

## How to Read the Bible (revised)

Why the Bible is important: The context for the question

For believers the Bible is the story of where we are coming from, who we are, and where we should be headed. That would be the Big Story. All the stories begin with the God of Abraham, of God's relationship with humankind, revealing the character of God and of human beings. It is not an individual but a communal story -- made up of many stories that use the plural *we* more than the individual *I*. The Big Story continues in both old familiar ways as well as in surprising turns: How odd of God to choose the Jews. Or, who would have expected the resurrection of Jesus?

Of course we always come from other directions as well. We emerge from and within the cultures whose languages, traditions, and habits we share. These stories, too, offer prospects of where we come from, who we are, and where should be headed. Both sets of stories at best enable us, enrich us, provide us individually and communally with life's meanings. At worst they disable us, set us against each other, demand death rather than life.

Both of these historical narratives defining and sustaining us find their key texts to be indispensable. As Christians cannot do without biblical texts lest they lose their identity, so citizens cannot do without the Constitution and other key documents by which we define ourselves as a nation.

Moreover both kinds of texts, religious and political, remain "open". Their true meanings remain contested even though scholars do their best. Both the Bible and the Constitution relate to everything. And therefore we are never done with them once and for all. New occasions not only teach new duties but shed new light on our founding and identifying documents. Whether it is the meaning of "faith" or of "God," on the one hand, or of "person" and "rights" on the other, controversies over understanding and defining such key words never end.

While the openness of key documents provides scholars, lawyers, and other professionals with rewarding careers, it tends to annoy normal people. Why should texts so familiar and straightforward be declared as questionable or even inauthentic by scholars?! Since there is so much at stake, whether that be our eternal salvation or our quest for justice in our time, it would seem ever so important to know for sure. And yet that verse about fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12) holds not only for working out our salvation but working out the meaning of texts and of justice in our land.

These two sources of our cultural and personal identity, of our past, of the meaning of personal and social life, and of our hopes differ. Each reaches for inclusiveness, naming and interpreting everything. Each can and does support and sustain us -- yet each can conflict with the other. And each remains mistrustful of the other, suspecting overreach and serious misperceptions in the other.

If there ever was a time that this nation might have been deemed religious or Christian, that is not the case now. And surely that is a good thing. When religion gains in standing and power, religious oppression and holy wars tend to follow. Wars of religion in the West, holy war and religious terrorism in the Middle East provide strong arguments for a cautious separation of church and state. Yet that need not imply that secular voices should have the only and therefore the last word, especially when it comes to public policy. The popular justification of restricting religion or faith to matters private would exclude religious voices from public or political discourse, granting secularism the default status in all public issues.

If that be the way things are, the Bible is important as counter weight to the prevailing voices of our times. Without it we, communities of faith, might simply become what our times insist we are -- citizens free to believe whatever they choose as long as they keep it private. Here religion should remain ceremonial, nationalistic, and supportive. Mixing politics and religion is said to create a toxic brew that proves detrimental in politics and should be avoided in polite company. If such voices carry the day, believers would be politically neutered. They would lack critical options. Even more basic, they would lack a theological fulcrum or leverage from which to judge and with which to improve public policy. Our deity would be star-spangled and speak American. The God of the Bible who insists on economic, legal, and political justice would again have to start from scratch.

So much for the argument that the Bible is essential for believers. It forms the key textual link with God. Its Big Story transforms believers' identity, prevents the faithful from being muted by the voices of our times, and insists on a political witness to God's compassion for the poor and oppressed.

*Caution: We make texts speak*

If one believes that God is eternal and unchanging -- I am not advocating the latter -- then it lies close at hand to ascribe those divine qualities to God's Word, namely to biblical texts. What follows here warns against such leap of logic and

of faith.

Religious communities make the Bible speak theologically. To explain with one example, Luther and other reformers rediscovered the New Testament (NT) gospel message of salvation by faith in God's grace. The NT witnesses to God's love proclaiming that our standing before God is a gift that we cannot earn. We are justified and saved by faith in what God has done for us. If that be the Bible's Big Story, then emphasis falls on human dependence on God, on daily repentance and forgiveness, on the moral ambiguity of even our best deeds. Even if one affirms such dependence, as I do, this theological focus need not readily lead to political witness and social policy reform. Reforming religion need not imply reforming political injustices. There are other ways, both in the past and now to make the Bible speak.

Furthermore, we all make biblical texts speak when we bring our cultural glasses to understanding these writings. I take this to be an inevitable feature of the claim that humans make all of reality speak, including texts. Humans are social creatures to the core. We are shaped by our times, by the languages we are taught, by the politics and economics in which we function and that function in us. These social givens are so much a part of us that we rarely become aware of them.

Moreover these "glasses" through which we see all of reality and with which we make reality comprehensible and manageable, including biblical texts, change over time. If we live long enough we may note startling changes even in ourselves. Busy pastors seeking to recycle old sermons are surprised by their own earlier words: I cannot preach that any more! Reading old letters written to my wife decades ago can be troubling. How could I have said that?! The years shape and reshape the ways we see and think.

