship to and embeddedness in another assemblage (or, in other assemblages) of human and nonhuman materials and vitalities, the one(s) we call *bible*. How do this gold glass and *bible* orbit one another and interact, and what agencies do they enact on each other and on the humans who attend to both? We are more used to contemplating the role of *bible* in textual assemblage: how the materiality of papyrus or paper, the form of roll or codex, or the circumstances of liturgy or ecclesiology condition human experiences of *bible* in textual assemblages. In this way of thinking, in a *Bible*, we can say that *bible* is in assemblage with various materials and actants (including both human and nonhuman ones). What happens when *bible* is arranged with different materialities?

⁵ In the case of this particular gold glass, Vatican records indicate that it surfaced in the collection of Cardinal Flavio I Chigi, a 17th century Italian nobleman and priest. It was “sent by Benedict XIV to the Vatican Library in 1746,” and then to the Christian Museum in 1756, and it appears in the inventory of 1762 as part of the collection (Unknown IV Century).

Among the gold glasses in the crowded corridor at the Vatican Museums, this particular gold glass does not stand out for its physical attributes. It is nine centimeters in diameter, which is within a normative range of size for gold glasses (Unknown IV Century). In the top register is an image of a human figure, with a staff or wand in hand, pointing it at a second person wrapped in burial clothes and emerging from the façade of a rock or a wall. On the bottom is substantially the same human figure, down to the designs on the garment and sandals, with the same staff or wand in hand, lofting it over a collection of seven pots or jars. Ringing the two semi-circles is a border of gold with much smaller cutaway semicircles,



Figure 1 (photo by the author)

each one separated from its starting point to create a kind of double border. Scholars universally identify these two images with the stories of the raising of Lazarus (top) and the miracle at Cana (bottom), both stories about Jesus found in the New Testament only in the Gospel of John. The juxtaposition of two scenes on a single gold glass is somewhat unusual. Most extant gold glasses contain only one register, rather than being divided into two semi-circular ones.⁶ To my knowledge, this is the only gold glass on which these two particular stories are juxtaposed. On an object as small as gold glasses, the level of skill required to juxtapose two scenes on the same glass might simply have been too rare to show up very often in the archaeological record.⁷

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⁶ A notable exception is found among “Jewish” gold glasses. Among the dozen or so extant gold glasses displaying Jewish iconography, several are divided into two registers in a way similar to the Cana and Lazarus gold glass. Among these are the glasses in plates 965, 966, 967, 969, 970, 973, and 974 in Goodenough (Goodenough 1953).

⁷ In her discussion of Jewish gold glasses, Rachel Hachlili gives dimensions of several extant examples (Hachlili 1998, 292-302).

juxtaposed scenes on biblical gold glasses generally, and of this juxtaposition of the miracle at Cana and the raising of Lazarus particularly, what force or vitality is present in and around this gold glass? As an assemblage, what exertions does it make, and what effects does it produce on the humans and nonhumans it encounters? This is a question of this assemblage's agency, as Bennett would have it, and by proxy we might call this a question of how materiality, and more specifically the materiality of assemblage, shape and condition what we call *bible*. In turn, this raises questions about the nature of human meaning-making, what we might term hermeneutics, and the ways our interpretations of bible are bounded by the specifics of the assemblages in which it is included.

Anarchic Affordances

In his 2017 dissertation, Michael Hemenway puts *bible* in conversation with materialism and the categories of interface and affordance (Hemenway 2017). Hemenway argues that book technologies (roll, codex, digital, etc.) offer distinct affordances to readers, especially with regard to linear or nonlinear access to texts, collaboration in reading and interpretation, and what he calls “anarchy,” or resistance to “closure or consolidation of any use to any mechanistic determinism governed by original author, original version, or final form” (Hemenway 2017, 69). Different material expressions of *bible* offer different possibilities for interaction with text, suggesting different conditions and horizons for readers' interactions with it. “Affordance” in Hemenway's work reflects the concept as developed by James J. Gibson, to describe interactions between agents and environments. Affordances describe “interactions with an agent made possible by a particular environment ... between the physical properties of a ‘surface’ and an organism encountering that surface” (Hemenway 2017, 18). Hemenway provides a nice theorization of the ways readers encounter texts in material assemblages, though he does not interact with that concept explicitly. *Bible* is encountered differently in different configurations of human and nonhuman materials in assemblage.

These observations are related to those of Sara Ahmed, whose engagement with Husserl leads her to describe paper (as an example) as an “orientation device” that both maps and directs human orientation towards itself (Ahmed 2006, 26). Ahmed is concerned with the ways material is manipulated by humans, but also with the ways material manipulates humans, signaling conditions and setting constraints on human activity. These are something like Hemenway's affordances, but Ahmed imagines a multidirectional flow of influence that is more amenable to Bennett's claims about the agency of assemblages. The paper of a book—or the glass of a vessel or disc—opens opportunities for human action, but it also channels those actions and limits them in certain ways, participating in its own use (from the standpoint of a human epistemology).

