

Introduction

Paying Attention to the Way We Read

Is the theory of evolution compatible with biblical faith? Are the Bible's views on same-sex relations, divorce, and the status and role of women relevant to life today? Does the Bible predict the "end of the world"? And what should we make of its statements on poverty and riches, government, and war and peace? These are questions that many contemporary Christians ask when they approach the biblical writings. But because they are also questions that interest many people beyond the bounds of biblically based faith communities, I am writing for anyone who wants to think seriously about the Bible's significance in our present-day world. These specific questions, however, are secondary to a more fundamental one, which has to do with *how* we read the Bible. Not many people who read the Bible are accustomed to asking that

fundamental question, however. So although this book will address the secondary questions in some detail, I begin with the fundamental one.

“We don’t interpret the Bible; we just read it.”

The young woman—a student in my undergraduate course in New Testament—was adamant. She insisted that her particular religious group was not burdened by human doctrines; the members of this group relied solely upon the Bible for their beliefs. There was no sense arguing about what the Bible means in any particular instance, because it means what it says and says what it means. And, of course, this group thought of its beliefs as the absolute truth, since they were based not upon fallible human interpretation but directly upon the Bible itself.

From my perspective, however, her statement made no sense at all. My point was not so much that her reading of the Bible was wrong but that it is nonsensical to talk about understanding any sort of communication without interpreting it. It might seem that at least some sentences are so straightforward that their meanings are self-evident, so that no interpretation is needed. But is this really so? The fact is that not only the simplest statements but even individual words need interpretation. When I say the word *dog*, a hairy animal does not leap out of my mouth. Anyone who hears me use the word will have to engage in an act of interpretation to associate that word with a canine, because I might mean something entirely different. In one context, “dog” could refer to a detestable human being, while in another it could signify a wiener in a bun. And the process of making the association between this word and one or the other of these choices is an instance of interpretation.

Nor does a sentence always mean what it says. Consider the statement “That was a smart thing to do.” We might understand it as a compliment that one person offers another. But we could also take it as sarcasm, meaning, in effect, “That was really *stupid*”—in which case the statement would mean not what it says but the exact opposite! And the

process of discerning whether a statement is straightforward or sarcastic is another example of interpretation.

To understand any sort of communication, we have to interpret it, which means using our imagination to construe it in some particular way. And when we come to complex writings such as the Bible, the need for interpretation becomes even more evident. For example, in Mark 3:27, Jesus makes this startling statement: “But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.” By itself this statement sounds like advice on burglary. But a quick glance at the context suggests that we should understand it metaphorically.

In the earlier chapters in Mark, Jesus has been performing exorcisms, and in 3:22, the scribes say that he himself is possessed by an evil spirit and accuse him of casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons—that is, Satan. Jesus replies in verses 23-26 by showing that the charges are illogical: “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against Satan and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.” The point is that it is nonsensical to charge Jesus with casting out demons by Satan’s power, since to cast out demons is to attack Satan’s own demonic kingdom. Why would Satan send one of his agents to combat his other agents? That would only divide his kingdom. So if we read the statement about binding the strong man in light of verses 23-26, we can understand the “strong man” as a metaphor

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especially the Bible.



for Satan and Jesus as the “burglar” who is plundering Satan’s house (attacking his kingdom) by exorcising his demonic agents. *But the passage does not say this directly.* We know this only through interpretation, an act of imagination that takes us beyond the surface meanings of the words.

Perhaps nearly everyone would agree that all reading involves interpretation. But my second point may seem less self-evident. Interpretation is not a *mechanical* process. There is no magic formula for interpretation that will ensure that everyone who follows the “right” procedure will come up with the same, “right” interpretation. There are different *ways* of reading the Bible, and no one is in a position to proclaim that any one way is the only right way. This is so in part because there are many different kinds of questions we can legitimately ask of the biblical texts. We may ask historical questions, such as “When and where did this event happen?” or “Did this event *really* happen?” But we may also ignore historical questions and read the text with literary, sociological, or psychological questions in mind. These approaches are not mutually exclusive; we can ask more than one question at a time. In practice, however, it is virtually impossible not to limit what we ask. So when different people read the same text, they often understand it differently.