One last example from the hallmark of our culture, contemporary individualism. To the amazement of foreign students who understand themselves bound to family and kin, current American college students conceive of themselves individualistically. When asked to introduce themselves, their responses tend to be self-referential without links to parents, families, communities. Individualism in religion takes pietist forms: "*And he walks with me and he talks with me...*" Or it manifests itself in the notion that God deals with humans only on a one-to-one basis. That contrast with the earlier American and the ancient biblical conviction that God addresses communities, judges nations, and demands communal repentance.

The point -- belabored here -- is that we make texts speak through the language, concepts, cultural assumptions that we bring with us as social beings. Moreover what we bring with us changes over time. Ordinarily what we contribute is so familiar that we remain unaware of it. Nevertheless, the meaning we discern in texts bears our mark. We become aware of such “glasses” only when we step out of our culture or time.

### *Misreading texts, misreading God*

If it be the human condition that the voices of the times do not just surround us but reverberate within us, then cultural voices inevitably expressed itself in ancient communities who heard the divine Voice and covenanted with it. Then perceiving revelation as well as responding to it and transmitting it becomes ... complicated.

Such ubiquitous and shifting cultural assumptions should caution us that in reading biblical texts and seeking to understand God -- who is said to transcend time and place -- we may be saying more about ourselves than about the real thing. In more philosophical and Kantian terms: we cannot know *Das Ding an sich*, the thing in itself. Therefore we need road signs of CAUTION! The VOICE OF THE TIMES! That voice always influences, affects, colors those ancient biblical texts and our reading of them. That holds for the writers or authors of ancient texts as well as for us modern readers.

To use a visual metaphor, the light of revelation is refracted through cultural prisms. That holds for those who heard and remembered God's voice, for those who recorded it, for those who memorized, edited, and passed it on, and for us who hear it, believe it, and act on it. That sounds suspiciously modern or relativistic. It is not. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) acknowledged this human factor: When it comes to the Bible, all is from God; all is from human authors. That does not help in distinguishing the wheat from the chaff. But it does make he point that the human element is unavoidable. Again, lest such hermeneutical modesty seem to undercut religious convictions, divine mystery or holiness has always been ascribed to the meaning of God. That proves relevant to hermeneutics, the interpretation of biblical texts, as well.

Believers seek the will and voice of God in Scripture. When the voice of the times speaks in these texts, it comes in the guise of divine revelation. One then faces the dilemma of divine self-contradiction. If we cannot or should not discriminate among texts, then the God of the Bible commands love of neighbor as well as holy war against neighbors whose land has been promised to us. Then the love

commandment must somehow lead to the condemnation and execution of gay neighbors. Then God declares the subjugated role of women and children as divinely ordained as well as the end of such distinctions “in Christ.”

The risk of ignoring the voice of the times is that we read our times into the text. To cite a German doggerel, “Im Auslegen sei frisch und munter. Leg’s Du’s nicht aus, so leg was unter.” (Be Bold to lay out [exegete] a text. If you don’t lay it out, slip something underneath.)

### *Needing to be certain in religion*

The claim that the word of God in the Bible is also always the word of humans is troublesome, even offensive. We want and need a direct line to God. We must be certain, must be sure about God, must know God’s will. For our eternal salvation may hang on it. Or so it is said. And so it was done when the orthodox burned heretics or when Christians killed each other over the meaning of holy communion. What could possibly explain such abominations but that the human relationship with God -- not only now but for all eternity -- requires the truth and nothing but the truth? Only the orthodox shall be saved!

### *Two reflections about our need to know for sure*

First, the quest for eternal verities, for understanding how things really, really are, for having reality by the tail, as it were, go as far back as Plato’s *eternal forms*. But such assurance about the way things are is not even given in the natural sciences. There as well as in our day-to-day lives we actually manage to be able to live with less than absolute assurance. Fairy tales warn against the quest for certainty: the young prince needs to know if the peasant girl really, really does love him. And the outcome of putting the matter to the test always ends badly. Understanding biblical texts and the divine will shall certainly not escape the limitations of our human condition. Knowing what God *really* said, meant, commanded, did, and is remains obscure (I Cor.13:12). But then we are not commanded to know but to trust and to love. And we know enough for that.

Second, if the relationship between God and believers expresses and affirms love (even if one-sided all too often), if God be holy, transcending human understanding or seeing, and (yet) if God be seen as parent (Father, Mother), then not getting it all right when we think and argue about God seems like a small thing. Then God would cut us some slack when it comes to creedal affirmations. Then we may doubt and question without risking everything for our standing with God is not at risk. Then we can both be wrong and be saved.

What parent would disown his or her child for the child's immature or mistaken concept of its father or mother? That relational bond is built on kinship and love, not on the child's understanding. How misconceived then that believers would kill each other in the name of God over doctrinal differences. How absurd that differences in beliefs should alienate the Abrahamic religions from each other.