One benefit of thinking about *bible* across technologies and interfaces is that it helps us to differentiate between *bible* and the material *formats* of *Bibles*, and to attend

to the ways format shapes human experiences of and interactions with *bible*. If *bible* can appear in a roll, a codex, or a Kindle and still be recognizable as *bible* across formats, then what happens if we recognize other material embeddings of *bible* as well? A passage on a t-shirt, a roadside sign, a necklace, or a greeting card might not be a *bible*, but is *bible* in the sense that it is an example of *bible* acting in assemblage. In every one of those cases, *bible* is present in and as assemblage, exerting agency. Though humans might be inclined to describe *bible* as both product and object of human agency, *bible*'s existence as and interactions with material give it agency apart from human agency. This is what Bennett describes as “efficacy or effectivity ... distributed across an ontologically heterogenous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts” (Bennett 2010, 23). *Bible* is entangled with human agency, but not defined or limited by it, and likewise *bible* is entangled with material agency or the agency of assemblages, and it is funded by and constituted by those agencies more than humans often suppose.

Bible in Nonbiblical Assemblages

How, then, do *bible* and material appear in assemblage in this Lazarus-and-Cana gold glass? We could catalogue some members of this assemblage: glass and gold, the now-absent sides of the vessel, the long-vanished food and drink it held, the conviviality of meals, social structures governing household events, the Gospel of John, the so-called “signs source” from which both of these stories may derive, memories of Jesus, parchment and papyrus, the smell of wine and oil, the smell of death, figs, the wail of mourning, a sliver of glass in a fingertip, words said at a grave, mortar, three decades of life and two surviving children, near-total darkness and the light of a single lamp, a thin paper ticket to the Vatican Museums, slavery, a crowded corridor, orthodoxy and heresy, bones, time, academic journals, volcanic stone, the antiquities market, sandals, jars of water, burial clothes, iconography, Aramaic and Greek, the New Revised Standard Version, copyright law, Mary and Martha, “woman” the mother of Jesus, trade secrets, grief. Such a list cannot touch a fraction of the assemblage, yet it already complicates, conditions, and textures human participation in it almost infinitely. Sheldon comments on a similar list in Bennett’s description of the blackout; the list, Sheldon says, “stands in metonymically for the randomness of the object world,” but also for the way “each piece is entangled in an emergent phenomenon with all the others” (though for Sheldon this entanglement is unsatisfyingly demonstrated) (Sheldon 2015, 208–9). I understand my above list neither to chronicle the randomness of the world nor to point to entanglement per se, but rather to underscore the complexity of the material affordances (Hemenway) or orientation (Ahmed) that material brings to any human encounter with *bible*.

In defense of her own proposal of “choratic reading,” Sheldon goes on to claim that “acts of literature...are performed in material composition with the affordances of their media, the sensorium of their audiences, and the deformations of

dissemination” (Sheldon 2015, 216). In the same volume, Erin Manning reflects on art “not as the form an object takes, but as the manner in which time is composed ... a field of expression through which a different quality of experience is crafted” (Manning 2015, 49). Both speak to the tension between a human creator’s actions and the actancy of the nonhuman materiality alongside which human creativity exists. Manning’s chapter, written from the perspective of an artist, chronicles the many ways human and nonhuman members of the assemblage altered the course of her art as she had imagined it, resulting in something altogether more chaotic, collaborative, and emergent than she had intended.

If this gold glass featuring Lazarus and Cana is an example of *bible* with distinct material affordances—with glass and gold rather than paper or pixels—then it is a test case for understanding how human perception, interpretation, and action with *bible* depends upon and is conditioned by material in assemblage. Materialities like canon and bounded, covered books have produced an experience of *bible* as stable and durable, but *bible* in a gold glass unleashes a wilder, more recombinant epistemology. It is interesting to imagine the tradency of the stories of Cana and Lazarus through the aperture of this gold glass, apart from written *bible*. Given the scarcity and expense of books in antiquity, I find it overwhelmingly likely that a gold glass like this one was made by an artisan or artisans who had never read *a bible* or *the Bible*, and probably commissioned by persons who might have heard stories we would recognize as *biblical* but who neither read nor possessed such a book. In any case, when this glass was made in the fourth century, no entity like *the Bible* we know today yet existed as a stable canon uniformly packaged across ubiquitous copies and accompanied by centuries of interpretation and theology. When we call the stories depicted on this glass *biblical*, then, we are relying on our own epistemologies and ontologies, not those that were operative in its first assemblages. Scholars (including myself) tend to identify depictions like this one as *biblical* in the sense that they derive from, represent, or correspond to what we understand to be *biblical texts*, but that kind of linearity might have been foreign to the world into which this gold glass emerged. Even if it reached backward into texts, any genealogy of *bible* behind these depictions of Cana and Lazarus was distinct from the simple appeal to *bible* we intend when we refer to them as *biblical* in the 21st century.