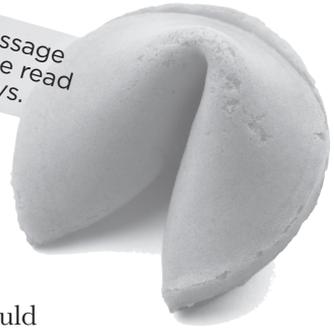
Beyond this, even two people asking the same questions of a text can find different answers. This may be because one person imports into the text something that is not there or assigns a meaning to a word that it cannot have. But this is not always the case. Sometimes a passage can legitimately be read in different ways. A famous example is Robert Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”¹ The poem depicts a scene in which the narrator stops by a wooded area to watch the snow build up. The last verse describes the dark beauty of the woods but ends with the declaration that there are promises to be kept “And miles to go before I sleep.” On one level, the poem is a pleasant recitation

of an experience of someone who is entranced by a scene with alluring natural beauty but decides not to linger because of the journey ahead and prior commitments. It is possible, however, to find a deeper level of meaning in it. Many interpreters understand the woods and the reference to sleep as symbols of death: there is something enticing as well as forbidding about it, but life calls us back to itself. And the interesting thing about this particular poem is that, according to my college English professor, Frost himself wavered on its meaning, sometimes denying and sometimes affirming its reference to death. Even the author could see that more than one interpretation is valid.

This is not to say that any meaning we might assign to a writing is as valid as any other. Some readings violate what is written in the text, and some questions we can bring to a work are more appropriate to its nature than others. We could ask whether Frost's poem describes an actual event in his life, but that would probably be irrelevant to the *meaning* of the poem, as would asking where the woods were located or who the owner (alluded to in the first verse) was. To ask whether the final lines refer to life and death, however, takes us deeply into the question of one kind of meaning, just as our efforts to imagine the beauty of the scene reveals a different kind. Both these types of meaning are appropriate to the nature of a poem in a way that the other questions are not.

My final point, then, is that it is important when approaching the Bible to consider the nature of the biblical writings and to ask questions appropriate to that nature. Much of our confusion about the Bible stems from the inappropriate questions many interpreters ask of it, and

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the result is a phenomenon I call “Bible abuse.” I mean this term in a double sense. On the one hand, it refers to the violation of the biblical writings by using them for inappropriate purposes. But the term also points to the way people sometimes use the Bible as a *tool* of abuse, a weapon to browbeat those with whom they disagree. The Bible is a collection of writings that has the potential to liberate human beings from fear, despair, and meaninglessness. It has the power to inspire them and empower them to break free from destructive patterns of personal behavior or social systems. All too often, however, it is used to oppress rather than liberate and to strike fear into the human heart rather than to banish fear. And whether the Bible liberates or oppresses us depends upon



“Bible abuse” means using the Bible as a tool for abusing others.

the way we choose to read it.

A key question that will therefore be

at issue throughout this book is the one Jesus posed to the lawyer in Luke 8:30 (RSV): “What is written . . . *how* do you read?” In chapters 1 and 2, I discuss the

nature of the biblical writings and the kind of authority we should ascribe to them. In chapters 3 through 5, I examine various ways people use the Bible that are, in my opinion, inappropriate and even harmful. I try to show how these uses violate the nature of the texts and miss their greatest potential, but I also begin to suggest more appropriate ways of reading. Finally, in chapters 6 and 7, I describe in more detail some ways of approaching the biblical writings that unleash, rather than curtail, their power to change our lives and our world in positive ways.

Before I proceed, however, I must add a footnote to the story of the young woman in my office. Weeks after the first conversation, we spoke

again, but this time the conversation was different. She told me she had left the group to which she had belonged. In abandoning that group and its teachings, however, she had not rejected the Bible. She was in a new place in her life—open, searching, but still serious about her faith. And the rigidity I had noticed before was gone. She was liberated now, free to explore both her life and the wisdom of the Scriptures in a new way. Although her group claimed that it did not interpret the Bible, members of that group had trained her very carefully in one way of reading it. Now freed from that straitjacket, she was able to reflect on *how* to read the Bible and ready to reencounter it in more exciting, adventurous, and empowering ways.

I wish the same for the readers of this book. The inspiration for its title came from an old country-and-western song, “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places.” The song describes the heartaches that come from falling in love with people who will hurt us rather than entering into mutually satisfying relationships. In a similar way, reading the Bible for the wrong reasons can be harmful rather than helpful. It can stifle, rather than enhance, what I believe is the life-giving Spirit of God within each of us; it can encourage shallow thinking rather than help us think deeper thoughts. And there is another way in which reading the Bible for the wrong reasons is like looking for love in all the wrong places. Both practices are deceptive. Persons in abusive romantic relationships often convince themselves that all is well. And many who read the Bible for the wrong reasons allow a false sense of security to mask the ways in which such reading stifles their spirits and dulls their intellects. For all such people, along with many others struggling to understand how the Bible can strengthen their spiritual lives, my hope is that they will find others ways of reading the Scriptures that will liberate, empower, and excite them.