### *Inerrancy*

Fundamentalists of course claim that we can be certain and that being certain counts as faithfulness. Every word in the Bible is the true and genuine revelation of God. If we question the veracity of one text, we could not be sure about the rest of the Bible as the Word of God. All is true or nothing can be known to be true. Fundamentalists love the Bible. And this love permits no flaws. The Bible is the one place where we can make direct contact with God over against the babel of our culture. Scripture is not tainted with any voice of the times.

The response of mainline churches to the dilemma of discerning the voice of God from the voices of the times acknowledges that we cannot avoid the predicament. But we can take cautionary steps with the help of scholarly research: by retrieving the oldest texts, by studying ancient cultures and languages, by being aware of the uses of the biblical texts in the life of the community or its *Sitz im Leben* (the place of the text in the life of the community that wrote it).

Yet knowing background and context of a text will not resolve the problem we face in differentiating God's voice from the voices of the times. Even if we understand a text in its original context and try for sociological and historical sophistication, troublesome problems in the text remain. Some verses we would never bring into the present. Holy War (herem), the endorsement of slavery, the lesser social and cultural status of women offer examples. Or more startling: the killing of homosexually active males. We leave such texts alone, respecting the Bible too much to remove them. But note the boldness of Thomas Jefferson, deleting miracles and other stories that he deemed to contradict the truths of his time, the Enlightenment and the rise of the empirical sciences. Radical surgery indeed! A less drastic therapy follows below.

### *Finding criteria to distinguish conflicting voices*

A theological solution of separating the wheat from the chaff in the Bible seeks a pervasive or key theme in Scripture to weigh problematic texts. This search for a key to isolate the voice of the times from the voice of God is said to seek a canon

within the canon. I have referred to it as the Big Story within the many stories. Here scripture yields its own interpretive key. Three variations follow.

Salvation History (*Heilsgeschichte*) is one such shared denominator of many texts and times. Theologians and exegetes discern a core theological message within the Bible that focuses on the biblical God. The Creator fashions Adam and Eve, and thereby all humans, for the purpose of loving God (back) and of loving each other. Of course the human rejection of that purpose does not survive the mythical first couple. Yet God insists. That ongoing saving insistence would explain the long history of God's efforts to keep humans from destroying themselves and of all that revelation and all those pages after Genesis 11. Nor has that purpose come to fruition yet. We may not even have come nearer. But we aspire: "Your will be done on earth..." God's creative, sustaining, and judging love throughout history and God's love commandment form the measures by which to discern God's Word in the Word of God. Such a method for distinguishing the voice of God from the voices of the times would require a deep understanding of love, especially of what goes by "tough love." But it does promise help in judging what texts might be more or less compatible with God's voice.

A similar but differently focused option for seeking a hermeneutic guide is the appeal to God's character. Character describes patterns of actions over time. Since the emergence of biblical religion, communities of faith have discerned patterns or constants of divine action. Moreover this way of reading the Bible assumes a human kinship with God. As children of God humans are to manifest the divine image in which they are created (Gen.1:27). Like parent, like child. That character -- in all but divine judgment -- then becomes normative for believers and for discerning what is genuinely of God and what texts are all too human. The interpretive task here probes specific texts by whether they resonate with God's character.

A differently focused key for interpreting the Bible is the life story and message of Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is God manifest in human flesh and blood. Here divine efforts for human redemption and human hopes for becoming what we are meant to be find ultimate expression. One then reads all of Scripture with Jesus in mind. And when it comes to ethics, the cliché, "What would Jesus do?" is not far off the mark. Of course, the motto assumes a profound understanding of the person, message, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Again, the intent in each of these variations seeks a reasonable method for creating/discovering coherence among biblical texts that distinguishes the voice

of God from cultural values we no longer share. And the theological story, whether it be Salvation History, the character of God, or the story of Jesus serves as the big story that offers a key for what to use and what to leave out.

One hopes that whatever the hermeneutical key, the results will prove to be compatible with each other. More important, will any or will each help in finding our bearings for resolving issues that divide us? Our congregation participated in the larger ELCA discussions over ordaining persons homosexual. Despite years of reflection and discussion, we concluded that we could not speak with one voice. Perhaps one should let sleeping dogs lie. But the question will reappear. And blessing the marriage of gays and lesbians is next. Can we reaffirm the biblical prohibitions in Leviticus 20:13? Can we resolve these issues by relying on that ancient text and others like it? Or are we answerable to God and to each other in the context of the big story, whichever we invoke?

Where does all this leave us for how to read the Bible? It makes the case for caution, suspecting ourselves as well as the ancients of reading cultural verities into the biblical text and into the voice of God. It may also make us suspicious of citing chapter and verse with the assured preface, "God says..." It may incline us to probe how the various ways we affirm our faith in God and our love for our country might resonate with a coherent big biblical story. It leaves us with a method or key for resolving current issues facing communities of faith. And it might incline us to welcome the search of other Abrahamic faith communities to discern the voice of God within other voices of our times.