Instead, as the glass solidified around the gold leaf at its moment of crystallization in the fourth century, this gold glass entangled stories and communities of practice and belief with certain material affordances. Something in the assemblage inhabited by the person who commissioned this glass suggested that two of the stories, the miracle at Cana and the raising of Lazarus, should be together. The hermeneutics behind that decision are lost to us; it was a proto-canonical choice that represents a logic of interpretation that we cannot recover. Perhaps if the glass had been larger, a third scene would have been included; perhaps the lost sides of the vessel were adorned with scenes from the life of Artemis, Paul, or the maker’s aunt. We cannot know.

As it traveled through time, this glass moved through and among numerous assemblages, and in each case, the nonhumans in those assemblages exerted agency alongside the humans. This is important to recognize and narrate, as a corrective to overconfident epistemologies and ontologies born out of centring human agency. The household in which the glass vessel was displayed or used produced different experiences and understandings of it for the humans who encountered it; those humans laboured to make sense of it and its gold images (or not) among the shelves, foods, animals, religiosities, and personalities that all clamored for a say. Perhaps the vessel held eucharistic elements, spare change by the front door, grapes set out for guests, or nothing at all. In the grave, different assemblages crowded around: Lazarus with his grave clothes was suddenly standing there beside dozens of graves lined up, each filled with the remains of a person, and the twin Jesuses of the upper and lower registers suddenly indexed an eschatological hope that was carried by at least some of the words and people who passed through the space. When it was pried loose and carried off to be traded or sold, the gold glass and its images were tokens of a Christian (and therefore not pagan, in the heresiological reckoning of the time) piety that determined the piece's value; when it was collected by a priest, the two Johannine stories might have come to rest comfortably as part of a *Bible* that had coalesced as an assemblage while the glass had been buried deep in a grave. In the Vatican Museums, the glass sits among dozens of others, a small piece of a great mosaic depicting a Christian past and making claims about power in the present. In an academic journal, it becomes an avatar of scholarly desires and anxieties in a different kind of assemblage of material and power.

It is tempting to characterize these movements as a serial recontextualization, understanding a stable object to have passed from one setting to another in a chain of hermeneutical frames. But that is to miss Bennett's point. The gold glass's journeys through different contexts is rather a kind of relational kaleidoscope, in which the human and nonhuman members of its assemblages shifted constantly, causing the gold glass and indeed *bible* to interact differently with each other and with the world, depending on the nature of the assemblages in which they participated. Each assemblage had its own agency and actancy that emerged from the dynamism of its constituent parts, such that from the perspective of the humans in those assemblages, its effects—what we might call meaning—shifted over time.

Conclusions

To demonstrate the power and agency of assemblages, we need only note that humans perceive the presence of texts in a wordless bit of material like this fourth-century gold glass. Seeing the images in the glass, we link them to stories we know from textual assemblages, *Bibles*, although the glass itself makes no explicit claims to reproduce or represent any particular words or texts. *Bible* has accrued so much agency, as part of contemporary and historical material textual assemblages, that we ground our epistemologies in it, even when the *Bibles* we know could not have

existed at the moment this gold glass emerged as and in its own material assemblages.

Throughout this article I have described the actancy not of *Bible* or *Bibles* (the discrete and bounded canon/s of Christianity as they exist in book forms), but that of *bible*. By appealing to *bible*, I am trying to name a participant in *Bibles*, but also a participant in countless other assemblages, alongside both human and nonhuman members. We might perceive *bible* in first-century oral traditions, though they likely existed apart from written texts that looked anything like *Bibles*. We could see *bible* in ancient catacomb paintings, in the decorations of sarcophagi, in homiletical allusions, and in oil lamps. In our own time, *bible* might be part of assemblages that include roadside billboards, political action committees, capital campaigns, academic publishing, and climate policies, to name just a few, all without any explicit representation of the textual assemblage we call *the Bible*. In the assemblage of this gold glass, *bible* exerts itself among the affordances of glass and gold in a way that is distinct from textual *Bibles* but that nevertheless conveys something related or allied to those familiar *Bibles*.

This gold glass has participated in numerous assemblages in the past seventeen centuries, from (perhaps) household to grave to private antiquity collection to museum display. In each case, the glass has wielded power within and as assemblage, its materiality and material conditions offering certain affordances to the humans who interacted with it. We cannot fully recover those historical affordances, or know the effects of all of those assemblages in the past, but we can imagine and attempt to reconstruct the kinds of agency that might have flowed through this glass and material instantiations of *bible* that accompanied them. We can note the participation of something *biblical* even in the absence of *Bible*, and conclude that *bible* precedes the *Bible* we know, as a member of myriad assemblages, expressed in diverse materialities. We can theorize *bible* without text, differently materialized, embedded in gold and glass, entangled in wilder and less bounded assemblages of human and nonhuman agencies alike.

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